**A Death Full of Gods:**

**The Arcane Link between Beauty and Death in the Philosophy of ‘Socrates’ and Shankaracharya**

Beauty and death? Is not death necessarily ugly, especially in the cases of the ‘normal’ deaths that follow the gradual decay of the body, the natural entropy that Shakespeare explores through Lear’s tragedy?1 Then, how can beauty and death be connected, and how can this connection be established within the normative parameters of ‘philosophy’, in the case of Western thought, or ‘Darshana’(literally meaning vision), in the case of Indian thought? To explore this area I have decided to adopt a comparativist framework within which I will place Shankaracharya, the Indian mystic and thinker of the eighth century, side by side with “Socrates”, the philosopher in the Platonic dialogues who may or may not neatly correspond with the historical Socrates.2

Socrates - at least the Platonic Socrates - and Shankaracharya have many things in common in their philosophical doctrines, including the privileging of the soul over the body, the focus on the eternality of the soul, an ascetic denial of bodily pleasures and a celebration of the life of rational spiritual thought (in Shankaracharya’s case, it is *vichara*, the practice of Vedantic ratiocination to separate the soul from the body).3 However, it is seldom noted that, apart from the ‘soul’ or ‘Atman’(the Self in Vedanta), both of them are also interested in the issue of beauty. If they think that the body is mortal and hence its beauty is of negligible cognitive value, why do they dwell on bodily beauty so intensely?[In Shankara’s case it is the bodily beauty of the gods and goddesses revered in Hinduism; in Socrates’ case, it is mainly a matter of beautiful boys.]4

The question of beauty also brings us to a related issue: that of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy. There is this quarrel in Socrates’ thought, and it is well documented and commented upon.5 However, when we take a comparativist approach and study Socrates and Shankara side by side, we may be able to reveal a secret connection between death and beauty that gives rise to the dichotomy of poetry and philosophy: because, just as Socrates’ descriptions of love reach a poetic height in the *Phaedrus*, Shankara too, while focussing on the *mayic* nature of the world and denying its absolute reality, composes appreciable poetry that is centred on beauty. In other words, in these thinkers’ visions there is a secret dichotomy between an other-worldliness that emerges from an enhanced consciousness of death and decay marking everything ‘earthly’, and, the fascination with a beauty that creates a philosophical *aporia*, by refusing to be categorized as *either* this-worldly *or* other-worldly. Beauty, for these thinkers, serves as an ambiguous object: it may pull us down towards the world of flesh; but it can also elevate us towards the realm of truth. The ethics of asceticism is bound to bracket off beauty and highlight death and decay at its cost, so that the espouser of such ideals can justify the moral necessity to *hate* the world, that is, *this* world. However, beauty is an aporetic element in both Shankara’s and Socrates’ thought, which, nevertheless, also hints at a *poros*, a plenitude and a path towards wisdom.6

The material world reflects the principle of entropy, and yet, it is intensely beautiful, as both Robert Browning and Hermann Hesse noticed. This beauty and this inevitable decay of the beautiful coexist in the world: we love beauty, and yet we die. Moreover, the beautiful itself decays, dwindling into ugliness caused by the ravages of time. Shakespeare’s sonnets are concerned with this painful dialectic of beauty, and most of the love poetry of the world is grounded in the dichotomy of the beautiful and its transitory nature. As Diotima points out in the *Symposium*, we desire beauty, but we also desire immortality. And this double desire is called love, in its fullest sense.7 That is to say, we do not desire an immortality that will be placed in a matrix of ugliness. We procreate – which is, in Diotima’s vocabulary, an indispensable constituent of the definition of Eros – in beauty, not in ugliness. And we procreate, whether through flesh or through the soul, to fulfil our desire for immortality.8 If one reads Diotima’s speech carefully to draw out its polyvalent nuances, one will find that Diotima is speaking about the birth of philosophical discourse. Though many thinkers have expressed their disapproval of the idea of ‘metaphilosophy’, one feels like saying that if Socrates is the philosopher, Diotima is the metaphilosopher par excellence.9 And we need to dwell on the gender of Diotima. Diotima, as a woman, does not speak only of truth but also of beauty. Diotima’s proposition about the erotic ascent is very different from the cave allegory figured forth in the *Republic*. The fire and the sun are sharply distinguished there, and they are both differentiated from the shadows.10 But in Diotima’s imagery, the fire is a ray of the sun: the beauty embodied by a beautiful person is not a copy or imitation, but a partial radiation of the sea of beauty. Martha Nussbaum has grasped the point well, though she does not appreciate Diotima’s teaching. She states that Diotima’s teaching establishes a family relationship between different genres of beauty: the beauty of geometry becomes ‘family-related’ to the beauty of a good-looking person.11 However, we need to focus on the other aspect of this observation. The family relationship between different sorts of beauty becomes possible only when they are not seen as distinct copies(or ‘shadows’) of the original Beauty, but rather as its partial manifestations. So, the fire is here only a wave in the sea of beauty that the ‘sun’ of truth embodies. The cave allegory in the *Republic* is centred on the ‘sun’, the symbol of true knowledge, while the dominant image in Diotima’s teaching is the sea of the *kalon*. However, both images are probably denoting the same reality. We should not say that they are the ‘different aspects’ of the same reality, because, the truth discovered by the person released from the cave is *the* *same* as the beauty-in-itself Diotima urges us to experience. The sea of beauty *is* the sun of truth. If the particular instances of beauty are not copies but manifestations of beauty-in-itself, then the mortal embodiments of beauty are not wholly mortal, they embody immortality too.

We may notice that more often than not the aspect of beauty is sought to be bypassed altogether in philosophical discourses, as beauty is not just transcendental but also a matter of sensory perception; when one beholds beauty, one is enchanted more than he/she experiences a release. However, as Iris Murdoch has argued, beauty can also initiate the process of ‘unselfing’, the procedure of releasing the individual from his/her imprisonment in an egoistic selfhood.12 This unselfing is, however, fraught with dangers. And Murdoch herself knows it jolly well. ‘Everything is full of gods.’ And yet, she is also aware of the dangers of trusting false deities.13 This is the *aporia* beauty sets before the philosopher: like the female principle in Hindu tantra, beauty is a principle of plurality, it pluralizes our cognitive universe; whereas the Sun is One, the sea of beauty is not frozen ice but warm waves rolling in ecstasy.14

