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Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz

In reading the poetry of Octavio Paz, one is struck by the central place of Woman, the sense and presence of her. (Woman) seems to be the focal point of both his philosophy of life and his poetry.¹

The central thrust of Paz's philosophy of poetry is as Eliot Weinberger had stated, "the mythic lost unity of thought and body, man and Nature, I and the other".² This study has therefore attempted to determine the significance of woman in Paz's poetry by attempting to explore the different manifestations in which woman appears and, by attempting to determine the role which each manifestation plays in Paz's poetic expression.

In undertaking the project, the study has also made use of Mexican history and myths, world philosophies and literary trends to illustrate how Paz was influenced by these in his treatment of the theme of woman in his poetry. This dissertation has been divided into five chapters including:

Chapter I Introduction

Chapter II The Basic Manifestations of Woman

Chapter III Woman as "Beloved"



Chapter IV Symbolic Fusion: Woman as “Water, Earth and Tree”

Chapter V Conclusion

Chapter I: Introduction

Octavio Paz, the internationally celebrated Mexican poet and essayist, was born on 31 March 1914 in Mexico City.³ Influenced by his literary family (both his grandfather and father were well-known journalists and writers), Paz began writing at a very young age. It was in 1931, at the age of seventeen that he began publishing poetry in *Barandal* (Balustrade), a magazine he founded with a group of young poets. Two years later, he published his first book, Luna Silvestre (Savage Moon) and founded another magazine, *Cuadernos del Valle de Mexico* (Notebooks of the Valley of Mexico).

Paz’s work as a Mexican diplomat had been a major factor in shaping his literary genius. As a diplomat he travelled extensively, from Spain to the United States, Paris, France, Japan, and India. These travels significantly moulded his poetic career and enabled him to learn more about different world literatures, arts and philosophies. Chief among these were surrealism, existentialism, orientalism, including Buddhist and Hindu tantric and Taoist philosophies.⁴ Each of these became a major influence and featured prominently in his poetry as an expression

of sociology, history and philosophy, simultaneously presenting such diverse themes as the eternal present, the “living language of myth”,⁵ the quest for modernity and eroticism, to state just a few.

Among these is the recurring theme of the presence of woman in Paz’s poetry. This dissertation therefore explores this particular theme, by studying the different manifestations, roles, functions and symbolic significance of woman in Paz’s poetic universe.

In reading the poetry of Octavio Paz, one is struck by the central place of woman, the sense and presence of her: “Woman stretched out made in the image of the world/The world a bundle of your images.”⁶ In fact, the image of woman, as in the lines quoted above, appears in all its universality (“Woman... in the image of the world”) and its multiplicity of forms and meanings (“The world a bundle of your images”) in a majority of Paz’s poems regardless of whether or not these poems deal with the theme of love. As Ann Marie Rembley Rambo said, “She seems to be the focal point of both his philosophy of life and his poetry”.⁷

According to Eliot Weinberger, Paz’s philosophy and poetry centre on his firm belief that poetry constitutes, “the secret religion of the modern age”. As he put it:

For Paz the revolution of the word is the revolution of the world,
and that both cannot exist without the revolution of the body: life

as art, a return to the mythic lost unity of thought and body, man and Nature, I and other.⁸

It is in the search for this “mythic lost unity of thought and body, man and Nature, I and the other” that Paz had turned to the exploration of the role of woman in human relationships and through her symbolic representation, the relationships of humans with nature and the universe.

Since the central thrust of Paz’s philosophy of poetry hinges on the concept of “the mythic lost unity” and, since the role of woman in human relationships is paramount to the concept, this chapter has therefore attempted to explore the symbolic significance of woman in his poetry by first exploring his concept of poetry in general, and his treatment, in particular, of “poetry and love as instruments in [the] search for a metaphysical union”⁹.

To Paz, a poem is an attempt to transcend language even though the poetic creation he believes “begins with violence to language”.¹⁰ Explaining the process, he concludes that it involves two basic acts. In the first, there is an “uprooting of words. The poet wrenches them from their habitual connections and occupations...the second act is the return of the word”.¹¹ It is in this way that poetry takes on an important role in Paz’s poetry because the poet has a heightened ability to struggle with the word and wrench from language new possibilities of expression and feeling by turning it into symbols of surrealistic realities.

