

# God as Mother in the Old Testament and Thiruvvasagam

## INTRODUCTION

With the emergence and interrelations of epistemological and sociological ideologies, historico-critical method and the interreligious affinities, there sprouted dialogical conflicts within the 'Sacrosanctum' of the human person and humankind as well. These have moved God from the periphery to the centre of existential issues. The 'God-problem' has brought to sharper focus the identity of man and woman in their respective roles and vice versa. In 1970s, for instance, the feminist movement became militant and made efforts, to create a more 'androgynous God' within the biblical tradition.<sup>1</sup> But in the process dualism became inevitable: feminine, nature and immanence were grouped on the one side and masculine, history and transcendence on the other.' Judith Ochshorn maintains that in polytheistic cultures of ancient Near East, gods and goddesses do not fall into stereotyped divine attributes.<sup>2</sup> The plurality of deities in male and female forms in polytheistic cultures seems to be an acceptable position. An analogical perspective of God based on experiential knowledge as the ground of the full personhood of men and women equally seems to open avenues in our 'God-concept' which in turn has deeper repercussions in our over-all life. We shall examine two basically eastern religious traditions that are advocated primarily as monotheistic and traditionally patriarchal in their theology and ritualism: namely *Yahwism* and *Saivism*. As a representative text of Saivism, pertinent to our issue, we

1. Reuther, R. R., "The Female Nature of God: A problem in contemporary Religious Life" *Concilium*, 143/3 (1981) p. 64.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

take 'Thiruvagasam's' authored by 'Manikkavasagar'.<sup>4</sup> The method of our approach is not merely a comparative study of particular religious traditions but "seeing truth from within, more than one's religious tradition, a true religious encounter!"<sup>5</sup>

Such an intertextual approach focuses on : Can God be a mother being basically feminine in nature? Is this tenet theologically and religiously cogent and viable? Is there a bursting forth of the 'Motherly Image' in the cultural religious evolution and consciousness of the respective devotees and exponents? The questions addressed to *Thiruvagasam* and *Old Testament* have vast in depth potentials. In an authentic dialogue, before an incisive inspection, there ought to be an authentic introspection, particularly as the O. T. contains unique and irrepressible irruptions.

### 1. Divine Irruption and a Semitic Revolution in the OT

There is enough evidence for a kind of 'Goddess' consciousness' in the Israelite community. A Meshel's excavation (in 1975-76) yielded several inscriptions (a 9th - 8th Cent. B. C. site). Two such are the following :

3. Thiruvagasam, a Saivite Bhakti text par excellence, has 51 chapters. Its literal meaning is Sacred Utterances. Though G. U. Pope's translation of it serves us largely, nevertheless it is amply complemented by the original Tamil Text with Commentary by G. Varadarajan.
4. Manikkavasagar (He-whose-utterances-are rubies) is the author of Thiruvagasam. He was a minister poet in the Pandya kingdom (about 1030 AD); yet basically a mystic-Bhakti poet who championed the cause of Saivism.
5. Cf. Raymundo Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, Paulist Press New York, 1978, p. 50 ff.

"Amaryan says : Say to my Lord (x). I bless you by Yahweh, (Our guardian of Samaria) and by his/its Asherah/Asherah". "May Unihahu be blessed by Yahweh, my guardian (?) and his/its Asherah/Asherah".<sup>6</sup>

'Asherah, mother goddess the spouse of EL, the Patriarch and father of the Pantheon, associated with the symbol of a pole or a tree standing for 'the tree of life' goes back to the third millenium'. Apart from life and immortality the deity's concrete functions of nurturing and nourishment are signified. Judges 6:25-26 indicates its presence in the Northern Kingdom (cf. 1 Kgs 18). Deut 16:21 forbids planting of the Asherah beside the altar of Yahweh, indicating the devotion to Asherah then in vogue. S. Olyan argues that neither Elijah nor Jehu nor Hosea opposed it, but only the Deuteronomic school.<sup>7</sup> Asherah was alienated (2 Kgs 13:6) because the Canaanite goddess went by the same name and also it was associated with Baal in the royal cults of Samaria and Jerusalem. After an historically substantiated argument M. S. Smith concludes, "whether in the form of asherah or wisdom or the Jewish 'Shekinah' - , Matronit", femaleness has been fundamental to Yahwism".<sup>8</sup> Again 'Shekinah' is both the mediating presence of God in the midst of Israel, and also the reconciler of Israel with God.<sup>9</sup> In rabbinic *mystical speculation* when God-as-Father has turned away his face, 'shekinah' goes with them. "The exile of Israel from the Land is seen ultimately as an exile within God, divorcing the masculine from the feminine' side of God".<sup>10</sup> In Hosea's time mothers and children, were