It is noticeable that Diotima, the wonderful theorist of beauty, is a woman, and Shankara’s most beautiful religious hymn is addressed to a female deity, the Supreme Goddess, and it is called the *Saundaryalahari*, or, *The Waves of Glorious Beauty*. The interesting point is that many scholars still argue that it is not really composed by Shankaracharya, that it is wrongly attributed to the non-dualist Shankara who could not have endorsed the tantric orientation the work betrays. However, it is to be noticed that most of the scholars and religious practitioners take the hymn as an original work of Shankara and highly regard it. As Arthur Avalon has noted, many well known philosophers and commentators on the text of the *Saundaryalahari* have accepted the authorship of Shankara.15 Those who doubt this authorship are, like Shankara and like Socrates, locked in the *aporia* of beauty. They think that the truth of *advaita* *vedanta* is incompatible with the admission of beauty into the scheme of spirituality championed by Shankara. This hymn is peculiar in that it vividly describes the Goddess in all her aspects: her divine majesty is celebrated through theophanic descriptions, and her physical beauty is described as minutely as an erotic poet describes his beloved.16 It is inspired poetry and the inspiration comes from a higher Eros, the Eros of the sort Diotima envisages: the Eros that has completed the ascent to the sea of the *kalon*. It is also interesting to notice that the hymn praises the plural and dynamic nature of the Mother Goddess: the *lahari*, which stands for waves or flood(both senses are involved here), implies ecstatic motion, and baffling plurality. Beauty is plural here, and yet it is radiated by the single deity, the Mother. She embodies both plurality and Oneness, both the sun of the cave allegory and the sea of *kalon* Diotima speaks of.

Adriana Cavarero has complained that the Western philosophical tradition, by dwelling too much on death and not on birth, has excluded the maternal body from philosophy. The focus on the other world that we see in Socrates’ speeches, she argues, shifts our gaze away from *this* mortal world into which we are ushered through our births. For Cavarero, the denigration of *this* world is essentially linked with that of the mother, and Socrates performs a symbolic matricide by foregrounding death at the cost of birth. And it has immediately misogynistic implications in the *Phaedo*:

‘……the speeches of the *Phaedo*, and more precisely the philosophical discourses that untie the soul from the body, take place in the cell where Socrates is sitting with his male friends during the final hours before his death. Xanthippe, his wife, has been hastily thrown out. This is not a place for women. Socrates does not want any women in the cell when he comes close to accomplishing that “living for death” announced by philosophy. Thus while waiting for the perfect, definitive untying, he attains the experience of death through a final dialogue about his own death. Women are unaware of the untying of the body in which true philosophy consists. They scream and yell in the face of death. Exactly like bad philosophers.’17

Cavarero’s anger is justified, but her reading of Diotima’s speech in the same light as that in which she reads the *Phaedo* problematizes her response to Plato. Diotima’s speech, too, she thinks, is oriented towards a denial of the material world, of embodied life, and so on.18 However, Diotima’s speech problematizes the whole issue of death by connecting it to that of beauty. The immortal is not a cold abstraction in her vision, but a sea of beauty, just as the Great Mother is, for Shankara, an inundation of the waves of beauty, and not just the attributeless Absolute(the Nirguna Brahman). We need to think of Diotima’s role as a priestess and ponder over Shannon Bell’s view that Diotima was probably a priestess of Aphrodite. Probably, Aphrodite was originally a goddess of both fertility and erotics, and hence a goddess of ‘birth’ as well as love. Diotima is, according to Bell, a devotee of this unified deity.19 If this is so, her teaching cannot denigrate the miracle of birth in order to foreground the erotic ascent. From this perspective, we can interpret her focus on procreation in a new critical light. For Diotima, life becomes, through love, perpetual births in beauty.

Diotima’s speech, and the entire corpus of Socratic thought in general, operate within a transitional period in Greek culture when the gods of a polytheistic system were being reconfigured in diverse ways.20 On the other hand, in Shankara’s case, he was propounding the concept of the non-dualist Brahman which was no new, radical shift in theology, but something already implied in the Upanishads. Besides, ‘polytheistic’ systems were well-established, and though they were in conflict with Shankara’s radical non-dualism, Shankara sought to reconcile them with his own doctrine non-agonistically. The ‘gods(and goddesses)’ were a problem for both Shankara and Socrates, and yet, Shankara could solve the problem more easily than Socrates could.21 What Murdoch implies by the *demythologisation* of religion was being performed by both Shankara and Socrates, and yet, Socrates was trying hard to remythologise philosophical thought, especially, his own doctrine.22 On the other hand, Shankara was simply breathing the spirit of his doctrine into the existing mythology of the religious system within which he operated. His *advaita*(non-duality) was peculiarly – in a way the ‘monotheist’ cannot grasp, perhaps – reconcilable with what Gayatri Spivak has called a ‘*dvaita* “structure of feeling”’, a twoness-minded religious sentiment. I would like to quote a few lines from Spivak’s ‘Moving Devi’ that brilliantly argue for a comparative methodology to study Greek and Indian ‘polytheisms’ and their ‘secret’.

‘ I must let foolish common sense interrupt the power of knowledge and declare: There is no great goddess. When activated, each goddess is the great goddess. That is the secret of polytheism. […..] [….]Discussing the *Mahabharata* with him(Bimal Krishna Matilal), I suggested that the active polytheist imagination negotiates with the unanticipatable yet perennial possibility of the metamorphosis of the transcendental as supernatural in the natural. To my way of thinking,this seemed to be the secret of the *dvaita* structure of feeling: the unanticipatable emergence of the supernatural in the natural.[….] It is not too fanciful to say that a possible *dvaita* “structure of feeling”, if there are such structures, would be the future anteriority of every being as potentially, unanticipatably *avatar* in the general sense. It is within this general uneven, unanticipatable possibility of *avatarana* or descent – this cathexis by the ulterior, as it were, that the “lesser” god or goddess, when fixed in devotion, is as great as the “greatest”[….]’ 23

Spivak suggests that, as in Hinduism, in the case of the Greek pantheon too it can be noticed that ‘every god or goddess’ was ‘the god or goddess of everything when cathected in devotion or worship’. She suggests that most of the Western commentators misrepresent the Greek polytheism because they do not know polytheism in cultural practice, they do not know the structures of feeling that constellate around the so-called ‘cults’ within polytheism.24 If we remember Bell’s argument that Diotima was the priestess of Aphrodite, we can say that for her, even the theologically diminished Aphrodite of the patriarchal Greek pantheon meant ‘everything’ , when ‘cathected in devotion or worship’. That is probably the secret of her erotic philosophy.

