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Voices from the Void: A Depth Psychological Reconceptualization of Sex Trafficking in Modern-Day India

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ABSTRACT *Human trafficking is practiced in many countries throughout the world, and every year millions of women and children are bought, sold, and traded into commercial sexual and labor-based slavery. Of these countries, India is one of the largest portals and destination grounds for the trafficking and sexual enslavement of women and children. Victims of trafficking live under the daily threat of their own torture, abuse, and death, and in most cases even the torture and murder of their families, should they try to escape their captors. It is the immeasurable fear used to manipulate these women and children that eclipses the abject poverty impelling their exile into the darkest shadows of human existence. Within this context, it becomes important to consider how healing which moves towards restoring humanity, authentic voice, and soul to those who have been stripped and silenced in this regard can begin. In my opinion, the realm of depth psychology is unique in its ability to hold the tension between substance and shadow as it impacts oppressed populations and the socio-cultural philosophies that have perpetuated silence and margin.*

Key words: sex trafficking, depth psychology, India, empowering feminine voice

The notion of shadow encompasses that of margin. Dark outlines of bodies, whether cast on screens, sidewalks, or walls of Platonic caves, carry distortions and limitations within their mirroring of reality. Depending on the angle from which a shadow is viewed, its form may seem thin or wide, short or long. Its substance or reality depends on one's perception of it; it has no legitimacy apart from the perceiving eye. Further, it can never perceive itself in authenticity, and thus can never determine its own sense of self. The shadow merely falls at the feet of the body casting it, a trail of shade behind a footpath of purpose, direction and choice – never its own. If we now move this understanding of shadow to the realm of metaphor and give it life as symbol, greater implications for shadow and body begin to surface. It soon becomes important to understand whose body is casting the shadow, and whether shadow can have viability and agency apart from the body to which it is bound.

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Women have existed in shadows and margins of voiceless constraint for generations. Across cultural, ethnic, and national borders, patriarchal standards have defined who we are in terms of biology rather than will and voice. Women are most often identified, not by our intellectual or spiritual capacities, but rather by the contours of our bodies – pregnant or pornographic. Women are bodies bearing babies; wet skin around erections, hands calloused and chafed by cleaning fluids, cooking oils, and age-old expectations. Indeed, in many cultures around the world, women continue to be objects of sale, enslavement, abuse, and exploitation. Denied the freedom to express her own experiences in the timbre of her own voice, and further, exiled from her own suffering by pervasive socio-cultural structures that privilege male perspectives and attitudes in language and law, the figure of woman has long been barren. She is repeatedly raped of opportunities to give birth to the gifts of her own spirit – the visions arising from her own soul.

The suffering born of this silence has manifested through countless practices that normalize the torture, slavery, and sexual exploitation of women worldwide. I believe that the very worst of these practices is human trafficking. Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat, or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (US State Department, 2003). Human trafficking is practiced in many countries throughout the world, and every year millions of women and children are bought, sold, and traded into commercial sexual and labor-based slavery (US State Department, 2008). Of these countries, India is one of the largest portals and destination grounds for the trafficking and sexual enslavement of women and children (Wadhwa, 1998). Victims of trafficking live under the daily threat of their own torture, abuse, and death, and in most cases even the torture and murder of their families, should they try to escape their captors (Centre for Social Research, 2005). It is the abject fear that is used to manipulate these women and children that eclipses the abject poverty that impels their exile into the darkest shadows of human existence.

The physical, emotional, and psychological abuses suffered by the survivors of human trafficking have been unspeakable – quite literally so. The fracture and fragmentation impelled by a subculture of sexual enslavement as endorsed by a culture that has held patriarchal privilege as a core value for generations – this is the legacy of millions of women and children in India today.

In modern society, as in ancient society, and all others that have lain across maps in times between, woman is colony, enslaved and exploited as an economic resource. She is a body without a voice, made to bear the burden of a world in which humanity and soul are tantamount to distant folklore; and yet, it is belief in her story, as well as the threads of innumerable others, that actually comprise the tapestry of human experience we call history. Wehr notes:

> The themes of sexism, misogyny, and the oppression of women are well-known, although their reality and their seriousness have not been widely acknowledged and accepted in our society. That lack of recognition stems from several sources, but one of the deepest is that sexism constitutes a worldview; that is, it is a 'lens' through which one views the world and its rightful order. (Wehr, 1987, 14)

Within the larger scope of trafficking and prostitution, one of the more pervasive ways which women and children in rural areas are exploited for sexual trade and enslavement is