This is also helpful in understanding his concept of love, for, even as poetry is an attempt to transcend language into planes of reality, love is an attempt to transcend the solitude of man into an ideal state. As Paz says in the Labyrinth of Solitude:

Love is one of the clearest examples of that double instinct which causes us to dig deeper into our own selves and, at the same time, to emerge from ourselves and to realize ourselves in another... In the life of every man there are periods that are both departures and reunions, separations and reconciliations. Each of these phases is an attempt to transcend our solitude, and is followed by an immersion in strange environments.¹²

Further, Paz states that:

Love...is an antisocial act, though not deliberately so. Whenever it succeeds in realizing itself it...[becomes] a revelation of two solitary beings who create their own world, a world that rejects society's lies, it abolishes time and work, and declares itself to be self-sufficient.¹³

Again for Paz, love, an act synonymous with poetry lures man back to what is elementary, the forgotten origin, where body and spirit are one. This is why Jason Wilson says that in Paz, "Love and poetry are the two faces of the same reality both are attempts to recover Edenic man"¹⁴ for, as Rambo states:

For Paz, life and poetry are so closely related that his poetry becomes an active part of his search for an explanation of

existence...Paz equates poetry and love as instruments in this search for a metaphysical union.¹⁵

It is in this 'search' that woman emerges in three different forms corresponding to three different stages in Paz's "development of the presence of woman". In the first stage, woman is seen as "the brief universal image of the girl, the mother, the frustrated woman, or the evil woman." She then appears, in the next stage, as "the beloved in a love relationship which expresses both the positive and negative sides of love", and finally she appears in "a transformed natural state in which there is a fusion of her feminine qualities with those of natural objects". The "role" that each of these forms "plays in Paz's poetic expression" which will be determined in the subsequent chapters will finally lead to an evaluation of woman as "an instrument and a symbol of transcendence" in Paz's poetic universe.

In discussing this symbolic significance of woman, reference to some of his major literary and philosophical influences like surrealism and orientalism – which includes Buddhist and Hindu tantric philosophies and the Taoist concept of the Yin-Yang is also made in this chapter.

Chapter II: The Basic Manifestations of Woman

This chapter is a discussion on the four basic manifestations of woman as “the brief universal image of the girl, the mother, the frustrated woman, or the evil woman”. These figures represent, for Paz, the image of the complete woman in all her facets.

Paz’s vision of the girl represents the universal qualities of feminine youth. As the girl begins the sequence, she is the very essence of innocence, and being so makes her connection to nature the strongest. She is always seen in a positive light, an image of freshness as in “*Andando Por La Luz*” (Walking through the Light), taken from the volume of poems, *Salamandra* (Salamander):

You lift your left
foot forward the day
stops and laughs
and starts to step lightly
while the sun stands still

Breasts high you stroll
the trees walk the sun
follows the day goes

to meet you the sky
 invents sudden clouds¹⁶

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot
 Weinberger)

In this poem, the girl is seen as a goddess, a creator and a life force and her innocence is stressed through the associations with everything that is purest in nature. In examples such as this, the girl is related to nature, the joy of a new day, the visual and refreshing effects of light. In the words of Rambo,

The frequency of these optimistic images suggests the poet's almost subconscious vision, as it were, of woman as a part of Nature, a vision he cultivates to gain understanding, achieve tonality, and to infuse his poetry with the presence of woman.¹⁷

The girl can also be seen as “a symbol for an ideal”, which is Paz's search for the “metaphysical union”, but as yet she remains only as a “possibility, the freshness of a future opportunity, an unattained ideal”. The figure of the girl is therefore innocence personified and she carries with her the potential of turning herself into a life force for man.

The severed ties with paradise that Paz feels can be reconnected only through the mediation of woman find expression once again in Paz's treatment of the mother, a figure who comes next in the sequence. Although this figure rarely appears but the essence of maternity is

present in many of Paz's poems. Paz "envisions her as the universal and natural mother".