However, to come back to the polytheistic predicament of Shankara and Socrates. Socrates privileges the One over the Many, and so does Shankara. But Shankara is comfortable with the gods or goddesses after he has attained the knowledge of the Brahman, as he inherits the religious culture familiar with the ‘unanticipatable possibility of *avatarana* or descent’ that can make every being (whether divine or ‘mortal’) an avatar of the Absolute. On the other hand, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates is still struggling with the tension between gods and God. It is unclear whether it is God (identifiable with his ‘Sun’) or gods that he wishes to meet after death. The reference to the mysteries suggests that he is thinking of the deities ‘below’ who accompany the dead, and yet, his heroic march towards death suggests that he has a calling from God, the embodiment of the “Good”.25 Iris Murdoch sharply distinguishes between the Good and God. However, in Plato, the Good sometimes reflects something like ‘God’, as we usually understand the word.26 Again, as with Shankara, with Socrates too, perhaps the One transcends even the idea of a personal God prevalent in monotheism.27 So, as Murdoch rightly points out, the Good is greater than God, it is the reality of which God is the dream.28 For Shankara too, the Saguna Brahman, the Absolute with attributes, is less real, in the ultimate analysis, than the Nirguna One, the attributeless Brahman. As far as Socrates is concerned, we may dwell on what Gregory Vlastos has to say about Plato’s notion of the divine:

‘[….] while Plato retains traditional deities and sets high above them in the *Timaeus* a creator god of his own devising, none of these personal divinities stirs either awe or love in his heart, while the severely Impersonal Ideas evoke both, but especially love, so much so that he speaks repeatedly of communion with them as an act of blissful and fertile conjugal union.’29

Then, is Socrates hinting at these Impersonal Ideas when he is speaking of the gods of the mysteries in the *Phaedo*? Will he, after death, dwell with these ideas in the ‘eternal world’ that – as Cavarero suggests – consists of ‘an infinite duration of pure thought’?30 Or is he really thinking of an afterlife full of gods? Socrates’ cave allegory has been sharply criticized by Hannah Arendt who thinks that the released philosopher in the cave allegory leaves the cave in ‘perfect “singularity”’, ‘neither accompanied nor followed by others’. For Arendt, the experience of death and that of the eternal are both the same as ‘to cease to be among men’.31 Is the heroic death celebrated in the *Phaedo* centred on the same image of solitary release as is presented in the cave allegory? If eternity and death are similar in terms of their disjunction from human plurality, then the answer seems to be yes. But, we now need to dwell on another aspect of this issue. When we read the *Phaedo* and the *Apology* carefully we cannot help realising that Socrates has a peculiar kind of grievance against the society that he seeks to subject to a thorough moral amelioration. Hence, there is a sense in him that he is being unjustly misunderstood by his fellow beings, and hence, it is not he who is distancing himself from the others within the polis but rather it is the community that disowns him for his ostensibly subversive teachings. This sense of being alienated generates two kinds of emotion in Socrates. There is a suppressed sense of anger which is, however, polished through ratiocination. Secondly, after he has released himself from the cave’s shadowy unreality into the sunlight and has looked at the sun itself, he feels a sadness about those who stubbornly refuse to be persuaded about the Real, about the world that lies beyond the shadows. This is a recognizable grievance which Cassandra also probably felt when she was ignored by her audience. We often forget that the relationship between the society and the individual should be adequately reciprocal so that the society accepts the ethical burden of listening to the non-conformist voices. Hence, Socrates’ embracing of death as a means to attain a better world in the *Phaedo* is perhaps informed by the grievances I have focussed on.32 It is not that he is willing to cease to be among men, as Arendt suggests, or totally neglect *this* world, as Cavarero would say. Rather, he knows that death is, for him, a threshold between what *is* and what *should* *be*. Which gods does he wish to meet after death? The moments before his death are spent *among* *men*, though it is true that this pre-death Socratic collectivity, this community of the ‘necessary others’(a la Cavarero) in the narrative of Socrates’ death, excludes women. After the death, will this community vanish together from the transmigrating Socrates’ cognitive horizons? Or is it this community which has become transformed into the “gods” Socrates wishes to meet after his death? That is, is it possible to imagine that Socrates does not see death as a radical break with this world, but rather as an entry to an ideal world which is nevertheless peopled by gods and not just Impersonal Ideas - and that these gods are the divinized forms of the humans he sought to enlighten throughout his life? Which gods do we imagine at the last moment of death? Maybe some people see death as an entry to the divine which is exclusive of the mortal memory. But it is also possible to think of other imaginative configurations of gods made by the dying, especially those dying people who know that the ‘cry of the flesh’ cannot be dissociated from the ‘cry of the soul’, and that the world of mortality remains a memory even at the point of death, which one cannot negate forcibly but can perhaps sublimate into the vision of a *peopled* Goodness, a Sun crowded by the humans, the loved ones of the fleshly world, now transformed into gods.33 This is figured forth wonderfully at the end of the *Mahabharata*, and I will return to this point later.

It is the beauty of the earthly existence, however fragile and transitory that may be, which binds us to this world even at the moment when we step out of it, at the moment of our final departure. This beauty is sought to be negated forcibly by the hardened ascetics. And still, this is not something we can negate once and for all. Socrates’ death, whose ugliness and unjust nature he seeks to soften with an imaginative exploration of the beautiful place in Hades, the death which Shankara urges us to defy through the weapon of Vedantic *vichara* and yet ends up surrendering to the Goddess of beauty who will beautify it through her grace(is this grace a combined form of *anandalahari*, the waves of bliss, as well as *soundaryalahari*, the waves of beauty?), and our own deaths whose ugliness we shudder to imagine, all indicate the intricate connection between beauty and death, love and the final departure.34 Eros may be of the good, as Diotima suggests, but it is actually a desire for the good that lies hidden and veiled in the perishably beautiful objects we adore in our lives. Eros keeps open the possibility of the imperishable transcendent, and yet invokes the perishable stubbornly, again and again. This is the *aporia* of Eros, and both Maria Zambrano and Murdoch had understood this.35 For Zambrano, Eros and the Psyche must walk together. We, the modern humans, do need the concept of the soul, and we must also be sensitized to the *aporias* created by Eros.36 We hesitate to accept Aphrodite’s gift, Zambrano says. And this hesitation is symptomatic of our complex historical positionality, our historically informed sense of loss, of having moved away from an earlier universe of images and thought.37

For Shankara, the imagination of death becomes an important tool in the *vichara*. Many of his hymns dwell on the ugliness of death and decay. In the ‘Charpata Panjarika Stotra’, for example, he links the image of death with, specifically, the dead body, insisting that, as soon as the life is out of the body, the body becomes a thing feared by one’s loved ones.38 Here one may think of Kristeva’s abject and Freud’s uncanny: both concepts refer to death and dead bodies as the most destabilising experiences for us.39 Shankara shows us the sheer ugliness and alienation involved in the event of death. This alienation, this sense of being deserted by all, even by the nearest ones, is another aspect of death which makes us particularly afraid of it. It is to overcome such a sense of desolation that we must concentrate on God.40 Death, as in Socrates, in Shankara’s works too often operates as the major means to dwell on the eternal and the immortal, the Self totally free from birth and death. Nevertheless, though death can be figured in thousands of ways, it remains ultimately unanticipatable. By familiarizing us with death, the most unfamiliar experience for every human, Shankara tries to make us transcend the fear of death. It is a negation of death through *vichara* and through spiritual experience. And yet, this *advaitin* (non-dualist) hero needs the figure of a goddess made one with the Absolute through devotion, the Great Goddess spiritually energized through a *dvaita* structure of feeling.