6. Smith, M. S., "God male and female in the OT Yahweh and His "Asherah". Theological Studies, 48(1987)p. 333.

7. Ibid., p. 336.

8. Ibid., p. 339.

9. Reuther, R. R., "The Female Nature of God: A Problem in contemporary Religious life", Concilium, 143/3 (1981) p. 63.

10. Ibid.

defenceless victims of masculine destructive mania since the wars under Baal's protection demanded them as human victims. In the face of masculine impulse to destroy, it is the mother who saves the child. "Still, however, one always perceives this as a kind of revolution".<sup>11</sup>

A pre-Israelite conception, the Gilgamesh epic (Mesopotamia, 12th C.B.C.) depicts Entil, the god of storm destroying the world, whereas Ishtar a multifaceted goddess rescues it.

"Ishtar cried out like a woman in child birth.....  
I who first bore my dear people....." .<sup>12</sup>

(Tablet 11:116-123)

According to T. H. Tigay in the Babylonian version of Atrahasis epic (1800 B.C) it is Nintu, the Lady of Birth who saves human beings from Entil.<sup>13</sup> Within Yahweh there is a metamorphosis from Entil to Ishtar and Nintu, by which His motherliness triumphs in contrast with the other afore said Epics. In the flood narrative Yahweh speaks, 'I will never again curse the earth because of human beings..... will never again destroy.....' (Gen 8:20-22); the same revolution within Yahweh occurs in Hos 11:8-9: 'My thoughts are overthrown within me, my compassion boils over, I cannot execute my fierce wrath; I am not able to destroy Ephraim For I am God, not a man...!' In biblical anthropology rationality and planning refer to 'heart'. So heart is not contrasted with human conduct, but male conduct. It then indicates that "God is not always represented as a male".<sup>14</sup> Yahwism as a patriarchal religion attempted to

11. Keel, O., 'Yahweh as Mother Goddess', Theology Digest, 36 (1981) p. 235.

12. Ibid., p. 234.

13. Ibid., p. 234:

14. Ibid., p. 235.

destroy the feminine underpinning of the cult as the prophets too inveighed against the syncretistic cult and projected Yahweh beyond sexuality and transcendent as well. But paradoxically 'motherly Yahweh' breaks through patristic Yahwism.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. God and the 'Feminine Principle'

God's portrayal as mother in the *BIBLE* is closely related to the vital question of discerning the feminine principle in the nature or 'identity' of God:

1. The Rhetorical criticism of Phyllis Trible affords us with a relevant insight. She identifies two types of rhetorical patterns in the core passage of Gen 1:26-30.<sup>16</sup>

Inverted parallelism : And created God *humankind* in his image, in the *image of God* created he *him*'.

Straight parallelism : 'In the *image of God* created he him, *male and female* created he *them*'.

In the metaphor there are vehicle (better known element) namely 'Male and female' and tenor (lesser known element) namely 'the image of God'. The vehicle indicates vocabulary of humanity; 'the three nouns are humankind (ha-adam) male and female (zakar un egeba) and their corresponding pro-nouns being him (oto) and them (otam).<sup>17</sup>

In the inverted parallelism 'him' (oto) indicates humankind (ha-adam) and in straight parallelism 'him' (oto) is amplified into male and female (zakar un egeba) and plural them (otam). The following emerges clearly: 1) the shift

15. Schmidt G. R., Lutheran Liturgical prayer and God as Mother, *Worship* 52/5 (1978) p. 517-42.

16. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1979, p. 16.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

from singular to plural pronoun shows that ha-adam is two creatures, male and female; 2) the singular pronoun (oto) shows that humankind is synonymous with 'male and female' but the components (them-otam) are not so; unity embraces sexual differentiation; 3) this unity indicated by humankind is stated in its tenor 'image of God' and this is amplified as 'Male and Female' in straight parallelism. Thus God is projected as unity in diversity - diversity accounting for the diverse principles. Within these, the father metaphor (Ps 103:13; Hos 2:16; Ps 98:6 and Ex 15:3) and the mother metaphor (Is 42:14; 66:13; Ps 22:9; 123:2) could be organised.

*THIRUVASAGAM* abounds with such a projection of God as in '*Thiruchathagam*' (the sacred cento) (No:84);

".....O Light Supreme! Male female rare Ambrosia, Sire!"<sup>18</sup>

The poet indicates that God is both 'Male and Female'. This inclusive concept is true to the nature of creation itself that has the two basic principles reflecting 'the image of God'.