The maternal figure in Paz's "Olmec Goddess" epitomises this universal quality of woman that the mother embodies:

The four cardinal points
are gathered in your navel.

In your womb the day is pounding, fully armed.¹⁸

(From Selected Poems translated by Mark Strand)

In this poem, the goddess, symbolic of woman is regarded as the centre of the cosmos. The reference to the navel as the point in which all the four points of the compass meet is also analogous to the umbilical cord that binds all men to the mother. Further, the essence of maternity is heightened by the mention of the womb in which the day is the foetus. So for Paz, each day is created by woman as she herself is the centre of all creation much like nature.

Here is Paz's "universal feminine figure capable of motherliness and [erotic] love".¹⁹ She is seen as encompassing all feminine qualities in one. Elsewhere in his poetry, Paz refers to her supernatural power which is related to the image of 'la orilla', "suggesting the shore of life at which the poet stands"²⁰ or what Julia A Kushigan states as, the "Buddhist concept of the symbolic leap to the other shore"²¹

From one bank to another,

there is always
 a body stretched:
 a rainbow.
 I'll sleep beneath its arches.²²

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In this poem, woman compared to a rainbow is the link that man requires to reach the other shore, which according to Kushigan, signifies a mержence of two opposing forces, the Yin-Yang, the female and male. The imagery of the body stretched between two banks like a rainbow is one which instantly connects the woman and her beauty to the beauty of nature. The man's decision to sleep beneath this arching body indicates the fact that he is almost at peace, knowing that it is through the woman that he can reach the shore of life.

Opposing this vision of the woman who represents the function and power of love fulfilled, is the frustrated woman, one "who suffers the anxiety of failing to complete her generic role. She is the contrast to the girl, the mother and to the beloved. Not representing idealization or danger to anyone, she can only be pitied as the most pathetic figure of the group".²³

This type of woman is exemplified in the poem "*Virgen*" (Virgin). Here Paz interprets the word "*virgen*" to mean 'old maid' in terms of what society considers as unproductive and non-life giving. This figure

is one whose life is filled with regret and longing. Unlike in the other three forms, this woman, having passed from innocent youth to old age, leading a barren life, can only cry out in frustration at the opportunities she had missed. The woman in the poem cries out to an undefined deity:

(Rain upon my wrinkled breasts
 Rain over my wrinkled breasts
 Rain over the bones and stones
 May your seed break the bark
 The crust of my inured blood)²⁴

(From Libertad bajo palabra translated by Sister Marie
 Therese)

The request for rain is suggestive of the rejuvenating quality of water which the woman feels will make her whole again. There is also a strong comparison here, between the “stones” and “bones” suggestive of their similar qualities. According to Rambo; “The rain sent by this natural god is “semilla” [seed], capable of penetrating or breaking open with new life the bark of plants and the shells which encases listless blood.”²⁵

Thus for Paz, the frustrated woman is one who has gone astray from her crucial role of being the link between lost paradise and man. The source for this frustration lies in the fact that she herself cannot

identify with nature. She is no longer able to function, as an agent of nature for the nature she symbolizes is arid and barren.

While this figure inspires sympathy, the evil woman, another deviation from the first three figures, however, is described “as an evil contrary to man [who] appears also, in contradistinction to the idealized visions of the girl and the mother... Paz sees her as potentially poisonous, ensnaring, capable of seizing and strangling his masculine spirituality, intellect and freedom”. In “*Piedra de Sol*” (Sunstone) we see this example:

I saw your horrid scales
 Melusina shining green in the dawn,
 you slept twisting between the sheets,²⁶

(From Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger.)

In the person of Melusina, the half serpent – half beautiful woman, “there is a fusion of woman and snake in which each shares the qualities of the other.”²⁷ This type of woman is especially characterized by “the connotation of treachery and sexuality which bears in all literature and symbolic expression.”

At this stage woman is seen simply as a contributing factor to the “creation of an atmosphere or to the presentation of a moment of emotion or sensation which is not necessarily essential to the central subject”, which is the search for the “metaphysical union” through love

as “a prime experience” and woman as “the most basic and obvious element in [that] experience”.