Unlike Socrates, Shankara focuses on the personalized images of the Absolute, and these images are part of the collective cultural repertoire of the religious community he functions in. He is a mystic, but unlike Socrates, he does not need to continually redefine the mythological universe his ‘poetic’ sensibility corresponds to. Socrates’ mysticism is often erotic and aesthetic, but it remains logocentric to the end. On the other hand, Shankara knows, like the *rishis* (seers)of the Upanishads, that the Absolute is ultimately beyond the reach of reason, and hence, for him, though humans are innately divine, they still have to accept the divine forms of gods and goddesses as Great Gods or Great Goddesses through devotion, thereby surrendering their imperfect humanity to the gods’ or goddesses’ divinity.41 The Socratic burden of heroism is lightened in Shankara, because, by allowing the gods and goddesses into his spiritual episteme, he bridges the mortal beauty and the immortal one that transcends death. This structure of feeling weds the *dvaita* to the *advaita*. Beauties of *this* world are rejected as mortal trash, as in Socrates, and, as opposed to them, a divine beauty is imagined, where the Goddess radiates supraterrestrial bliss. And yet, the Goddess’s beauty somehow encompasses the mortal world too. The immortal descends to the mortal, blurring the boundary between the two realms, implying that death cannot be negated through reason, but it can be drowned in the waves of bliss and the waves of beauty, *anandalahari* and *saundaryalahari*.

In his works like *Viveka-Chudamani* (The Crest-jewel of Discrimination), Shankara focuses on the ‘powers of horror’(a la Kristeva) exerted by death, and on the deplorable nature of the material body.42 Here one may see a fear of the female body as well. In the ‘Charpata Panjarika Stotra’ he tries to sensitize us to the filthy nature of the female body.43 However, this is basically a horror of our *embodiedness* in general, and not just a misogynistic fear of women’s flesh. Shankaracharya, unlike Socrates, was quite respectful towards women.44Nevertheless, a feminist critic like Cavarero can justly object to the passages in Shankara’s work that denigrate the female body. But what is interesting here is that though Shankara links the gross body with death, decay and ugliness, when he praises the beauty of the Goddess, he does not dwell on an abstract sea of beauty without any specific form. He, rather, vividly describes the goddess’s body, and here no fear of the female flesh is evident. One may say that he does not consider the Goddess fleshly. That is true; for him, the Goddess is a congealed form of spiritual beauty. However, in ‘Hindu’ polytheism, the deities betray an intermediate nature between the human form and the divine formlessness, the Absolute as beyond beauty and its descent or *avatarana* (as Spivak would say) in the particular, beautiful form of a god or goddess. The absolute Goodness of Murdoch is here incarnate in the particular instances of beauty embodied in the goddesses or gods.45

While in his philosophical treatises and some of his spiritual guide books Shankara sees death as the entry point of *vichara*, in his hymns addressed to the Goddess purely out of devotion, he lets the divine splendour of Her beauty break the door of death and drown the perishable beauty in the waves of an imperishable one. There is a subterraneous faith in the *power* of this beauty: this is something not to enjoy, but to drown in.46 Was Diotima trying to say the same thing? Perhaps Socrates’ heliocentric imagery and his obsession with vision missed the essential Diotimean point. The sea of *kalon* is not fixed in the *hyperouranios* *topos*; it always descends, with its rolling waves, towards the ugliness of the imperfect earth.47 This idea also finds a deep echo in a latter day devotee of the Goddess, the Indian philosopher, Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo claims, ‘The Mother is dealing with the Ignorance in the fields of the Ignorance; she has *descended* there and is not all above.’48[emphasis added] This descent, this downward motion of the sea of *kalon* is what informs the concept of the Great Goddess as Mother in India. Shankaracharya invokes, precisely, this *descending* Mother who can reconcile her absolute beauty with the perishable beauty of our decaying, mortal existence. Goodness is no more the sun that does not send its rays into the cave; rather, it is the violent sea of beauty that floods the twilight of beauty and ugliness on earth with the assurance of an everlasting beauty in which both life and death can be implicated. It sounds too utopic, and it requires a heroic imagination to envision it, a heroism more difficult than the one Socrates shows, the heroism of facing death boldly. Aurobindo was, from the very beginning, opposed to the idea of a cold asceticism; he invoked the figure of the goddess Mahalakshmi to uphold an ideal of spiritual transformation that did not neglect the aesthetic side of life.49 In his *Savitri*, which he prepares as a symbolic saga of the achievement of the “life divine” that conquers death through the spiritualization of our flesh, the central *agon* is between the heroine who is, again, an avatar of the Divine Mother, and Yama, the God of Death. At the end love wins through Savitri’s conquest over Yama. And this love is eros as well as agape.50 This heroism, which Aurobindo associates with the feminine, again reminds us that Diotima is a woman and Shankara’s passionate prayers are addressed to the Goddess, the divine female epitome of Beauty. If knowledge is imagined in masculine terms in the (largely misogynistic) ascetic ideals, beauty is conceived as feminine. This beauty is a threat and a lure at once. Our pangs are the deepest when we lose the beauty(whether of ourselves or of others we love) that we adored intensely; and the ascetic tries to negate beauty altogether by harping on abstract ideals. But can there be a beauty that descends towards us, a descending grace Rilke could envisage?51 This is what haunts the seers like Socrates and Shankara, who know that the greatest philosophical heroism lies in the successful attempt of opening up death itself to the waves of beauty that can dissolve the greatest boundary of our cognitive universe, that between life and death. When we are genuinely convinced that truth is beauty and beauty is truth, we can live with beauty rather than dying towards truth, and the Sun is transfigured into a splendid Goddess and comes down into the cave. Like the rivers imagined to be goddesses in India, the Goodness of Plato and Murdoch thus descends towards the earth, towards the ambiguous deities we adore. And we can, only then, imagine a *beautiful* *death*, a death-in-beauty even Diotima could not think of, a death full of gods illumined by Goodness.

