The Great Mother: A Phenomenological Study on the Female Constitution of the Unconscious (Book Summary)*

Henrique Guilherme Scatolin
Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), São Paulo, Brazil

Introduction

This book, published by the German psychologist Erich Neumann in 1959, provides us the great richness that lives in the symbolic manifestations of the unconscious. Throughout this book, this great disciple of Jung portrays the deepest archetypal manifestations of the unconscious and the symbolic manifestations of the Great Mother.

In its first chapter entitled “The Structure of Archetype”, Neumann (1959/2006) approaches the concept of Great Mother. We highlight that this concept, as an aspect of the “Great Feminine”, can be considered a later abstraction, since it points out the existence of a highly developed speculative consciousness.

For this author, the concept of the Great Feminine appears late in the history of humanity, but this was already present in several images of our history, as gathering of symbols colored by the emotional. In this path, the concept of Mother would be related to a complex psychic condition of the ego; and the concept of Great would be “the symbolic character of superiority manifested by the archetypal figure compared to what is present in all creatures” (Neumann, 1959/2006, p. 25).

The Great Mother is related to the spontaneous emergence of a wide range of symbols, linked to its yet undetermined and amorphous image. Such symbols are marked by the image of the Great Maternal, who lives in them and is identical to them. This Great Maternal can be represented by a stone, a tree, a fruit, or an animal. These figures are joined by the figure of the Great Mother, creating the circle of symbolic aspects that form the archetypal figure, manifested in the rituals and symbols of each ethnic group.

The circle of these symbolic images is explored throughout this book, involving several figures of Great Mothers, which manifestations are present in habits, rituals, myths, religions, and fables, and are represented by gods, fairies, female demons, and nymphs (which can assume graceful entities of good and also of evil). These manifestation forms of the Great Mother are nothing further than central aspects of the Great Feminine (Neumann, 1959/2006).

We can find in the primordial archetype of the Great Mother, positive and negative attributes themselves. According to Neumann (1959/2006), this Great Mother can be unfolded as a Kind Mother, Terrible Mother, and also as a Kind-Evil Mother. These forms stand out from the archetype of the Great Mae, enabling an organization of unique elements. We have in the Kind Mother the good male and female elements. And in the Terrible Mother, we can find the negative elements, presented through a devouring aspect. This is expressed in

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*I dedicate this summary to all women who were and still are present in my affective life, enriching my anima.

Henrique Guilherme Scatolin, M.Sc., Ph.D., Dr., Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Clinical Psychology, Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), São Paulo, Brazil.
aggressive phallic symbols, such as the symbols of the *vagina dentata*, not providing the internal growth of her own child. Finally, we have the Kind-Evil Mother who shelters the good and bad attributes. This, while enabling the internal growth, does not make room for the independence of consciousness.

The union of opposites, of the primordial archetype of the Great Mother, points to a consciousness and an ego still incapable of differentiation. Their manifestations become stronger and more disconcerting the greater the contradictions in this involved archetype. The nature of this primordial archetype is “paradoxical, indiscernible and unrepresentable, given that, containing in it a great deal of contradictory motifs and symbols, this plurality is summarized in one—in itself” (Newmann, 1959/2006, p. 26).

In this path, when developing this idea in the book, Newmann (1959/2006) points out that in the primeval phase, the base of the archetype goes beyond the form of human representation, eliminating any kind of configuration. If this archetype reaches a certain form in man’s imagination, his representations can emerge as a monstrous, colossal and non-human aspect. Here we have the chimeric figures and semi-human creatures, such as the sphinxes, the gargoyles, the monsters represented by maternal and bearded phallic figures. The moment when consciousness moves away and becomes differentiated, these symbolizations create other contours. For Newmann (1959/2006), throughout the development period, internal and external forces move away, becoming so strong, and allowing that the intuitive images of the archetype take a more sacred form.