This chapter therefore serves as an exploration of the four basic manifestations of woman and an examination of the role of each manifestation, to show how man can achieve a metaphysical union with her through love in the beloved of the next chapter.

Chapter III: Woman as “Beloved”

The figures of lovers and physical love form the second stage in “Paz’s development of the presence of woman”. Here the beloved is the central figure and this chapter therefore examines woman as a beloved in a love relationship that “expresses both the positive and negative sides of love”.

In “*La Llave de Agua*” (The Key of Water), the presence of the beloved and the success of her relationship with the poet, transforms both the beloved and the poet’s world, almost surrealistically, into a new reality of natural beauty and grandeur, as when he says:

After Rishikesh
the Ganges is still green.
The glass horizon
breaks among the peaks.

We walk upon crystals.

Above and below

great gulfs of calm.

In the blue spaces

white rocks, black clouds.

You said:

Le pays est plein de sources.

That night I dipped my hands in your breasts.²⁸

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

Here woman is not only seen as synonymous with nature's beauty but Paz also introduces an element of spirituality, that arises from the presence of woman and her fusion with nature. In the lines "That night I dipped my hands in your breasts", Paz refers to woman as if she were a holy river with a vast spiritual repertoire. In dipping into that river, he partakes of her spirituality and becomes himself an extension of nature.

It is through such a successful relationship that Paz "must seek a spiritual union with all life".²⁹ It is in the search for this spiritual union that Paz "metamorphizes familiar objects into objects of Nature and intermingles the two worlds. In this atmosphere of his own creation, the poet is linked philosophically and physically to woman and hence to all life". The figure of woman is also related here to the nature symbols of trees and water suggesting "fecundity, profundity and power of life".

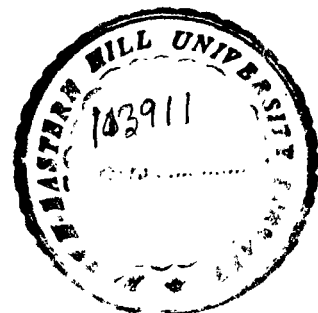
Another important aspect of love that Paz explores in his poetry is his belief that it is through the experience of love that man can be reconnected with the “Mythic lost unity”. This search for the “mythic lost unity’ finds true expression in Paz’s treatment of the beloved for, according to Wilson

Woman’s reality abolishes all that is peripheral to the vision,
for she is the complementary half to man’s aloneness...
Experience with woman leads to vision...and this vision
through woman as concrete symbol of eternity obviates the
need for language.³⁰

The beloved also personifies the ideal relationship through which he can regain pre-Edenic innocence as shown in the introductory chapter with another quotation from Wilson that, “Love and poetry are the two faces of the same reality both are attempts to recover Edenic man”.³¹

In “*Antes Del Comienzo*” (Before the Beginning) taken from the volume of poems entitled *Arbol Adentro* (A Tree Within) Paz talks about returning to the mythic lost unity with the help of the beloved by saying:

The world
is not real;
time wonders:
all that is certain
is the heat of your skin.

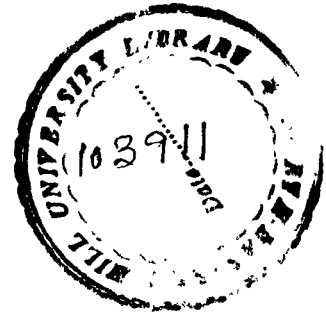


In your breath I hear
 the tide of being,
 the forgotten syllable of the Beginning.³²

(From A Tree Within translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In contrast to such poems, the negative side of love appears in poems of pessimistic tone where there is little of the glorified relation of woman to nature as in “*Canción Desentonada*” (A Song Out of Tune):

The day is short,
 the hour long.
 I walk through lots and corridors and echoes,
 my hands touch you and you suddenly vanish,
 I look in your eyes and suddenly vanish,
 the hour traces, erases, invents its reflections
 but I don't find you,
 and I don't see me.³³



(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In poems such as this, when the love relationship is unsuccessful, the poet is unable to experience similar grand passions as seen earlier. In fact, because of the absence of the beloved “the world is seen as an empty, lonely existence”,³⁴ and the poet reveals his “doubt that love can lead him to a union with humanity and in an empty environment voices his feelings of isolation”.