However, Shankara’s goddess is totally different from the goddess of Parmenides that Cavarero is dismissive of. Cavarero writes:

‘On this route toward the de-realization of the world, we find women bringing and leading Parmenides on high.[….] it is astounding that female figures inaugurate the route toward abstract thought, where philosophy celebrates its patriarchal glory. In fact, within the symbolic order of philosophy, women are either completely absent, or they appear as naïve and ignorant persons [….] or function as divine female mentors like Parmenides’ goddess and Plato’s Diotima. Thus we find a subtle and ambiguous symbolic game. It almost seems as though women (excluded from the realm of thought both in reality and because of the “unthinkability” of their gender) become the sacrificial food for the journey toward the realm of philosophy that will exclude them. In other words, it almost seems as though philosophy was attempting to leave a residual trace of the matricide committed at the outset. In any case, it is a female figure who opens the route to the paternal realm of metaphysics, where pure thought no longer holds any (living) root.’52

This view can be contested, as it is a fairly reductionist reading of Parmenides’ poem, “On Nature”. However, instead of commenting on Cavarero’s reading of this poem, I would rather reflect on another mode of imagining the “goddess” that emerges from female roots in India. The tantric modes of thought are often considered to have been developed from a matriarchal culture. However, even if we bracket off the role of the Magna Mater in tantra that Arthur Avalon so sincerely reveals in *Sakti and Sakta*, we can see the female roots of the Indian Goddess spirituality in the Vedas themselves.53 The *Devi Sukta* in the *Rig* *Veda*, which is supposed to be composed by Vak, the daughter of the Seer, Ambhrina, presents theophanic poetry where she, after realizing her oneness with the Absolute, speaks, as it were, from the transcendental heights about her immanence in every form of worldly existence. This *sukta* itself has a form of the descent I have earlier focussed on: the woman sage, after she has become one with the Absolute, after she has become the Supreme Goddess, speaks about how she has manifested herself as the world, the dynamic existence of the cosmos. She is greater than the earth, and still she is within it. No, she *is* it. She touches the sky with her body. She is the mother even of the Father. Thus, the *sukta* presents the Divine as realised by a woman: a divinity pervading both worlds, the world of life and the world that is unimaginable, undermining the barrier between this world and the other world. She is, unlike the women Cavarero dwell on, herself a mystic, a divine Seer one with the Absolute; she is over-capable of abstract thought and yet the imagery in her speech includes the basic biological functions of the living beings: eating, hearing sounds, breathing. It is rooted in a life that is rooted in the divine.54

I would strongly argue that this vision of the *Devi* *Sukta* is reflected in the all-devouring waves of beauty Shankara celebrates. No logocentric solution to death and decay is possible. Death is not to be conquered with words, but rather with some *experience* greater than death, something in which death is included, not as nothingness but only as the other door to life, complementing birth and not negating it. This all-encompassing experience must be ethical, aesthetic and metaphysical simultaneously. Drawing on Paul Valery and Simone Weil, Murdoch tells us that the sun is an insuperable difficulty.55 Yes, the sun that blinds the human just released from the cave is certainly a difficulty, something more baffling than even ‘nothingness’. But the sun is not the only manifestation of the Good or the Real. If the patriarchal sun is dissolved into maternal beauty, the sage coming from the shadows will drown in it without becoming blind or a stone, a statue.56 And that beauty will make our death bright as the sun, full of gods, a peopled portal on the path followed by universal life. Cavarero offers a vision of death opposed to the Greek view of death as a sign of human finitude.57 For her, death becomes a cairotic moment in the continuum of universal life; individual death as nothingness is thus conquered by ‘the unending metamorphosis of impersonal life.’58This also is, however, a metaphysical and not ‘materialist’ solution. The individual, at the point of dying, cannot envisage the abstract universal life. One needs the humans one loved throughout life, or the gods, to accompany him/her. Death must be a *peopled* death, because, as Cavarero herself observes, our selfhoods are narratable.59 Death needs its narrators to remain linked with *this* world even after the moment of final departure. Horatio must survive Hamlet. But Socrates thinks of something else, as do Shankara and the mystic devotees of the Mother in India. They need their god/goddess at the moment of death. If the Good is powerful enough to offer us, at the moment of death, not only the sun that is an insuperable difficulty but also the waves of the sea of *kalon*, the imperfect human companions in our lives may become gods at our death to accompany us. Because, within the *dvaita* structure of feeling, every being is an avatar, the descent of the transcendental supernatural into the natural.

At the last moment of the Great Departure of the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*, the King of gods descends on the peak of the Himalayas to welcome Yudhishthira into the paradise. Yudhisthira is reluctant to go *alone*. Then he is told that all his human companions have returned to their original abodes in different parts of the heaven. They are now divine beings. But there is still left a dog that has accompanied Yudhishthira. What about it? It becomes King Dharma all of a sudden. The unanticipatable emergence of the supernatural in the natural. The troubled king, Yudhishthira, is contented now.60 His death is peopled by gods, both the gods of the ‘above’ and the divinized humans who are *now* above. Like Socrates’ Hades, Yudhishthira’s afterlife is full of gods.

At the last moment of his life, it is said, Shankaracharya became the God whose avatar he was, and all the gods accompanied him to heaven.61 In this narrative, death becomes a festival, a crowd of divinities. Not just a good death, but a death full of beauty.

But what is the fate of the dead body, the extreme instance of the Kristevan abject? Let me conclude this essay with an anecdote. When Kabir, an Indian mystic associated with the Bhakti movement in the fifteenth century, died, his Hindu and Muslim followers began to quarrel among themselves on the issue of the death rituals applicable to the dead body of the saint. When they uncovered the corpse, there was no body, but a heap of flowers.62 The ultimate vision of the conquest of beauty over death.

Death is full of gods. Death is strewn with flowers. We can look forward to the realisation of the apparently other-worldly vision of corpses turning into flowers on *this* earth. It is only a vision, and yet it propels us towards the hope of making the impossible possible. This is a concern of religion and philosophy as well as art.

When the corpse becomes flowers philosophy and poetry end their quarrel decisively.

