

Feminizations of the Divine: *Śakti* and *Shekhinah* in Tantra and Kabbalah

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The Eternal Feminine Divine: The Resurgence of the Mother Goddess

Though the idea of the Eternal Feminine as the Divine Mother is a significant element in both Tantric and Kabbalistic theosophical formulations, its eventual acceptance required the incorporation of this idea into the patriarchal language of their respective traditions, which was accomplished by drawing upon the mythological and symbolic canons of both traditions' foundational scriptural sources. In the Hindu tradition, where the idea of the Goddess was already present in the Vedic strata of the Hindu scriptures (albeit in a subdued fashion), the process was somewhat less traumatic. Even there, however, the dominant imagery of the Mother Goddess in the Śakta Tantra¹ can definitely be seen as an affront to the highly patriarchal conception of the Divine. Within the Jewish context this process involved a more strenuous and radical exercise of imaginative engagement with (and interpretation of) biblical and Talmudic sources, such that its final product in the imagery of *Shekhinah*, so akin to the imagery of *Śakti* in the Hindu Tantra, appeared to be an anathema to the patriarchally defined religious sensitivities of mainline Jewish thought. It is no wonder that the only Jewish scholar who ever attempted to compare these two images of the Feminine Divine side by side found it necessary to concentrate on articulating what he perceived to be the profound differences between the two conceptions. To this end, Gershom Scholem makes the following statement at the beginning of his insightful but cursory comparative analysis of the two concepts: "Can the *Shekhinah* be described as a cosmic force in the same sense as we find the feminine in the image of *Śakti* in Indian Tantric religion? To my mind, I believe that we can discern quite clear differences between the two conceptions—differences no less profound than their affinities."² The present study takes issue with such generalizations, suggesting that they are based on insufficient comparative-phenomenological data and governed by the specific ideological reserve of the scholar in question.³

It is our contention that the notions of *Śakti* and *Shekhinah*, the development of which involved a radical transformation of their traditions' respective transcendent principles, seem to have had significant consequences on the predominantly patriarchal and puritanical overtones of orthodox Hindu and Jewish traditions. Employing the tools of comparative-phenomenological approach, this paper seeks to delineate the specific nuances of Hindu and Jewish mysticism with special reference to Tantra and Kabbalah, in order to assess the structural and thematic universes of discourse within which these feminisations of the transcendent took place. In particular, there are many specific elements of the Tantric and Kabbalistic notions of *Śakti* and *Shekhinah* that deserve special attention in our pursuit of the structural congruencies and conceptual affinities between the two notions. For the purposes of this paper, we intend to explore some of the most significant of these congruencies, both in the process and the outcome, between the conceptualizations of the Feminine Divine in the two traditions under consideration.

As a prelude to the comparative-phenomenological exploration of the Feminine Divine, we will also articulate the pre-Tantric and pre-Kabbalistic developments that informed and constituted the background for the later development of the notions of *Śakti* and *Shekhinah* in Hindu and Jewish mysticism. In pursuit of our comparative enterprise we will concentrate on three predominant and interrelated theosophical and ritual motifs that characterize the depictions of both *Śakti* and *Shekhinah* in these two traditions (see Part II): (1) the emergence of the Feminine Divine as the creatrix and the redeemer; (2) the

dangerous woman: the other side of the Feminine Divine; and (3) mystic and the erotic: atriarchal appropriation or the revenge of the Feminine Divine.

Part I

Śakti and Shekhinah: The Pre-Tantric and Pre-Kabbalistic Context

Śakti: The Supreme Feminine Divine in the Tantra

The three most conspicuous representations of the Feminine Divine in the Vedic Strata are the Goddesses *Uśās*, *Vác* (or *Vágdevī*), and *Aditi*, all three of whom became merged in the later Tantric reconstruction of the Mother Goddess.

Uśās is the first significant example of a feminine characterization of the Divine in the *Rg Veda* that had the potential to emerge as the Supreme Mother Goddess of the Tantra.⁴ There are innumerable *Rg Veda* hymns dedicated to *Uśās*, who through various allusions is associated with "light"⁵ and is variously called "Mother of the gods,"⁶ "Daughter of the Sky,"⁷ and "Wife of the Sun."⁸ She is the fundamental principle of motion behind all movement and as such she is the dynamic principle that sets in motion all living things: "everything that moves bows down before her glance."⁹ Her lustrous ascendance soon became a matter of envy for the Vedic Indra, who struck a definite blow to the Goddess's power by destroying her celestial cart. *Uśās*, afraid of the god's destructive thunderbolt, was forced to depart, abandoning her heavenly chariot and, in the process, presenting an image of the powerlessness of the Feminine Divine. As we will see, this subordinate characterization is contrasted by the description of the Mother Goddess in the Tantric tradition, where she is raised to the status of Supreme Divinity. Moreover, the original conception of *Aditi* as the mother of Vedic gods (which will be discussed presently) constituted the context for making her the creatrix and mother of the Hindu Trinity (*Brahmá*, *Viśnu*, and *Śiva*).¹⁰