2. The unique semitic movement of the metaphor points to the 'Image of God'. While the Vehicle (Male and Female) points to the tenor, it distinguishes God and the image of God. In God and the image of God there is similarity and yet 'image - of' distinguishes God and his image. Thus the otherness of God (Transcendence) is distinguished in inclusive concept.

In '*Potrithiruvagaval*' the transcendence of God is indicated as lord of the Vedas (No. 106), the first of all

<sup>18</sup> Pope G.U., *The Thiruvagasam*, (English Translation). The Clarendon press, Oxford, 1900, p. 44. (*Thiruchathagam* consists of hundred poems on God's eternity, praise of His deeds, His subtle form and rebirth of beings).

creation (No. 122), ever living (175) and One beyond comprehension (178).<sup>19</sup> Yet the image of God is indicated in '*Neethal Vinnappam*' (No. 22) as a woman, man and eunuch.<sup>20</sup> In attributing the triple nature to Siva, the humankind is more perfectly the image of God. While it is beyond our comprehension as to how God could at the same time be all the three in unity, yet humanity shares his image in diversity. Therefore the feminine principle is identified to be in the nature of God as far as the indicative 'image of God' is concerned.

3. In the process of salvation, in the movement to the 'other', a mediator adequately personifying the existential conditions is portrayed in '*Thiruchazal*' (No. 9) in the form of Siva.

"A mighty maniac, delighted in the female form..... Had he not delighted in the female form, all in the wide world would have obtained heaven's bliss but earth had failed".<sup>21</sup>

The truth concealed under these symbols indicates that the supreme being condescended towards earth to taste the bitter cup of suffering conditions while he offers immortal blessedness. Keeping to this rhythm and being true to himself and the nature of humanity, he partakes of the feminine which is an essential principle of his creation and therefore of his very self. In '*Arputhathu*' (Miracle

19. Pope G.U., op. cit. p. 30. (Portrithiruvagaval sings about the poet worshipping God and praising Him).

20. Varadarajan G. Thiruvagam - Virivurai, Pazaniappa Brothers, Tiruchirapalli, 1978 p. 216. (Neethlavinnappam desires to see God and wants God to reveal Himself).

21. Pope G. U. op. cit. p. 159. (Thiruchazal dwells on Siva's compassionate energy).

Decad)<sup>22</sup> the Tamil text of No. 4 expresses the poet being much affected by the passing features of a woman and thus he is confounded. He is brought back into realization that the God who redeems him from woman, himself has the feminine. God who is fully integrated expresses himself as the way and truth for the poet who is disintegrated so that he could assume the Lord as the symbol of integration.

### 3. Feminine Acquiring Motherhood

a) John Muffitt quotes Bede Griffiths "...Certainly I see no reason why one should not address God as Mother".<sup>23</sup> Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who attained communion with Divine mother Kali said, "... She is by no means a god mother. She is your own mother".<sup>24</sup> The noun forms '*Hokmah*' ('sophia' in Greek and 'Saraswati' in Hinduism) and '*shekinah*' (presence) point to the 'femininity of God'. 'While the former is pictured as divine human spirit who informs all created realities (cf. Prov 8:1-9:6; Wis 6:12-9:18; Sir 24) the latter appears as the earthly dwelling of the presence of God (cf. 12:11; 14:23; 16:2) which in the rabbinical literature is later employed as a substitute for the name YHWH'.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that while at the experiential level of communion, transcendence becomes remote, motherhood becomes accessible.

b) '*Pidithapathu*' (No. 3) whose central theme is 'Reality amidst illusion, begins thus.

22. Varadarajan, G. op. cit. p. 575.

23. Muffitt, J., 'God as Mother', Cross Currents, 28/2 (1978) p. 130.

24. Ibid., p. 131.

25. Raja R. J. "God as Mother in the OT", Jeevadhara, 21/122 (1991) p. 131.

“O mother! O my father, My Gem beyond Compare!  
Ambrosia, ever-precious yield of love.....”<sup>26</sup>

The ever-precious yield of love ‘the Reality’ is prominently expressed in the term ‘Mother’. The compound word referred to God is ‘Mother-Father’ (*‘Ammaiappan’*) where the ‘Mother’ precedes structurally and conceptually.