**Notes**

1 Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare, A Very Short Introduction* (OUP,2006), pp.100-112 2 For Shankaracharya’s (also referred to in this essay as Shankara) life and works see Swami Tapasyananda, ‘Introduction’ to Madhava-Vidyaranya, *Sankara Digvijaya, The Traditional Life of Sri Sankaracharya*, trans.Swami Tapasyananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2011), pp.v-xxxvi. The date of Shankaracharya is still an issue hotly debated by scholars, though many modern scholars think that Shankara was born in the eighth century AD. For the issue of the Platonic Socrates and the historic Socrates, see Lloyd P. Gerson, ‘*Elenchos*, Protreptic, and Platonic Philosophizing’, in *Does Socrates Have a Method?, Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato’s Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. by Gary Alan Scott(University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp.218-220. 3For the focus on *vichara*, see Sri Sankaracharya, *Vivekachudamani*(The Crest-jewel of Discrimination), trans. Acharya Pranipata Chaitanya, and revised and edited by Satinder Dhiman, pp.251-255, <<http://www.advaitin.net/PranipataChaitanya/Vivekachudamani%20eBook%20FinalFinal1.pdf>>[accessed 17 September 2013] 4  See Eva Cantarella, ‘Section 1, Textual Evidence’ in ‘Introduction’ , in Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella, *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty, Boys Were Their Gods* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2008),pp.17-18 5 I here think of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy Socrates speaks of in the *Republic*. For a detailed analysis of the issue see Raymond Barfield, *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry*( Cambridge University Press, 2011),pp.10-31 6 For the elucidation of the Greek concepts of *poros* and *aporia*, see Sarah Kofman, ‘Beyond Aporia?’, in *Post-Structuaralist Classics*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin(London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp.7-44. 7Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp.35-38 8Plato, *Symposium*, p. 37 9For the issue of metaphilosophy see Nicholas Joll, ‘Contemporary Metaphilosophy’, in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/con-meta/>>[accessed 17 september 2013] 10 For a profound interpretation of the cave allegory in the *Republic*, see Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Republic, A Study*(New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005),pp.268-277 11 Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness, Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, updated edition (CUP, 2001), pp.178-181. 12 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.82-83. Also see Jessy Jordan, *Iris Murdoch’s Genealogy of the Modern Self: Retrieving Consciousness beyond the Linguistic Turn* (doctoral dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Baylor University, 2008), pp.150-154 <<https://beardocs.baylor.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2104/5240/Jessy_Jordan_phd.pdf?sequence=1>> [accessed 18 September 2013] 13Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage, 2003), Epub e-book, chapter 17, ‘Axioms, Duties, Eros’ 14 In Hindu tantra the female principle, personified as the Mother Goddess, is cited as the creatrix of the multiform universe. See Sri Shankaracharya, *Saundaryalahari*, *Inundation of Divine Splendour*, trans. Swami Tapasyananda(Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2006), pp.4-5 15 Shankaracharya, *Saundaryalahari*, pp.6-7 16 See Shankaracharya, *Saundaryalahari*, p.3. While the first part of the hymn is mainly centred on the Devi’s majestic splendour and her theological supremacy over other gods, the latter part deals with her physical beauty. The *alamkaras*(figures) used for this purpose remind one of the erotic love poetry in Sanskrit. 17 Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato, A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio and Aine O’Healy(New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 29;also see pp.38-39 18 Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, pp.92-104 19 Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*(Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 26-29 20 C. Jan Swearingen, “A Lover’s Discourse: Diotima, Logos, and Desire”, in *Reclaiming Rhetorica, Women in the Rhetorical Tradition*, ed. byAndrea A. Lunsford (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), pp. 39-43 21 In *Epistemics of Divine Reality,What Knowledge Claims of God Involve*(2007, 2011), Domenic Marbaniang argues that polytheistic systems lack ‘a sense of the abstract and absolute underlying ground of values’ and thus relativize values. He thinks that polytheistic systems are marked by the ‘absence of any infinite omnipotent Being who can guarantee the absoluteness of justice.’ pp. 139-140. [The book is available on the Google Books] Marbaniang’s view of polytheism is totally inapplicable to Hindu polytheism, because here one finds a co-existence of the gods and goddesses with the idea of the Brahman, the ‘infinite’ Being that is even more transcendental than the ‘omnipotent’ God. Shankara could assimilate his Advaita Vedanta to the devotional polytheism in Hinduism, because he could lend reality to each of the deities he sang to thanks to his idea of the all-pervasive and all-encompassing Reality of the Brahman. Marbaniang’s views of polytheism are intolerably vacuous, and it is surprising, as he is well acquainted with ‘other’ religious cultures, as is evident from his articles like ‘The Search for Reality in Greek and Indian Philosophy’, though there too broad and unacceptable generalizations are made. <<http://marbaniang.wordpress.com/2011/02/05/the-search-for-reality-in-greek-and-indian-philosophy/>>[accessed 18 September 2013] Here we understand how important an intervention Gayatri Spivak has made by radically reorienting the studies of polytheism in ‘Moving Devi’[for details, see a later note]. For a sane and well-informed study of Hindu ‘polytheism’ see Swami Harshananda, *Hindu Gods and Goddesses*(Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2000),pp.1-5, 159-162. As opposed to Shankara, Socrates seems to have failed to assimilate his new monist philosophy to the existing polytheistic universe of the polis. 22Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, chapter 19, ‘Metaphysics: A Summary’. Also see Jordan, *Iris Murdoch’s Genealogy of the Modern Self*, pp. 218-226. Murdoch is not fanatically championing demythologisation, she is well aware of the intricacies involved in such a process. She also knows that myths and icons are important in shaping our moral consciousness. She herself admits that she is attracted to the new mythological spectrum produced by Plato in his writings. Murdoch’s reading of Indian polytheism is also perceptive, and though she acknowledges that the value of the multiple religious images is ambiguous, she is not a philosopher whom one can easily call an iconoclast or a puritan. 23 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Moving Devi’, *Cultural* *Critique*, No. 47(Winter, 2001):120-163, pp.122-123 24 Spivak, ‘Moving Devi’, pp.123-124 25 Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, *The Electronic Classics Series*, pp. 49-52, 68-72 <[http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/plato/phaedo.pdf>[accessed](http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/plato/phaedo.pdf%3e%5baccessed) 17 September 2013]. Also see the ‘Introduction’, pp.4-5. Paul Harrison shows how the modern thinkers sought to manipulate the putatively anti-polytheistic thought of Socrates to set forth their own attack on ‘the new polytheism of forces and drives’. See Paul R. Harrison, *The Disenchantment of Reason, The Problem of Socrates in Modernity*(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), p.7. Socrates’ response, in the *Apology*, to the charges of atheism and of disbelieving the gods of the Greek pantheon is totally misleading: it is a jugglery of words rather than a concrete statement of his exact attitude towards the gods the polis reveres. See Plato, *Apology*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, *The Electronic Classics Series*,pp.11-13 < [http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/plato/apology.pdf>[accessed](http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/plato/apology.pdf%3e%5baccessed) 17 September 2013]. It is interesting that at the end of the *Apology*, when Socrates courageously welcomes death and enumerates the positive sides of the death he is going to embrace, he speaks of the gods and the blessed dead “below”. See the *Apology*, pp.24-25. Again, it is not clear if he has still some belief in the traditional deities or they have already become merely fictional images, ‘figures’, for him. Throughout the *Apology* he gives the impression of having been propelled towards his vocation of philosophizing by a God, a god who may be identified as Apollo. What this implies is also not clear. Is his ‘Apollonian’ (a la Nietzsche) logocentrism making him embrace Apollo as *the* God? Here we also need to remember the heliocentric imagery of the cave allegory. However, the overall impression Socratic thought gives is that of an ambivalent and complex attitude towards polytheism. See Dr G. Wiggers, *A Life of Socrates*, translated into English(London: Taylor and Walton, 1840),pp. cxiii-cxvii. Most of the materials available on the relationship between Socrates and polytheism betray the authors’ bias for or against monotheism or polytheism(though mostly the bias is *against* polytheism and that is founded on a thoroughly dogmatic and absurd reading of polytheist cultures). When we read the Western writers’ writings on this topic, we realize how apt Spivak is to warn us against accepting those materials on monotheism that are not connected with any living cultural practice of polytheism. Unfortunately, the dogmatic anti-polytheist stance of the Western monotheist religions is reflected in the secular liberal scholars’ explorations of polytheism. And hence, to rely on any single source on the relationship between polytheism and Socrates will be unwise. We need to explore this topic comparativistically, by putting Greek polytheism on a spectrum along with the polytheistic cultures of India, Africa, Latin America, and the North American aboriginal communities. 26 See Joseph Malikail, ‘Iris Murdoch on the Good, God and Religion’, *Minerva*, Vol 4 <[http://www.minerva.mic.ul.ie//vol4/murdoch.html> [accessed](http://www.minerva.mic.ul.ie//vol4/murdoch.html%3e%20%5baccessed) 17 September 2013] 27 In the case of Shankara, the Absolute, the attributeless Brahman, transcends even the personal God or Ishwara, the Brahman with attributes. See the debate between Mandana Mishra and Shankara in the *Sankara* –*Digvijaya*, p. 95. Shankara’s arguments imply that the God with attributes, though qualified as omnipotent, omniscient and so on, is ultimately limited and remains distinct from the Jiva, the limited ordinary being, so long as the Brahman is not experienced. But when the Brahman is experienced, all distinctions dissolve and there remains no difference between the limited human being and God. The Brahman transcends and yet encompasses both the human individual and the personalized God who is omnipotent. 28 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, chapter 17, ‘Axioms, Duties, Eros’. Also see the chapter 19, ‘Metaphysics: A Summary’. This observation finely grasps one significant aspect of the Socratic religion. 29 Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic* *Studies*, second edition(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.26 30 Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato,* p.29 31 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edn (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press,1998), p.20 32 Here we need to dwell on the comments Socrates makes at the end of the *Apology*. What he says there validates my point: ‘If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus, and other sons of God who were righteous in their own life, that pilgrimage will be worth making.*’Apology*, p.24. He indirectly says that there is no possibility for him of getting real justice in the society he inhabits. The ‘true judges’ must be in the *other* world. 33 See Jowett, ‘Introduction’, in Plato, *Phaedo*, pp.22-25.William Butler Yeats speaks of the ‘cry of the soul’ and ‘the cry of the flesh’ in his ‘Introduction’ to Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali*( *Song* *Offerings*)(1912); see Yeats’s Introduction to Tagore’s *Gitanjali*(*Song* *Offerings*), ed. by Shobhan Som(Kolkata: Ramakrishna Pustakalaya, 2006), p.15. When I speak of Goodness here I have in mind not just the Platonic Good, but the Platonic Good as reinterpreted by Murdoch.