Vác, the Goddess of Speech in the Vedas, has a paradoxical character.¹¹ In the *Rg Veda Samhita* she appears to be a goddess of immense power and import.¹² Moreover, this stratum of the Vedic literature also states that she was not created by a creator god, as she is nowhere associated with *Prajápati* or *Brahmá*, the creator god of the Hindu trinity. On the contrary, *Rg Veda* X.125 even suggests that she gave birth to the Father on the world's summit.¹³ In the later *Brahmána* stratum of the Vedic literature, however, *Vác* is associated with *Prajápati*, the God of creation, later identified with *Brahmá*. Born of the mind (*manas putri*) of *Prajápati*, she was with him at the very beginning of the creative process, making her both a consort and a cosmogonic partner to the god.¹⁴ Herself created as the consort of *Prajápati* and co-habiting with him in order to create, she is acknowledged as having a secondary role in the creative process.¹⁵ However, the Tantric literature, by making *Prajápati* himself a created being owing his existence to the Mother Goddess, reverses this role, such that it becomes the Mother Goddess, rather than the Father God, who is seen to be the ultimate source of all existence. What distinguishes the later notion of *Śakti* as the Mother Goddess from Vedic thinking is that it makes the Mother Goddess the source, not only of various mundane and insignificant divinities, but of the Hindu Trinity as well. Thus, the Tantra elevates the Mother Goddess to the status of Universal Mother by making her mother of even of the creator God, *Prajápati* or *Brahmá*.¹⁶ In some ways, this idea is already present in embryonic form in the Vedic notion of *Aditi* being the mother of gods.

Specifically, the *Rg Veda Samhita* extols *Aditi* as the all-inclusive singular divinity. She is the heaven and the atmosphere. She is the mother, the father, and the son too. She is all the gods in their totalities, as well the five classes of beings. She is all that has

been born and shall be born.¹⁷ The paradox of the Eternal Feminine Divine simultaneously conceived as mother, daughter, and wife is also strikingly present in the *Aditi* myth of the *Rg Veda*. She is the daughter of *Dakṣa* and, paradoxically, is also his mother and consort.¹⁸ *Aditi*'s many sons (seven, eight, or twelve) are called *Adityās*. Later mythological works make her mother of *Viṣṇu* as well, who was said to be her last (or youngest) son.¹⁹

It seems that *Aditi* provides the most promising conceptual framework for the emergence of *Śakti* as a feminine characterization of the Divine in the earlier strata of Vedic literature. Such an assessment can be made for several reasons: In the first place, she is the "Infinite" Goddess, who, because of a lack of fixed personality or domain, was capable of adopting expanded meanings and personalities—in particular, those which had once been the province of other goddesses. Second, unlike *Uśās*, the other Feminine Divine in the Vedas identified as mother of gods, *Aditi* never suffered the humiliation of being dethroned or vanquished. Though we noted earlier that *Vāc* (or the *Vāgdevī*) had a definite potential of becoming the Supreme Feminine Divine through her association with *Prajāpati*, as well as the Upanisadic identification of between her and the supreme *Brahmān*,²⁰ the unbounded *Aditi*, given her free-flowing character, became symbolically identified with *Vāc*, the Voice or Speech, thus sharing her glory of identification with *Brahmān*. Furthermore, while *Vāc* was associated with *Prajāpati*, the gradual loss of the god's eminent status in the Hindu mythico-religious framework meant that *Vāc* also lost much of the grandeur and majesty that would have allowed her to become a viable claimant for the preeminent place as the Supreme Divine Feminine. In a sense *Aditi*, in her identification with the *Vāc*, gradually came to encompass both the connotation and stature of *Vāc* and thus became the probable forerunner of the notion of *Śakti* in the Tantra. Additionally (and as noted earlier), *Aditi* is perceived to be personification of all-comprehensive Nature, which contains within its bosom all that is born and that will be born. Thus, at an early stage in the development of Hindu thought, *Aditi* foreshadows the idea of *Prakṛti*:²¹ Nature as an all-inclusive transcendent reality that contains within it all manifestations as potentiality, with creation being the mere transformation of the potential into the actual.