Perhaps what gives Manikkavasagar the status of ‘a solitary boast’ is his emulation of *‘Tholkappiam’*, the ancient Tamil grammar-literature which upholds the supremacy of life. ✓  
‘There is nothing greater than life...’ says *‘Tholkapptam’* which is adopted by Manikkavasagar differently as ‘there is nothing greater than Mother’.<sup>27</sup> Though Manikkavasagar reflects the connotation of *Tholkappiam* yet the point of departure is the substitution of ‘life’ with ‘Mother’. If mother is the greatest, she is greater than ‘life’. So, logically ‘Mother’ is equated with God or viceversa (who is greater than ‘life’ or a sum and fullness of life).

*‘Thiru Ammanai’* (no. 7) praises God under ten different epithets which are actually the sum of the poet’s creed. The Tamil rendering, of the last line, significantly, is *‘Thayana thathuvane’* - Mother who is truth personified.<sup>28</sup> From the creed perspective, that truth personification being mother, it implies that ‘God as mother’ is truth itself.

*‘Potrithiruvagaval’* (nos 135-136) establishes the aforesaid truth while superceding the perspective of God as bridegroom’.

26. Pope G.U., op. cit., p. 291. (Pidithapathu deals with the poet’s communion with supreme understanding, mystic wisdom and peace).

27. Subramania Pillai. K. Manikkavasagar Varalaru, The south India Saiva Siddanta publishing society, Thirunelveli and Madras, 1928. p. 101.

28. Varadarajan, G., op. cit., p. 280.

"First one surpassing all, - praise!  
 Bridegroom of Her with fawnlike eyes - praise',  
 Mother of the immortals in the heavenly land -  
 praise!"<sup>29</sup>

As a bridegroom, he is united with 'the bride only', but as a Mother He has a host of gods to care for. Thus 'qualitatively' and 'quantitatively' Motherhood is more explicit and even logical. On deeper reading, it is interesting to note that gods do not have or do not need mothers; yet God is like a Mother to them. This reiterates that God is 'inherently a Mother'.

The following verse in '*Sivapurānam*' (No. 56-61) is titled as 'Human embodiment and enlightenment by grace'.

"To me who lay mere slave-meaner than any dog  
 Essential grace more precious than a mother's love!"<sup>30</sup>

The last line in Tamil reads more like, "the truth personification ('*Unmaiporul*') in the form of Grace ('*Arul Vadivam*') emulates Mother!"<sup>31</sup> The reference to mother as a climax occurs after a sequence of various praises on and to God. The unworthy consciousness of the poet takes him to the extremity of considering himself as a dog, devoid of any positive quality. God who is the personification of love, overlooking unworthiness, is then the highest personification of mother. This is true since God is the personification of Truth ('*Unmaiporul*').

29. Pope G. U., op. cit., p. 30.

30. Pope G. U., op. cit., p. 5. (*Sivapurānam* sings of the creative act of Siva to preserve all living beings).

31. Varadarajan G., op. cit., p. 32.

Verse No. 19 of Thiruvembavai sums up the conviction of the author. The poem centres on 'Vow' which in turn indicates resoluteness:

"The children of the hand are we; our Refuge thou;  
Thus the old word we say anew..."<sup>32</sup>

This sense is the derivative of a traditional redundant saying 'the child in you is your own object of refuge!'. The poet considers it a presumption that 'that old word' - God is mother - is only said anew. Thus from the consideration of God as mother as absolutely true there is a transition to it being considered as a presumption in the experience of the poet devotee.

What follows now is a multidimensional perspective of God as Mother.

#### 4. GOD AS MOTHER

##### 4. 1 The Womb - Love

In Hebrew '*rehem*' in its root form means womb or uterus. The plural '*rehamim*' expands to abstractions of compassion, mercy and love. 'To show mercy' is indicated by the verb '*rhm*' and merciful by the adjective '*rahim*'. 'There is a semantic movement from physical organ of the female to a psychic mode of being'.<sup>33</sup> In fact the modern unearthings in the explorative hermeneutic of symbol and myth affirm this typical semitic movement. The womb functions with a view to wholeness and wellbeing.

##### 4. 1 1 Womb-Love moulds life

a) The imagery of *Second Isaiah* connotes that God possesses a womb;

32. Pope G. U., op. cit. p. 103.

33. Phyllis Trible., op. cit., p. 33.

'Hearken to me,.....all the remnant of the house of  
Israel,

Who have been borne by me from your birth,  
carried by me from the womb

I have made, and I will bear, I will carry and I will  
save' (Is 46:3-4)

In *Num 1:11-12* the liberated people cry to Moses for  
meat like babies and the responsibility is placed on Moses  
as if he is the guardian or mother. The following loaded  
language of Moses projects a plethora of images.

"Did I conceive (*'hariti'*) all this people?