34 The first part of the *Saundaryalahari* is often called *Anandalahari*. See the *Saundaryalahari*, p.3

35 See Maria Zambrano, ‘On a History of Love’, , trans. Sarah J. Ciganiak, in Sarah J. Cyganiak, *The Method of Maria Zambrano: an analysis and translated selection of essays centered on the concepts of the word, the person, compassion and love*(doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan,2011),p.295-298; <<http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/84589/cyganiak_1.pdf?sequence=1>>[accessed 14 August, 2013]; for Murdoch, seeKieran Setiya, ‘Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good’, *Philosophers’* *Imprint*, Vol.13, No.9(May 2013):1-21, p.19,< [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/p/pod/dod-idx/murdoch-on-the-sovereignty-of-good.pdf?c=phimp;idno=3521354.0013.009>[accessed](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/p/pod/dod-idx/murdoch-on-the-sovereignty-of-good.pdf?c=phimp;idno=3521354.0013.009%3e%5baccessed) 18 September 2013]

36 Zambrano, ‘On a History of Love’, p. 292

37 Zambrano, ‘On a history of Love’, p.288

38 Shankaracharya, ‘Charpata Panjarika Stotra’[The Eighteen Gems of Wisdom], omshivam.wordpress.com, <<http://omshivam.wordpress.com/shri-guru-gita/jagat-guru-adi-shankara-acharya/charpata-panjarika-stotra-the-eighteen-gems-of-wisdom/>>[accessed 18 September 2013]

39 Annalise Baird, ‘The Abject, the Uncanny, and the Sublime: A Destabilization of Boundaries’(dissertation, 2013),pp.7-8, <<http://writing.rochester.edu/celebrating/2013/Baird.pdf>>[accessed 18 September 2013]

40 Shankaracharya, ‘Charpata Panjarika Stotra’

41 Shankara prescribes the Vedantic *vichara* for the elimination of ignorance about the Self, but he does not subject the Absolute to a logocentric comprehension. See the *Vivekachudamani*, pp.453-454