Aditi, the illustrious daughter of *Dakṣa*, had another definite advantage in terms of her cosmogonic significance as the Supreme Feminine Divine that was not available to *Uśās* and *Vāc*. This advantage flowed from her undeniably dialectical character, an ambiguity that came from her twining with her antithesis, the *Diti*, the changeable/perishable or destructive element of existence. The dialectic of the *Aditi* and *Diti*, representing the infinite and the finite, eternal and the changeable aspects of all-encompassing Nature, acquired a definite mythological representation as the twin goddesses became associated with the immortal gods (the *adityas* / *devas*) and their demonic opponents (the *daityas* / *asuras*) in the later mythological literature. What is important to note here, however, is that *Aditi* and *Diti*, along with all that they represent, remained connected and having a definite place in the grand divine scheme of things.²² Thus, the panoramic, all-encompassing portrayal of *Aditi* certainly sets her apart from other Vedic feminine divinities, which led one leading scholar to claim that "in the Vedic mythology, the gods have a limited power and they have ascendancy over the goddesses. *Aditi*, however, is an exception to this rule: Her sovereignty is unlimited and she is superior to the gods."²³

While the conception of *Aditi* provides the context for the cosmogonic possibility of the Feminine Divine in the *Samhita* and *Brahmāna* strata of the Vedic literature, it is in the *Upanisads* that one finds the first significant impetus toward this possibility becoming manifest. Specifically, the *Kena Upanisad* describes the Divine as mediated by *Umā Haimvati*, the revealer of the supreme reality of *Brahmān*,²⁴ who in the later Tantric tradition becomes characterized as the universal Feminine Divine. In other words, the Tantric literature sees this goddess completely identified with the Truth and Reality of

Brahmán, to the extent that she eventually came to be seen as the instantiation of such knowledge. For this reason, the Tantra conceives of her as the personification of *vidya* (wisdom) and declares her to be the *Máhavidyá* (Great Wisdom).²⁵ This philosophical development led to more the religiously inspired notion of the Ten *Máhavidyás* /Ten Wisdom Goddesses, which are seen in the Tantric tradition as ten major representations of the supreme Feminine Divine called *Devī* or *Śakti* (two terms that remain interchangeable in the Tantras).²⁶ This identification between *Umā* and liberative Wisdom (*Vidyā*) presents a compelling analogue to the notion of *Shekhinah* as the personification of Wisdom in the Jewish philosophical tradition—a contention that will be explored in more detail below.

As outlined in the previous paragraphs, both the early Vedic reflections and later Hindu philosophical developments played an important part in the Tantric reconceptualization of the Feminine Divine as an ontologically independent (or even unitary) Divine Reality imbued with cosmogonic and cosmoredemptive functions. This development certainly constituted a significant moment in the Hindu conceptualization of the Feminine Divine, as neither the Vedic nor the philosophical literature conceived of the Goddess as the sole, independent Divine reality. Moreover, this conception of the ultimate Goddess (*Devī* or *Śakti*) is what fundamentally distinguishes the Tantras from the mainstream of patriarchal Hinduism grounded in the Vedic/Brahmánic tradition. This transformation became feasible only after the development of certain innovative elements in specific strata of Puránic literature, wherein the Feminine Divine was given a much more pronounced role within the cosmic and salvational drama.

The most important example of this development is the *Devī Mahátmya* segment of the *Márkanḍeya Purána*, which accords the Feminine Divine significantly elevated status by acknowledging her as supreme mother (i.e., creatrix) as well as redeemer. Other Puránic texts, including the *Kurma Purána*, *Skanda Purána*, and *Śrīmad Bhágvatam*, all tend to support this position. Though this promotion is accomplished by elevating the status of the Goddess, the early Puránic literature, including the *Devī Mahátmya* segment of the *Márkanḍeya Purána*, still sees the Feminine Principle as being dependent on or subservient to the masculine principle/s. This tension between the characterization of the Feminine Divine as an independent, autonomous cosmogonic and cosmoredemptive being and the historically situated, patriarchal conception of Divinity that depicts the Goddess in contingent terms was evidenced in the majority of the Puránic literature, at least until the development of the *Devī Bhágvatam* in the later part of the medieval period. Given that by this time the Tantras had already accorded the status of supreme creatrix and redeemer to the Feminine Divine (as *Devī* or *Śakti*), some of the late Puránic literature also reflects this fully crystallized Tantric notion of a unitary, creative, and salvific Feminine Divine.