Did I bring them forth (*'yelidtihu'*) that thou shouldst  
say to me

Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries the  
suckling child, to the land which thou didst swear to  
give their ancestor" (V. 12).<sup>34</sup>

In the other passages the verb *'hrh'* (conceive) appe-  
ars as parallel to *'yld'* (give birth) to depict a woman con-  
ceiving and carrying a child. God is portrayed as fashion-  
ing or 'forming' life in the womb.

"And now the Lord says,  
who *formed* me in the womb..." (Is 49:8)

"Before I *formed* you in the  
womb I knew you ..." (Jer 1:5)

The mother's forming of the child begins at conception  
and it is a primordial call to life. It is further concretely  
expressed as

"For it was you who *formed* my inward parts;

You *knit* me together in my mother's womb"

(Ps 136:13).

34. Ibid., p. 69.

b) This 'forming' and 'knitting' of the child in the womb by God is graphically pictured in '*Potrithiruvagavel*' (lines 11-14)<sup>35</sup> as a month by month development; in the first month-the foetus is guarded against disintegration, second month-guarding of the physical form, third month-sustaining from the swelling liquid in the womb, fourth month-escaping from the darkness due to the liquid, fifth month-preserving from death, sixth month-guarding from an irritating sensation of the womb, seventh month-preserving the foetus from falling as an unripe fruit from a tree, eighth month-relieving the child from compression due to density in growth within the womb, ninth month-escaping from suffering due to preparation to come out, tenth month-preserving from 'ocean-like' birthing agony of the mother. Even after birth the child is safeguarded amidst painful pressures due to inadequate care or no care.

#### 4. 1.2 Birthing and Birth pangs

a) *Job* 38:28-29, contains complementary parental images as in *Proverbs* 23:22-25,

'Has the rain a father or who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoar frost of heaven?'

Though Job's idea is to teach the transcendence of God through irony, there is the semitic mind betrayed here. Human images suggest the activity of the divine. So ice and hoar frost are given birth to by God the mother.

In the following quotes, the first one from *Genesis* indicates the female dimension of God who gives the blessings of breasts and womb (sustenance, life and all it connotes); the second one from *Hosea* pointing to female steri-

35. Varadarajan G., op. cit., p. 91.

lity symbolises corporate fertility. Hence even a negative reference affirms his motherhood.

".. by God almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above...blessings of the breasts and of the womb" (Gen 49:25)

'Ephraim's glory shall fly.. .....  
no pregnancy, no conception' (Hos 9:11-12a)

The following graphic pictures of *Isaiah* capture Yahweh as being in labor and travailing;

'Before she was *in labor* she gave birth' (Is 66:7)

'.....with what are you *in travail*?' (Is 45:10)

'Now I will cry out like a woman *in travail*, I will *gasp and pant*.' (Is 42:14)

These provide witness to Deut 32:18: 'the Rock who gave you birth and the God who writhed in pain'.<sup>36</sup>

b) In the following triplet in '*Potrithiruvagaval*' (No. 174-176) we can discern a gradual progression.

'Father-praise! guru-praise!  
Eternal-praise! pure one praise!  
Brother-praise! Existent one praise'.<sup>37</sup>

The literal rendering of the final attribute is - the source of birth of every existent thing. So the triplet begins with God as father and ends with God as 'origin of life' climaxing with mother's basic function of birthing.

#### 4. 13 Womb love-compassion and mercy

a) The plural of the root word of mercy is '*rehemim*' which is translated as 'mercy' or 'compassion' (Ex 33:19; Dt 13:17-18; Is 9:17; 14:1; 63:7-15 etc).

36. Phyllis Trible., op. cit. p. 62.

37. Pope G.U., op. cit. p. 30.

In *Hosea* 1:6 the second child is named '*lo ruhamah*' (not Loved); Yahweh closes the womb of compassion (*Hos* 2:4) but finally it is opened.

'I will have compassion ('*werhamti*')  
upon not loved ('*lo ruhamah*')' (*Hos* 2:21-23; 2:1).

In *Jeremiah* 31:15-22 Ephraim being called a darling child indicates that Yahweh identifies himself with Rachel in showing compassionate love. Tribble's structural analysis brings out the meaning of 'female surrounds man' (31:22) graphically; when Rachel cries (v. 15), Yahweh consoles (v. 16-17), then Ephraim confesses his estrangement (v. 18-19), Yahweh contemplates and melts (v. 20) and Jeremiah (God's word) commends compassion of the lord (v. 21-22).<sup>38</sup> The female organ nourishes, sustains and redeems Ephraim who is encircled by motherly compassion.

b) '*Potrithiruvagaval*' (no. 206-207) indicates one such action of God.