Therefore, this author is poring over and delighting in the manifestations of this archetype of the collective unconscious. Based on Jung, the author points out that the archetype is a mythological motif common to all men, appearing in the symbols of Egyptian theology, in the Hellenistic mysteries of Mitre, in the Christian symbolism of the Middle Ages, in the visions and also in the deliriums.

Throughout this work two types of character from the Feminine that can coexist, antagonize or interpenetrate in a single person are distinguished. Using the personal equation, he brings the personal projection to focus on the “anima” in the man and the “animus” in the woman. The manifestation of the elemental character of the feminine will always be in clear evidence when the ego and consciousness itself are childish, poorly developed and the unconscious is dominant. This elementary character, as ambiguous as the character of the transformation, with its good aspect and its bad aspect, becomes the basis for the conservative, stable, and immutable side of the feminine, very present in Maternal. When this ego-consciousness becomes strong and independent in human evolution, the tension between the unconscious and the ego-consciousness may arise.

In man, the transformation character occurs in the anima, stimulating the masculine to all kinds of adventures of the soul and spirit, enabling a new inner and outer world. And so, he brings the central symbolism of the feminine, for example, the symbol of the Vase, so explored at the beginning of this book.

This would be an archetypal symbol that would represent the essence of the Feminine. Therefore, he extols the symbolic equation Woman = Body = Vase, since this equation would represent the most elementary basic experience of humanity towards the feminine, and water and earth are elements of nature essentially linked to the symbolism of the Vase. On the other hand, in the same book, he highlights the mysteries of the Great Feminine transformation, since they are processes carried out based on the natural or material element, providing a qualitative transformation.

In the second part of his work, Newmann (1959/2006) explores the symbolic manifestations of this archetype, such as that of the Great Goddess of Antiquity. The manifestations of these images, going from Siberia to the Pyrenees, are the oldest known works. From these manifestations, he associates it with the
symbolism of the Great Mother present in these ethnic groups.

One data that is necessary to emphasize is the negative elementary character of the Feminine. As the unconscious is experienced as feminine and maternal, not all unconscious contents appear as feminine; since in the Unconscious, there are male and female forces, trends, orientations, complexes, instincts, impulses, and archetypes. And so, he points out that consciousness considers the unconscious symbolically as feminine and itself as masculine. From the childish dependence of the maternal walking towards the glorious struggle of the male hero against the Great Mother, the consciousness establishes its development stages. So, the growing strength of the male could be compared to consciousness, while unconscious is acquiring the power of the maternal.

The liberation process of this male consciousness would be a painful struggle for the entire humanity, making the negative elemental character of the male an archetypal experience for both men and women: Here we have the symbolic reality of Terrible Mother. This dark side of the maternal takes on terrible forms, which are manifested through monsters, figures of witches, vampires and ghosts, both in men and women.

And, through symbols and figures of destructive and aggressive aspects, Newmann (1959/2006) explores the manifestations of this Terrible Mother. The figure of the Terrible Feminine and its archetypal manifestations are present in the pre-Hellenic world, and also in the early days of the Greek world. In some manifestations, the progress of both the male consciousness and autonomy of consciousness raises the symbolic murder of this Great Mother, and often, terrible. Here, in this movement, we find the figure of the hero. And then, the positive and negative elemental character of the Great Feminine reaches the high and the low, manifesting itself as the Great Circle. “The Great Feminine is the lady of time, since she governs growth” (Newmann, 1959/2006, p. 199).

Therefore, the reading of this book provides an opening to the symbolic manifestations of this Great Mother, emphasizing its unique aspects in each culture. In this part, Newmann provides a unique reflection of such manifestations, not only in Psychology, but in the broad field of human sciences. And that is why the reading of this book is unique and mandatory for every Jungian analyst.

Reference

Newmann, E. (1959/2006). A grande mãe: Um estudo fenomenológico da constituição feminina do inconsciente. (F. P. Mattos and M. S. M. Netto, Trans., 5th ed.). São Paulo: Cultrix.