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through the perversion of cultural and religious rituals. In his book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, Kevin Bales (2004) discusses the Indian religious practice of *devadasi*, and details how poorer families, often in rural areas, will sacrifice their daughters to the gods, in hopes that they will appease their community's professed deity, and assure themselves of a happier, more prosperous future. Once these girls are married to the gods, they are officially declared to be 'saints', and must move into the local temple and care for it. They are forbidden to do any other work, leave their village for any reason, or 'divorce' and marry anyone else. These girls must live out their lives in control of the men who run the temple. Within this context, extreme poverty, the willing objectification and sacrifice of women, and the brazen perversion of religious ritual combine to take the form of sexual slavery. Bales explains:

> For centuries these men have turned the girls to prostitution, so that the temple doubles as a brothel. Any female children born to the 'saints' are raised to be *devadasi* as well, and the women live out their lives as enslaved prostitutes, while the men who run the temple pocket the profits. (Bales, 2004 199–200)

In his book *A Crime So Monstrous: Face-to-Face with Modern-Day Slavery*, Benjamin Skinner (2008) relates his observations of *devadasi* women and children in the Indian holy city of Varanasi. Skinner notes:

> In the holy city of Varanasi, I found brothels where pimps paid prostitutes only with food, confined them to four-by-six-foot cells, and forced them into unprotected sex with hundreds of men. In southern India, tens of thousands of girls are devadasi – ritual sex slaves. (Skinner, 2008, 209)

Religious rites such as *devadasi*, as well as socio-cultural and class privileges deriving from the caste system, are more easily practiced to distortion and exploitation in rural areas, since older traditions are more prevalent than modern trends in education, and more progressive ideas and opportunities with regard to individual and community development are always eclipsed by abject poverty. In referencing rural slavery and exploitation, Bales notes, 'One study looked at 235 villages and estimated the total at 500,000 bonded laborers … most are from lower castes (officially called "scheduled" or "backward" castes in India)' (Bales, 2004, 202).

This insidious treatment and exploitation of women and children at the levels of manipulating cultural rituals, religious beliefs, and patriarchal subjugation of women and girls have served to increase the magnitude of trafficked women and children within and across India's borders. However, the increases in revenue gained by organized crime syndicates (One World US, 2008), corrupt government organizations at both local and national levels, as well as resistance against forming a federal law enforcement agency (Kumar, 2004), make it quite clear that India's attempts to create and enforce laws protecting human trafficking victims have not only proven unsuccessful, but quite often, insincere. Inefficiencies and corruption surrounding the enforcement of laws against trafficking have long perpetuated its practice and growth, and have especially increased the sexual trafficking of women and girls.

In order to facilitate movement for woman as 'other' out of the bleak narrows of margin towards healing, we must begin to question the source or dynamic that has perpetuated masculine rejection of the feminine story, and further, how notions of otherness and dominant–non-dominant power paradigms have been 'normalized' within society and culture, as certain stories have gained privilege over others. Psychoanalytic feminist critique

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provides a framework within which these dynamics can be re-viewed through a lens that restores power and presence to women surviving in the margins of their societies and cultures. Speaking of French psychoanalytic feminist Julia Kristeva, Clark notes that Kristeva 'advocates a notion of cultural and personal identity which recognizes that the strangeness of the other is a strangeness within' (Clark, 1995, 205). Clark goes on to assert:

> At the level of the state, this implies the acceptance of foreigners. At the level of the individual, this implies the recognition of the unconscious. Identity, then, must be seen as provisional rather than exclusive, constructed as an effect of the heterogeneous processes of discourses. (Clark, 1995, 205)

Within this context, it becomes important to consider how we may begin to practically and constructively apply the perspectives that postcolonial, postmodern, feminist, and new historicist lenses provide. How can healing which moves towards restoring humanity, authentic voice, and soul to those who have been stripped and silenced in this regard, begin? In my opinion, the realm of depth psychology is unique in its ability to hold the tension between substance and shadow as it impacts oppressed populations and the socio-cultural philosophies that have perpetuated silence and margin.

Depth psychology values the process of individuation or selfhood as it occurs from within its connection to socio-cultural and world consciousness. C. G. Jung (1990) emphasizes this state of connectedness: 'Without consciousness there would, practically speaking, be no world, for the world exists for us only in so far as it is consciously reflected by a psyche … The carrier of this [world] consciousness is the individual' (Jung, 1990, 27).