"Thou who dost undertake to save us praise!

Thou who in grace didst give the tiger's dug (teat)  
to the antelope, Praise!"<sup>39</sup>

It narrates an incident in the land of Pandiya where a mother deer alone in a forest, hid her young ones in a bush and went to drink water. But when shot down by an arrow it died thinking of the young ones. Transcending the animal category a tigress, through Siva's grace, gave the vital food of milk for the young ones. If a tigress could be moved which is beyond our analogical imagination, even so is the compassion of the great Mother.

a) Mercy of God is also expressed through the Hebrew word '*Hesedi*'. It refers to God's profound covenantal love

38. Phyllis Tribble., op. cit. p. 50.

39. Pope G.U., op. cit. p. 42.

(Ex 34:6; 2 Sam 2:6; 15:10; Mic 7:20). Mercy springs from the original bond of mother and child. Though Yahweh's fidelity is portrayed masculine yet the meaning-supplying root is feminine which implies goodness, tenderness etc.

b) '*Thiruppoovalli*' (the sacred lilies) (No. 3) entitled 'Converting grace' indicates God's merciful condescension thus :

"Us too, than dogs more vile, of worth and note He made to be; with greater than a mother's tenderness, Our Peruman cut off illusive birth made us His own".<sup>40</sup>

God's compassion comes to the poet who is worse than a dog. He is condescending to dwell in the poet, making him Her own, as a mother who stands out as a paradigm of mercy.

#### 4.14 Womb-Love, surpasses every love

a) *Is 49:15* and *66:12-13* "is one of the strongest, if not the strongest expression of God's love in the OT, the Bible's most cherished way of portraying God's graceful love to human beings .....the acme of tenderness".<sup>41</sup> The moving force of the testimony of second Isaiah (49:13-15) can be gauged from the root '*rhm*' which appears for the third time in 49:15 which reveals the unfathomable womb-love of Yahweh. In the third Isaiah (63:15-19) the first part 'the yearning of the heart' can be translated as the 'trembling of the womb'. Significantly the reference to compassion of the father that follows is qualified by the womb-love of a mother. It connotes that 'Motherly love' surpasses every love.

b) For a discerning eye the portrayals of surpassing love of *Thiruvagasam* are equal to the love of Yahweh in OT. '*Thiruvundihyar*' (Triumph of god's grace) (No. 17) reads :

40. Ibid., p. 168.

41. Raja R.J., op. cit., p. 113.

“Who that day to the son gave the sea of milk”.<sup>42</sup>

In Vasista Ashram when Ubamanya as a child cried for milk due to hunger lord Siva brought to the child an ocean of milk. A child's cry for milk can only be fully understood by the heart of a mother. The ocean of milk is symbolic of Siva's love as being greater than the quantity of milk required. It indicates the compassionate outpouring of mother's love that supercedes every other love.

‘*Thirukothumbi*’ (union with Siva) (No. 37-40) resonates with Isaiah's womb-love.

“Pain I endured, grow old again waxed like a weanling calf,...with mother-love, He came in grace, and made me His! To the rich Lord of Mercy's store go thou”.

In the Tamil original, weanling calf has a connotation of ‘a calf which its mother forsakes’.<sup>43</sup> In the animals, the ‘mother-child’ relationship is strong as it is natural and instinctive. While the ‘mother-cow-abandoning’ indicates God superceding the natural, the phrase ‘Made me His’ reveals the way of God, the mother, which is further qualified as a ‘mercy's store’.

But ‘*Pidithapathu*’ (Tenacious grasp No. 9) soars higher still and provides a paradigm for the mother-love itself.

“The mother's thoughtful care her infant feeds :

Thou deign'st with greater love to visit sinful me.”<sup>44</sup>

The significance assumes greater importance with the background of the verse. Mother-child relationship is catego-

42. Varadarajan G. op. cit., p. 370.

43. Ibid., p. 310.

44. Pope G.U. op. cit., p. 296.

rised in three ways by the bhakti tradition. In the first, inspite of the child's cry the mother does not feed; in the second, the child is fed only if it cries, and in the third, the child's need is anticipated and it is fed. God's relentless readiness towards his child is paradigmatically expressed in his mother-love.

'*Thiruvarthai*' (the sacred word) (No. 6) specifies the predominant concern of the mother.