42 Shankaracharya, *Vivekachudamani*, 393-394, 407-409

43 Shankaracharya, ‘Charpata Panjarika Stotra’

44 Socrates’ attitude to women is deeply ambivalent. His views of women are sometimes misogynistic, and sometimes egalitarian. This ambiguity remains in the Socratic dialogues, and does not get clarified decisively. See Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp.21-24. On the other hand, throughout the *Sankara* *Digvijaya*, there are scattered evidences of Shankara’s respect towards women. His philosophical doctrines may sometimes seem paternalistic, with a constant denigration of the body that Cavarero associates with the mother. However, as will be clarified in a later note, the Indian monism is not a solely patriarchal invention. The ‘Devi Sukta’ in the *Rig* *Veda* presents a kind of feminine monism. Again, Shankara’s relationship with his mother is significant here. Though he had become an ascetic, he visited his mother when she was on her deathbed, and performed all the death rituals when she died, to fulfil her wish, defying the social masters who were unwilling to let him perform the rituals because, as they claimed, a *sannyasi* did not have any right to perform such rites. Again, he was quite respectful towards the wife of Mandana Mishra, Ubhaya Bharati, a highly learned woman, who adjudicated in the famous debate between Mandana and Shankara on the real meaning of the scriptural passages. One legend has it that when she wanted to ascend the pyre after Mandana had decided to become an ascetic, Shankaracharya brought her to Shringagiri and made her a professor there. Besides, though Shankara’s major philosophical works may seem to advocate the rational exercise of a radical hatred of the pleasure of the senses, there is a legend about him that, when Ubhaya Bharati asked him to defeat her in a debate on sexual knowledge, that is, erotics, he had to enter a dead king’s body and have amatory relationships with that king’s wives to acquire erotic knowledge. It was only after he came to obtain the knowledge of sexual pleasure that he could be accepted as a master of all forms of knowledge. Unlike most of the conventional stories of asceticism, this is peculiar in that it does incorporate sex into asceticism, which is a paradox par excellence. In Hinduism, binaristic thought is almost impossible, and Shankara’s obtaining sex-knowledge by entering a dead king’s body is a supreme example of this. See ‘Acharya Shankara o Viveka-Chudamani’[Master Shankara and the Viveka-Chudamani] in Shankaracharya, *Viveka*-*Chudamani*, translated into Bengali by Shambhunath Pathak(Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2008), pp.129-131; also see the *Sankara* *Digvijaya*, pp.103-129, 153-155

45 See Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human, The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (OUP, 2003), pp.118-122

46 See his hymns to the Goddess like the ‘Annapurna Stotra’(Hymn to Divine Mother Annapurna), ‘Minakshipancharatnam’(Hymn to Goddess Minakshi), ‘Lalitapanchakam’(Hymn to Goddess Lalita), ‘Devyaparadhakshamapanastotram’(The Hymn Asking the Devi for Forgiveness), ‘Bhavanyashtakam’(Hymn to Mother Bhavani). All these hymns are addressed to the different forms of the same Goddess, the Ultimate Mother of the Universe. In these hymns the Devi’s majestic grandeur, her infinite grace and the devotee’s absolutely self-surrendering approach to the Goddess are foregrounded. Often Shankara fashions the poetic persona as an old man. But we know that he died early, at the age of thirty two. Maybe he envisions the decaying body of embodied humanity in general and offers itself up to the Mother, to drown it in her beauty that is one with her grace and her majesty as the Creatrix. She is the One that offers an imperishable shelter for the perishable plurality of life, and she descends to the Many from the One for this purpose. She is the Goodness that is not just a meta-ethical principle above, but descends to the twilight of flesh and spirit *below*. In these hymns to the Mother, Shankara no longer shows the Vedantic heroism that conquers death, but rather opens up the human condition ridden with death and decay towards the descending grace of the Mother. See *Stotraratnavali*[The Gems of Hymns], translated into Bengali by Gayatri Bandyopadhyay(Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2012), pp. 40-55

47  For an elucidation of the concept of the sea of *kalon*,see Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp.180-181; for the elucidation of the concept of the *hyperouranios* *topos*, see David Ulansey, ‘Mithras and the Hypercosmic Sun’, in *Studies in Mithraism*, ed. by John R. Hinnells(Rome: "L'Erma" di Brettschneider, 1994), pp. 257-64 <<http://www.mysterium.com/hypercosmic.html>>[accessed 18 September 2013]

48 Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2007), p.62

49 Aurobindo, *The Mother*, pp.45-50

50 Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol*(Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram,1984), Book Ten, Canto Four, pp.663-668; Book Eleven, Canto One, 671-712. Especially see the page 692.

51 Rainer Maria Rilke,’The Tenth Elegy’, in *Duino* *Elegies*, trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender, fourth edn(London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), p.99

52 Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, pp.38-39

53 A wonderful exploration of the tantric modes of Goddess spirituality is found in Arthur Avalon, *Sakti and Sakta*(Madras: Ganesh, 2010). See the chapters, ‘Sakti:The World as Power’,pp.16-33, and ‘The Indian Magna Mater’, pp.262-278. Also see Sikha Sarkar(Aditya), Mother-Goddess in Pre-Mediaeval Bengal(Burdwan, 2001), pp.116-150

54 The ‘Devi Sukta’ from the *Rig* *Veda*(The Saying of the Devi), in *Mantrapushpam*(The Flower of Mantra), ed. by Swami Sarvagananda and translated into Bengali by Swami Alokananda(Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2009), pp.100-101, 208-209. Swami Vivekananda, in a class talk in New York on ‘Mother Worship’, dwells on this *sukta* and argues that it initiates an integrative and holistic idea of the Godhead which becomes designated as the ‘Mother’ because the original perceiver of the all-pervasiveness of the Absolute was a woman, namely Ambhrini Vak, the speaker of the ‘Devi Sukta’, <<http://www.vivekananda.net/ByTopic/MotherWorship.html>>[accessed 18 September 2013]

55 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, chapter 19, ‘Metaphysics: A Summary’; also see Antonaccio, ‘Preface’ in *Picturing the Human*,pp.vi-vii

56 Nussbaum suggets that what Alcibiadees means to point out in his speech in the *Symposium* is that by practising a rigorous negation of the passions and the destabilizing threats of plurality, Socrates has turned himself into a kind of statue, a stone: *The Fragility of Goodness*,pp. 189-195

57 Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, p.20

58 For the concept of the *cairos* and the continuum, see Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History, The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron(London and New York: Verso,1993),pp.101-105 ;Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, p.116

59 The concept of the ‘necessary other’ that I have dwelt on earlier in the essay and that of ‘narartable selfhood’ are presented in Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman(London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp.34, 81

60Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, *Mahabharata*, translated into Bengali by Rajshekhar Basu(Kolkata: M. C. Sarkar and Sons,1394 Bangabda), pp. 680-681, 684-685. Spivak refers to this moment in ‘Moving Devi’, p. 123

61  Madhava Vidyaranya, *Sankara* *Digvijaya*, pp.194-195

62 See Evelyn Underhill, ‘Introduction’ to *The Songs of Kabir*,trans. Rabindranath Tagore (1915),p.5 <<http://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Songs-of-Kabir-by-Tagore.pdf>>[accessed 18 September 2013]

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