Most of the Tantric literature written in the post-*Márkanḍeya Purána* period, of which *Devī Mahátmya* is an important part, took the cosmogonic aspect of the Goddess to its highest level by making her supreme creatrix, responsible even for the genesis of the Hindu Trinity (*Brahmá*, *Viśnu*, and *Śiva*). Thus, as we will see later in this paper, the Tantras make a significant break from patriarchal mainstream Hinduism by proclaiming the complete autonomy and supreme status of the Feminine Divine. The Tantric literature is replete with such claims. For instance, the *Tantra Śástra* declares *Brahmá*, *Viśnu*, and *Śiva* to be ghostly entities (*preta*) by subordinating all of their activities to the *Śakti*, therein described as the fundamental supreme reality whose indulgence alone empowers the male deities to perform their allotted functions. The *Tantra Śástra* also claims that Nirvána can never be attained without the knowledge of the *Śakti*.²⁷ The *Mahákála Tantra* makes similar claims for the cosmogonic power of the *Śakti* by stating that both masculine and feminine are part of the Feminine Divine, namely *Śakti*, which is ultimately responsible for the creation, preservation, and destruction of "untold millions of Brahmánās."²⁸ In a like manner, the *Yoginī Tantra* states that "Ádya Śakti gave to *Brahmá*, *Viśnu*, and *Maheshwara* the charge of creation, preservation, and destruction respectively."²⁹ The *Nirvána Tantra*,

reversing the *Devī Mahātmya* of *Mārkanḍeya Purāna*, makes similar claims about the ontological status of the Feminine Divine:

At the time of creation Brahmá, Viśnu, and Maheśvara, and other Devas are born of the body of that beginningless and eternal Kālīkā.... From a part of Kālīkā, the primordial Śakti, arises Brahmá, from a part only arises Janardana, and from only a part arise Sambhu...Neither Brahmá, nor Viśnu, nor Maheśvara knows Her fully...They too are born at the beginning of the creation as Lords of creation, preservation, and destruction, and again disappear in Her at the time of dissolution.³⁰

Not only did the post-*Mārkanḍeya Purāna* Tantra literature make other divinities, including the members of the Hindu Trinity, dependent upon and subservient to the primordial Śakti, but they also extended the claim to subsume even the Vaiśnava divinities (including their incarnations) beneath the power and sovereignty of the primordial Śakti. Thus, the *Brahmānda Tantra* claims that, amongst the followers of the Vaiśnava tradition, "some meditate upon that great Śakti as Kṛ śṇa, two armed and beautiful with a dark complexion, and others as the husband of Laksmi, four armed and tranquil."³¹ Further, the *Mundāmaḷa Tantra* sees the supreme Feminine Divine herself proclaiming: "I am Māhavidyā formed of Hari and Hara, and I am also worshipped of Brahmá, Viśnu and Śiva."³²

Thus, in the Tantric literature the Feminine Divine, namely Śakti, emerged with full grandeur and majesty, and acquired a status and power that was only foreshadowed in the Vedic *Samhitas*, *Brahmánas*, *Upanisads*, and the early *Purānas*. The feminization of the Divine was so complete in the Tantra literature that it found reverberations in later Purānic literature, including the *Kuram Purāna* and the *Devī Bhāgavatam*, which assert a complete identification of Śakti with supreme Brahmán, knowledge of which the *Umā Haimvati* of the *Kena Upanisad* was enjoined to reveal. In the Tantra then the Vedic revealer of the Truth becomes the Truth revealed, and knowing her is to have liberative knowledge. No wonder *Niruttara Tantra* declares: "O Devī! Without the knowledge of Śakti, Nirvana is unattainable."³³

Shekhinah: The Feminine Divine in the Kabbalah

The earliest references to *Shekhinah* as a category of Divinity comes from Talmudic literature, circa the 1st century B.C.E. to the first century C.E.³⁴ However, the use of the term *Shekhinah* in the ancient Talmudic literature is primarily restricted to the idea of God's presence in the world, such that the *Shekhinah* is rarely personified as an aspect or emanation of God with a separate existence or an ontic status distinct from the Divine, which remains the ultimate and indisputable creator and the source of *Shekhinah's* being.³⁵ While the early rabbinic literature does not generally view *Shekhinah* as an independent personification of one of God's qualities, the characterization in medieval Jewish philosophical literature clearly represents a distinct entity perceived as a manifestation of God or His glory, which was described often using the imagery of light.³⁶ For most of the pre-Kabbalistic Jewish philosophers of the period, *Shekhinah* is a hypostasis of the biblical concept of God's glory and is a manifestation of God willed by Him, which implies that *Shekhinah* is a primordial created entity who does not partake of Divine essence or God's being. What is significant here is the claim that, as a created entity, *Shekhinah* does have an existence quite distinct from God Himself, which is definitely a different understanding than that found in the early rabbinic literature. This development, coupled with some later Aggadic formulations of *Shekhinah* as a distinct hypostasis of the Divine presence and glory, provide the necessary background and context for the evolution of the Kabbalistic