"Our mighty Lord, in forest wilds where He abode,  
Took pity on the hunted boar!  
A pig became, wonder unique, and milk bestowed!"<sup>4</sup>

This is a scintillating sketch beyond human comprehension. A sage, who was in a deep contemplation, was disturbed by twelve youngsters and they were cursed to become pigs. The mother pig being shot dead with an arrow, God assumed mother pig and fed the dying piglings with milk. God becoming pig is something detestable and unthinkable. The context is more baffling. The piglings are a punished lot for their sins. Yet when their cry is for the basic necessity of life (milk), God assumes the despicable form. There is a 'basic movement of being' on the part of God, that seems to transcend womb-love. This basic movement of being towards the suffering is portrayed also in the OT as a core dimension of Yahwism.

## 4. 2 MOTHER-LOVE

### 4. 2.1 Mother-love transcends sinfulness and unworthiness

a) Mother-love, is expressed in forms of *forgiving*, *residing* despite unworthiness and *elevating*, as the principal characteristics of the womb-love in the OT. In Jeremiah 31:15-22 the female imagery becomes more significant in the format-

45. Ibid., p. 319. (Thiruvarthai deals with the bounteous love of God that shows mercy to all).

portrayal of Phyllis Trible. It begins with the passive act of God, 'a voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping' (v. 15-20 Rachel is consoled directly - 'keep your voice from weeping and your eyes, from tears' (v. 16). But in v. 18, 'I' of Yahweh becomes the subject in the place of Rachel ('Indeed I heard Ephraim pleading'). So the whole emphasis shifts from 'Yahweh' to the woman, 'Her children' becomes 'they' (v. 16) which in turn becomes 'Ephraim His Son!'

The voice of the child is addressed to Yahweh as if its mother. In Ephraim's confession again there is a twin perspective that repentance is the act of God and the return of Ephraim is the work of God. The cause of repentance of Ephraim (v. 18-19) is because of the movement of God which is the climax of the passage (v. 20).

'Is Ephraim my dear Son? Is he my darling child? for as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him, I will surely have mercy on him.'

"Moving from anthropomorphic speech in the rhetorical question of the first line to anthropopathic utterances in the motivational clause of the second, Yahweh comes, in the conclusion of the third line, to the inner recesses of human existence where the physical and the psychic unite to convey the depths of divine love".<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the way of Yahweh is the way of mother's movement of a forgiving condescension.

Though Hosea (750 BC) depicts God as husband (2:7) yet in chapter 11 we see his mature prophetic experience. Yahweh's love to Israel is expressed in the two basic verbs, love and call ('*Ahab*' and '*Para*'-v. 1). The nature of love is expressed through the verb '*rgl*' ('foot'-v. 3) which implies

46. Phyllis Trible, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

Yahweh's condescending care of the child as it learns to walk foot by foot. But the intensity of love only breaks forth at the instance of the three negative reactions of Israel (11:1-5). Yahweh's thought of discarding the child recoils within Him (v. 8). Motherliness bursts forth in his resolute declaration that He will not destroy (v. 9). In the prolonged struggle Yahweh's instinctive motherhood emerges, as Yahweh rejects 'male' behaviour. God acts, because he is 'EL' (God) and not 'Ish' (A man). 'If the essence of male conduct is anger and punishment, Yahweh is concerned with his relationship, something which more frequently and strongly describes women than men'.<sup>47</sup> This is a personal experience and witness of Hosea.

b) In *Thiruvagam* the triple characteristics of God *forgiving, residing* and *elevating* are quite distinctly displayed. The last verse of '*Kulaapathu*' (Decad of Thilai) says 'God who is mother (Ammal) I clung onto and she in turn forgave all the accretions of my previous birth'.<sup>48</sup> The continual forgiveness of God indicates the continuous movement of the mother within. In '*Punarchi pathu*' (desire of Advaitic union No. 9) there is a dramatic contrast.

"sire and mother of the seven worlds... old who me a dog mad'st thine..."<sup>49</sup>

The poet considers himself a dog. Such an unworthy human vessel the mother of the seven worlds makes her own. The way in which it is done is expressed in the next line as that of an 'incorrigible maniac' whose sole desire is to reside in the poet. Such a movement of condescension tends to elevate the child. '*Achopathigam*' (No. 9) which is

47. Schungel - Straumann. H., "God as Mother in Hosea 11", *Theology Digest*, 39/1 (1989) p. 3.

48. Varadarajan G. op. cit., p. 572.

49. Pope G.U. op. cit., p. 243.

titled 'saves me with a mother's love' is the last song of Thiruvagam. The Tamil original reads as 'making me as something worth, like a dog on a giraffe. It was thus the mother gave me grace',<sup>50</sup> By removing the enslaving conditions and making him 'a being' from the status of the dog, the poet is elevated to giraffe's height. The analogy indicates the depth and height of the child being elevated due to the core movement of God.