This is important in that it holds both individual and collective realities in balance, and recognizes that one cannot exist without the other. In speaking of the psychic energy belying the perpetual dance between individual and collective consciousnesses, Jung notes:

> But, just as between all opposites there obtains so close a bond that no position can be established or even thought of without its corresponding negation, so in this case also 'les extrêmes se touchent.' They belong together as correspondences, which is not to say that the one is derivable from the other, but that they subsist side by side as reflections in our own minds of the opposition that underlies all psychic energy. (Jung, 1960,116)

One must individuate from what he or she is not while simultaneously readjusting to one's inevitable connection to that pull of 'negation' (Jung, 1960, 116) at some larger level. In the case of sex trafficking survivors, this path entails learning to recognize and engage themselves as individuals rather than objects. Within this context, Jung's definition of individuation serves as a crucial foundation for understanding the process of authentic self-expression, as will unfold in my research with trafficking survivors. Jung argues: 'Individuation means becoming an "in-dividual," and, in so far as "individuality" embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as "coming to selfhood" or "self-realization"'(Jung, 1966, 173). Specifically, it is this question of self-discovery or realization, and its relationship to the authentic expression of lived experience, that becomes important when applied to psychotherapeutic treatment with sex trafficking survivors.

Within this context, the socio-cultural environment in which this process of individuation unfolds must be considered. To what extent is self-realization for women possible in a culture that consciously treats women as soulless objects of sale and trade? To even begin seeking an

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answer to this question, it is essential to understand the psyche of such a culture. In this vein, Jung's discussion of shadow in terms of its impact on socio-cultural attitudes towards class and gender is important as it may illuminate our understanding of cultural consciousness and psyche in India today. Regarding Jung's perspective of shadow integration, Wehr states:

> For Jung, the un-integrated shadow represents a moral problem, although integrated, it represents the possibility of greater wholeness. Coming to terms with it therefore constitutes nearly a moral imperative … Inasmuch as the shadow is related to the problem of evil, Jung's vision has a positive twist to it, because by acknowledging and integrating what the ego conceives of as 'evil' – most often found in the shadow – one prevents the shadow, as autonomous sub-personality, from continuing to act out blindly. Personal 'evil' can be transformed. (Wehr, 1987, 61)

Jung's conception of shadow integration involves incorporating the presence of 'evil' and presumably 'good' in the full telling of psyche's story. In extending this same principle to the healing and individuation process of trafficking survivors, integration would involve the articulation of 'self' in a way that acknowledges past experiences of trauma and victimization *alongside* and even in service of healing and identity formation. The integration of shadow in this regard, allows for these women to fully *own* their experiences of abuse through their authentic narratives and, in so doing, make it possible for brokenness to bear and nurture wholeness of spirit, mind, and soul.

The psychological lens with which we choose to perceive society, specifically in the context of its categorization and treatment of people, must be one that has the clarity to behold the many qualities and characteristics that comprise the whole face of human experience and, further, one that can conceive of the integration of these differing and often contrary facets, so healing of psyche or soul can become a reality for individuals as well as the world community at large. Within this context, I hold that choosing a depth psychological lens initiates the presence of pathology in an invocation of healing. Hillman writes:

> The wound and the eye are one and the same. From the psyche's viewpoint, pathology and insight are not opposites – as if we hurt because we have no insight and when we gain insight we shall no longer hurt. No. Pathologizing is itself a way of seeing; the eye of the complex gives the peculiar twist called 'psychological insight'. (Hillman, 1989, 149)

In addition to its commitment to wholeness in perspective and healing, the depth psychological orientation is one which values minority cultural perspectives, and seeks to represent psyche in terms of the plurality that characterizes our world. In her work, *Seeding Liberation: A Dialogue Between Depth Psychology and Liberation Psychology*, Mary Watkins says:

> I found in depth psychology a basic orientation to being that seeks to allow *what is* to be present in its animation and its difference. It is a desire for the liberation of being … The stance is one of listening and humility, a practiced vulnerability to being wounded, questioned, brought up short. Such listening allows the diversity of psyche's voices to come into audible range. (Watkins, 2002, 32)

In essence, depth psychology as applied to the individuation and healing process of sex trafficking survivors in India provides a container in which we may begin to practically consider and deal with socio-cultural rupture, as derives from the unintegrated shadow of

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patriarchy in India. Depth psychological perspectives, as inform and assist recognition of cultural trauma in this regard, can provide a space for sex trafficking survivors to begin giving voice to their experiences, and begin the journey of healing the split that exiled them from their humanity – that enshrouded their souls in bodies sold into degradation and suffering.

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