notion of *Shekhinah*. However, while the philosophical formulation of *Shekhinah* conceived as a distinct entity with separate existence was quite different from the Talmudic conception (as it never accorded *Shekhinah* an existence separate from or independent of God), it remained a far cry from the Kabbalistic conception of *Shekhinah*, which looked at *Shekhinah* as one of the sefirot: a noncreated divine potency that was coeternal with the Divine. Specifically, the Kabbalistic formulations postulate that *Binah*, called the upper *Shekhinah*, emanates coevally from the *Hokhamah*, the Supernal Wisdom, and is conjugally connected with Him, which means that it is not seen as a created entity that belongs to the realm of creatures. By way of contrast, the medieval philosophical conception of *Shekhinah* had nothing to say about the female character of *Shekhinah*. That the Kabbalists of the subsequent period saw this philosophical conception of *Shekhinah* as problematic is amply reflected in their expression of horror at this philosophical description, which tended to overemphasize its creaturely nature and asserted its separation from the realm of Godhead.³⁷

As one delves into the Kabbalistic literature one discerns a conception of *Shekhinah* that is radically different from its Talmudic and philosophical antecedents. Its boldness, and in some ways its freshness, are both impressive and somewhat startling—not only for Jewish religious sensitivities but also for scholars of Kabbalah who have made it their business to translate Kabbalistic thought into the world of academic discourse. Though the authors and thinkers of the Kabbalah tradition indubitably borrowed heavily from the rabbinic tradition in their pursuit of mystical insights and practices, what is noteworthy is how radically they sifted and re-sifted through the conceptual and thematic storehouses of the rabbinical world until they arrived at a completely new vision of these traditional ideas and notions. It is not surprisingly then that, in the deft hands of the Kabbalah authors and thinkers, the notion of *Shekhinah* acquired a completely new form and meaning. The most significant aspect of this development is what has been considered by some Kabbalah scholars to be the unequivocal and highly controversial appropriation of the pre-Judaic imagery of the Near Eastern Great Mother Goddess under the guise of the new Kabbalistic understanding of *Shekhinah* as the Feminine Divine.³⁸

Whether this resurgence of the image of the Great Mother within Jewish mystical tradition was a response to a historical situation that found in the imagery of *Shekhinah* an appropriate Jewish symbol through its identification with the notion of *Keneseth Yisrae'l* is a debatable point.³⁹ What is clear, however, is that once the idea took hold of the imagination of the Kabbalistic thinkers, it produced results that were far from anything that can be traced to the overwhelmingly patriarchal image of the Divine embedded within biblical and rabbinical Judaism.

The most significant development that took place in the Kabbalistic representation of *Shekhinah* is the unqualified and unequivocal feminine character assigned to it, not merely as a metaphorical personification of the Divine presence or glory, but as a real active principle existent within the structure of Godhead and imbued with power of creativity. Thus, within the Kabbalistic framework, *Shekhinah* as a *sefirah* is seen not only as a principle of potentiality; rather She is here conceptualized as a real existent being integrally connected with the Godhead, which manifests itself in and through Her.

The affinities between this notion of an Eternal Feminine Divine within the Godhead in the Kabbalistic tradition and the Hindu notion of *Śakti* (introduced above) are remarkable. *Shekhinah*, like the *Śakti* of the Hindu tradition, appears to be simultaneously mother, bride, and daughter. The earliest Kabbalistic text to make this bold assertion is *Sefer ha Bahir*, which makes many allusions to *Shekhinah* as the God's mother, sister, and daughter. In one significant passage of this early Kabbalistic text, there is also implied assertion of spousal relationship between God, the Father, and *Shekhinah*, the Supernal Mother. The passage states that *Shekhinah* is the Divine Queen, the Supernal Mother, who Her children go to see but are not allowed by the Father to see Her then.⁴⁰ Though the

Sefer ha Bahir tends to be somewhat more restrained in making use of the sexual imagery to suggest the consorting relationship between God and *Shekhinah* (who is also called daughter, mother, and sister of God), the notion of sacred marriage between God and *Shekhinah* already emerged in the earliest stratum of Kabbalistic literature, where it is accentuated in a bold manner in the *Sefer ha Zohar's* clearly sexual imagery of the relationship between *Shekhinah* and God. This sexual imagery will be discussed in more detail below.