#### 4. 2.2 Mother tending and training

a) In the song of Moses (Deut 31:10-11) through the semitic imagery of eagle, Yahweh's motherly cuddling and nestling is brought out.

"He found him in a desert land,... he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle... spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions' (Deut 31:10-11),

Though eagle's swiftness is portrayed (Dt 28:49; Prov 23:5; Job 9:26; Jer 4:13; 48:40; 49:22 etc), Ex. 19:4 and Dt 32:11, paint the mother bird brooding over and leading the fledglings to independence and safety."<sup>51</sup>

When the *Psalmist* (131:1-2) says 'like a child that is quieted is my soul', Yahweh's tending is evident. Is 51:17-18 pictures God as a good nurse that Israel should trust and confide.

b) In *Thiruvagam*, 'like mother, thou hast brought me up, I praise' is the crown and climax of the lines 58-87 of '*Potrithiruvagaval*',<sup>52</sup> where God-mother is seen bringing up the poet - son all along the various phases of struggles such

50. Varadarajan G. op. cit., p. 649.

51. Raja R.J. op. cit., p. 113.

52. Pope G.U. op. cit., p. 35.

as obstinacy, buoyancy, people's laughter, jeering, stammering, quivering etc. Such an intimate guidance is the cause of transformation as well.

### **Mother-consolation, Refuge and Surrender**

a) In *Is 66:12-14*, 'You shall be carried upon her knees' becomes a clue to understand the divine. For in the semitic movement, the effect amplifies and embellishes the cause which reveals Yahweh as a consoling mother in verse 13, 'As one whom his mother comforts so I will comfort you'.

*Jeremiah*, chs 30-33, is referred to by scholars as the 'Book of Consolation' because its content pertinently refers to consolation, restoration, and rebuilding of the people.

b) While comforting, refuge and restoration are interrelated in the above passages, in *Thiruvasagam* these are more distinctly pronounced '*Thirukazukundram*' (The Eagle Mount) No. 3 runs as,

"In wilderment I stayed from perunthurrai far,  
Where tears were changed to joy and foulness purged...  
I sinner knew not what should after grow.  
Bereft of the home.....  
To save me from confusion sore thou cam'st....."<sup>53</sup>

We can discern here the real picture of a mother wiping the tears of the helpless little child having lost 'the home'. 'Fear' vanishes with the arrival of the gentle balm of consolation. God's abandonment of the poet is echoed in '*Neethalvinnappam*' (plea of the forsaken) No. 16 :

I wandered weary, none to say 'fear not' .....  
Like Mother thou, like Father thou,  
my soul's most precious wealth"<sup>54</sup>

53. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

The cry of the poet for 'Refuge' takes a dramatic turn in the last line when his cry of abandonment is instinctively first addressed to the Mother. Structurally and functionally, in fulfilling the role of refuge and embrace, the mother precedes the father. Mother is one's trustworthy refuge.

## CONCLUSION

The perspective of 'Image of God' as the feminine principle and God as Mother have made OT and Thiruvasa-gam mutually throw open their doors wider and deeper. Each, with its unique milieu, has an eloquent and poignant delineation of the Mother. Though philosophically there may be disagreeable categories, yet on the basis of faith and Bhakti, while each preserves its unique experiential articulation, they lend complementarity. Depth psychology and Psychospirituality fully endorse the consideration of the divinity and deity as Mother.

"Ann Ulanove cites Paul Tillich's image of the 'Ground of Being' with its "Mother quality of giving birth, carrying and embracing, as an appropriate Christian image".<sup>55</sup> When Patriarchal hegemony entered liturgical communion, it did alienate indirectly a part of humanity. By inclusion of maternal metaphors, especially indicating the themes dealt with so far, the liturgical communion would involve and unite a wider spectrum of praying people.

Religion is basically universal in character and involves adequacy of symbols. 'We do not pray to an earth goddess, to sophia or an eternal feminine principle (Jung)'.<sup>56</sup> God as our Mother would signify the entire gamut of Her compassion and mercy, Her outpouring self and absolute refuge than become suggestive of cultural patterns of

55. Schmiot G.R. "Lutheran Liturgical prayer and God as Mother", *Worship* 52/5 (1978) p. 537.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 537.

sexism or feminine ideology. As the mother symbol deeply penetrates the ground of our being it will have an 'impactful' access into the core of our being - mind, memory, will and imagination. Then, 'religion' and 'religions' will have a relevant basis and communion wherein all the deep aspirations will be met with. There will then be a silver lining in the fragmented society when it thinks of itself as a child and children of the One and the same Mother!

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