A distinctive development in the post-*Bahir* Kabbalah draws our attention here. Namely, this period saw the application of the term *Shekhinah* not only to the tenth sefirah, as the *Bahir* had done, but to both *Binah*, the third sefirah (the upper *Shekhinah*), and to the tenth sefirah, called *Malkhuth* (the lower *Shekhinah*). What is important is that, in this doubling of the *Shekhinah* and in identifying *Binah* as the upper *Shekhinah*, a clear move has taken place in which the upper *Shekhinah* is seen to play an active role in primal creation. Significantly, the *Bahir* had already called the third sefirah "the Mother of the Universe."⁴¹ What distinguishes post-*Bahir* Kabbalistic thought is the identification of this third sefirah as the upper *Shekhinah*. This identification clearly articulates the fundamental Kabbalistic assumption that the Eternal Feminine is to be construed not only as a passive and receptive principle, but also as a Divine being with a significant role to perform in the overall cosmic creative process. It is important to note that, as the upper *Shekhinah*, the third sefirah is not the source and mother of the external world but of the Divine potencies themselves, which emanate from her in unceasing flow culminating in the lower *Shekhinah*, who stands at the edge of the internal manifestation of the God and is the mother of the external world. As such, the lower *Shekhinah* is designated as *Malkhuth*, "the Kingdom" (i.e., God's dominion or power in the world). Analogous to the Hindu notion of *Śakti*, the upper *Shekhinah* is the mother, not only of the Cosmos but also of the Divine potencies that flow from Her.⁴² The symbolism here also acquires significant sexual connotations as the upper *Shekhinah* is paired with *Hokhamah*,⁴³ who plays the role of Supernal Father in the creative process, such that the two become conjugally connected, like *Śiva* and *Śakti* in the Hindu tradition. This is precisely the clearly articulated point of departure for the *Zohar*, which attaches great significance to the *Shekhinah* in the role of the Divine Female partner in the sacred union (*zivuga kaddisha*). This being said, the *Zohar* reserves more pronounced sexual symbolism for the lower *Shekhinah's* relationship with the sixth sefirah, *Tifereth*, or the ninth sefirah, the *Yesod* (as will be discussed below).⁴⁴

Thus, in the Zoharic formulation of the notion of *Shekhinah*, a great stride has been made beyond Talmudic, philosophical, and early Kabbalistic conceptions of the nature and character of *Shekhinah*. Here, the *Shekhinah* has certainly emerged as an independent Divine force (*koah*) in and through whom the Godhead manifests itself, first through esoteric and internal manifestations within the realm of the Divinity through the upper *Shekhinah*, the *Binah*, and second mediated through the tenth sefirah, the lower *Shekhinah*, in the realm of cosmic creation that is God's kingdom. In the Zoharic scheme of things *Shekhinah* is not a creaturely entity (as Jewish philosophical thinking would have it); rather She is the coeternal and coeval Divine female partner, the Supernal Mother who is eternally united in a sacred marriage with the Supernal Father, the *Hokhamah*. The unequivocal female character of *Shekhinah*, with all of its attenuated features, is the very cornerstone of Zoharic Kabbalah, which brings to the fore (with almost fervent enthusiasm) all the power of sexual symbolism to drive home this point.⁴⁵

Indeed the Eternal Feminine, the Mother Goddess of the Near Eastern World, has returned here with a vengeance, though in a manner that takes a uniquely Jewish form and content. While pondering the radical elements of this new imagery of the *Shekhinah*, one feels inclined to suggest that what is encountered here is not merely the "resurgence of the idea of the feminine within the Godhead in the heart of the earliest Kabbalists";⁴⁶

rather, what one discerns here could be interpreted as a return of the Goddess, which includes a rich array of symbolic and mythic frameworks that bring to fore the considerable power of Mother Goddess imagery. The fact that such visions took hold of the Kabbalistic imagination problematized the very notion of patriarchal imagery of the Divine, as they did in the case of emergence of *Śakti* in the Tantra of the Hindu tradition.

Part II

Śakti and *Shekhinah* in a Comparative Perspective

The Emergence of the Feminine Divine: The Creatrix and the Redeemer

The most significant moment in the respective theosophical reformulations of the Feminine Divine in the Hindu and Jewish traditions is the incorporation and appropriation of a function and a role that had hitherto been reserved for their respective patriarchal Divinities: namely, their structurally connected cosmogonic and cosmoredemptive functions. As long as these two aspects of the Divine operation remained the exclusive or predominant prerogative of Divinity depicted through patriarchal imagery, there was very little room for the Feminine Divine to come to the fore as a force to be reckoned with, either as Supreme Feminine Divine or as a Feminine Divine with significant religious functions. It is interesting to note that the Tantric and Kabbalistic traditions both arrive at this particular moment of breakthrough by according the Feminine Divine a role in the cosmic drama that involved both elements of creation and redemption. At this point, it may be appropriate to suggest that creative and redemptive dimensions of Divine operation are structurally connected within the theological and mythological traditions under discussion, such that the source of temporal existence, which is subject to mortality and destruction, can alone confer upon the mortal beings immortal life. Indeed, creation without the element of redemption is anathema to the religious sensitivities that seek freedom from the vicissitudes of mortality that characterize the realm of creaturely existence. And indeed it is precisely this logic that is inevitably operating in the ascendance or resurgence of the Feminine Divine in the two mystical traditions under investigation.

The redemptive aspect of the Feminine Divine in the Tantra is conveyed originally through the symbolism of light. Specifically, the notion of light, which symbolizes knowledge and emancipation, is at the very root of Tantric imagery of *Śakti*. The association of the Feminine Divine with light in the *Rg Veda*⁴⁷ and later in the *Kena Upanisad* with *Umā Haimvatī*⁴⁸ is (as discussed above) the original source of this identification.⁴⁹ The later Tantric literature sees the symbolism of light taken to its logical conclusion by according the Feminine Divine the redemptive role, which is an extremely significant development in as much as it means that liberative power does not exclusively belong to the Masculine Divine anymore. Indeed, the *Śakti* in the Tantric tradition is most potently conceived of in the form of ten *Māhavidyās* (ten personifications of wisdom) that they themselves have liberative quality: a quality that originally belonged to the male divinities only.⁵⁰ But before this development could take place, the Feminine Divine had to be retrieved as the creatrix, the Universal Mother capable of bringing forth the creation, engaging in a cosmogonic function, which, in the case of Tantra, occurs without the need of a mediating Father who casts His seeds in the womb of the Mother.⁵¹

In the case of Kabbalah, the Supernal Mother, the Upper *Shekhinah* called *Binah*, no doubt does need the mediating influence of a Father figure (the *Hokhamah*), but here too She is given a significant role in the creative process along with the masculine aspect of Divinity.⁵² Not only is She given a role in creative process, but, like the *Śakti* in the

Tantra as the *Ādya Kālī*, the Upper *Shekhinah* in the Kabbalah becomes a personification of the principle of time as principle of movement and dynamism in all creation, such that She "stands at the edge of the seven *Sefiroth* for seven primal days, emitting them from herself and realizing strength in them in this inner, theogonic side of creation."⁵³ This development within the Kabbalah is the most fascinating side of the story, where one discerns the process of the emergence of *Shekhinah* as the Feminine Divine with a separate ontic status imbued with creative powers and coeternal with the Masculine Divine. In a manner analogous to the emergence of *Śakti* as the creatrix in the Tantra, one discerns in the Kabbalah the broader parameters of the process by which *Shekhinah* came to acquire a distinct and separate ontic status, which is a fundamental requirement of being a creatrix.

As noted earlier *Shekhinah* originally was characterized as presence or dwelling of God that may be manifested in a supernatural glow of light, known as the "radiance (*ziv*) of the *Shekhinah*."⁵⁴ Thus, in its original formulation the light of *Shekhinah* is nothing other than a derivative light, making her a manifestation of Divine glory without any independent ontic status (or even creaturely) status. This can be contrasted with earlier Kabbalistic writings, where *Shekhinah* is identified as emanating from the primordial great light, namely *Hokhamah*. This emanating light, the *Shekhinah*, is that which shines upon creatures and fills whole earth.⁵⁵ According to these Kabbalistic sources, the sages called this created light *Shekhinah* and thus ushered in an intermediary stage in which *Shekhinah* came to acquire an independent ontic status with a decisive role in the creative process. This association of *Shekhinah* with light, like the ontic identification of Tantric *Śakti* with Rg-Vedic *Uśās* and *Aditi* and Upanisadic *Umā Haimvati*, took on its own life in Kabbalistic imagery. Both *Safer ha Bahir* and *Safer ha Zohar*, the two Kabbalistic texts that contain the most decisive breakthrough of mythical consciousness into the sphere of rabbinic Judaism, tended to give preeminent place to this symbolism of light in their conception of *Shekhinah* as a distinct entity. Thus she "comes from the place of light," "from His place," "she is the brilliance taken from the primal light," which is "the good light stored away for the righteous."⁵⁶ *Shekhinah*, the primal light emanating from *Hokhamah* assumes a creative role in the Kabbalah as the consort of *Hokhamah*, the Divine Force called Upper Wisdom. This upper *Shekhinah*, known as the *Binah* in the Kabbalistic writings, is unmistakably construed in the *Bahir* as the "Mother of the Universe."⁵⁷ Notably, the Spanish Kabbalah features frequent references to *Shekhinah* in her cosmogonic creative role, almost giving her the status of creator by using the masculine term *Yatzer Bereshith* ("Creator" or "Demiurge") in referring to one of her two aspects.⁵⁸

The creative/cosmogonic function accorded to *Shekhinah* is not confined to conceding her the role of mother of the physical and human world alone. Analogous to *Śakti* becoming the mother of the members of the Hindu Trinity, *Shekhinah* as the Mother of Universe is also the mother of the angelic beings. Thus, according to the *Zohar* she is the mother of Metatron, the highest potency in the angelic world, who "emerged from between her legs."⁵⁹ Quite daringly, the *Zohar* also describes *Shekhinah* as the mother of the demonic figures, who are children of her two malefic daughters, *Lilith* and *Naamah*.⁶⁰ Thus, not unlike *Aditi* and *Diti*, the twins of the Indian mythological world, both of whom went into making of the ultimate figure of Tantric *Śakti* as the Universal Mother as well as destructive principle operating in this world, *Shekhinah* has emerged as an independent creative potency that is the source of both the angelic and the demonic: an idea that provides us some food for thought.

These metamorphoses of the Feminine Divine—in the case of *Śakti* as the sole cosmogonic power and in the case of *Shekhinah* as the Supernal Mother with a distinct and separate ontic status—were the necessary intermediary steps in their respective emergences as redemptive powers. Thus, both *Śakti* and *Shekhinah*, once imbued with

creative powers, also came to be seen as loci of human redemption. The natural connection between the creative principle and redemptive principle is preeminently applicable to the Feminine Divine once she is anointed with the creative function. In this way, the universal creatrix also becomes the saving mother.

The Tantric texts make a distinction between two aspects of *Śakti*: the aspect of bondage and the aspect of liberation. In her creative role *Śakti* is credited with creation of the conditions for human bondage, from which she alone can provide liberation.⁶¹ Similarly it is not without significance that, according to the Zohar, *Shekhinah* is also symbolized by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—the biblical source of humanity's fall. As such, she is also called the Tree of Death.⁶² We will have more to say about this symbolic identification at a later stage in this paper. Suffice it to say that under this imagery *Shekhinah* shares with *Śakti* that paradoxical character of simultaneously being the principle of death and redemption. In the case of *Śakti*, this paradox is captured under the category of manifest *prakṛti* (also called *maya*), the realm of differentiation and division. This is also the case with lower *Shekhinah*, the *Shekhinah* involved in the lower regions of earthly existence and the nether world, where she is in contact with the "Other World."⁶³ However, the higher *Shekhinah*, which is identified as "the Source of Life" and "the World to Come" (the true dimension of bliss in the Kabbalah), is also called Return (*Teshuvah*), for everything that began in it returns to it at the end when its energy has been fully consumed. Accordingly, the upper *Shekhinah* is explicitly described as the realm of redemption. Gershom Scholem puts it thus: "As the lower mother, the *Shekhinah* is present in the cosmos in the work of Creation; as the upper mother, it constitutes the opportunity for the redemption of the world. In Kabbalistic terms, that place where Creation began as a process within God Himself is identical with the site of redemption and atonement."⁶⁴ Indeed the structural affinities between this conception and the Tantric *Śakti* are amazing when one considers that in the Tantric tradition it is affirmed that the *Adya Śakti* (the primal *Śakti*) has two parts, with which She creates and liberates. One of these parts is *Saccidānands Prakṛti*, the realm of truth, consciousness, and bliss and the other is *Māyā Prakṛti*, the realm of worldly entanglement.⁶⁵

The Dangerous Women: The Other Side of the Feminine Divine

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Tantric notion of Feminine Divine is its horrific and destructive side. Not only *Kālī* and *Durgā*, the two most well-known manifestations of Feminine Divine in the Tantric tradition, but some of Her other manifestations (such as the ten *Mahā Vidyās*), also share in this gory (and some may consider revolting) imagery of the bloodthirsty, violent, and destructive side of the Feminine Divine.⁶⁶ What distinguishes the Tantric vision of *Śakti* is its portrayal of the Divine in imagery that tends to bring to the fore that specific quality of the Divine that, to use Otto's phrase, is captured in the notions of "*mysterium, tremendum et fascinosum*." Tantra's fascination with the "tremendum" aspect of the Feminine Divine has been seen as problematic by many, both within and outside the Hindu religious fold. However, as one delves deeper into this Tantric imagery, one finds a potent dialectic at work that is closely linked with the creative and redemptive functions of the Feminine Divine. *Śakti* in her various manifestations engaged in the cosmic battle against the forces of the evil is indeed the principal redemptive power, who is engaged in this cosmic conflict with the specific purpose of restoring the original ontological condition of a Cosmos turned to chaos by the ascendance of demonic power.⁶⁷ Moreover, it is precisely when the Goddess is in contact with the demonic—the creatures of the other world—that she becomes violent and destructive, revealing the *tremendum* aspect of her character. As such, this is not random violence; rather, like the purposiveness of creation, this destruction too is purposive. Within the Hindu context, this portrayal of the "cosmic combat" is an integral aspect of cosmoredemptive action in which