Having attempted to establish the significance of the presence of the beloved in aiding man's search for "the mythic lost unity", this chapter also attempts to show how copulation can also facilitate an achievement of liberation. This concept of liberation is an important part of the Hindu and Buddhist tantric traditions for, according to Kushigan:

Both Hinduism and Buddhism, at least in their tantric forms, predict the achievement of liberation in this life through the fusion of opposing elements: feminine and masculine, light and darkness, life and death, the material and the spiritual...which symbolizes any binary pair composed of opposing elements.³⁵

The poem "*Vaivén*" (Sway) from the main collection of poems, *Salamandra* (Salamander) emphasises this point when Paz says:

I fall in you with the blind fall of a wave
your body sustains me like a wave reborn
wind blows outside and gathers the waters
all of the forests are a single tree³⁶

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

These lines suggestive of sexual act, indicate how the natural elements surrealistically symbolize the theme of unity in the metaphor of the tree and the union of two bodies into one. It is in this union, that the rebirth occurs, for, the contrasting qualities in the beloved reflect, Kushigan's views that "Woman and man are the subjects of the passionate games, the dispersal and the union of the opposing forces of

which the poet speaks.”³⁷ According to her, “These are important manifestations of liberation and ultimately Samsara, or rebirth.” This chapter therefore tries to explore the theme of rebirth and how it can be achieved, at this stage, only through the poet’s successful relationship with the beloved. It is in this way that “the Beloved is the central figure”³⁸, and that “it is through her Paz must seek a spiritual union with all life.”

Chapter IV: Symbolic Fusion: Woman as “Water, Earth and Tree”

Having discovered the possibility of a “spiritual union with all life” through a successful relationship with the beloved, this chapter is a deliberation on the symbolic fusion of woman with nature. In the poems of this final stage, “Nature is made the ideal, the basis of femininity and the figure of woman is transformed and subordinated to this ideal”. As woman and nature represent both physical solidity and spiritual profundity to the poet, they always appear related through “the same three poetic symbols of water, earth and the tree”.

You open my chest with your fingers of water,
you close my eyes with your mouth of water,

you rain on my bones, a tree of liquid
 sending roots of water into my chest³⁹

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In Paz's poetry, water is seen as a universal poetic symbol, suggesting fecundity, timelessness, continual change and purity leading to spirituality.

In examining this symbol of water and how it is surrealistically linked to woman, this chapter also discusses the significance of Mexican mythology where Aztec goddesses are linked with nature, and how, at times Paz symbolically links woman to a holy river like the Ganges in his poetry. The concept of "la orilla"⁴⁰ is also once again discussed in this chapter to illustrate how Paz's poetic quest, "the mythic lost unity", and the concept of the fusion of opposites are achieved.

The earth, on the other hand, is seen as a solid basis of life, profundity and substance. In many instances it is also seen as a fusion of the figure of the woman with earth and water as in the poem, "*Hablo de la Ciudad*" (I Speak of the City) taken from the volume of poems entitled *Arbol Adentro* (A Tree Within):

eyes that are the night half-open and the day that wakes, the sea
 stretching out and the flame that speaks, powerful breasts: lunar tide,
 lips that say sesame, and time opens, and the little room becomes a

garden of change, air and fire entwine, earth and water mingle.⁴¹

(From A Tree Within translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The fecundity of woman is expanded in the final symbol — the tree. This symbol of the tree is between earth and water and is sustained by both. It represents life, “based in reality and reaching vertically toward the infinite”.⁴² Thus, for Paz the fact that the tree is all at once a part of earth and sky is the ideal symbol to illustrate his theory of how woman though a mortal just like man, is not restricted to man’s limitations, for she is also a part of the “mythic lost unity” and only through union with her can man regain the joy of Paradise. This thought is echoed in one of Paz’s poems entitled “*Noche, Día, Noche*”(Night, Day, Night) taken from Arbol Adentro (A Tree Within):

Under the leafy canopy of your hair,
 your forehead:
 a bower
 a clarity among the branches.
 I think about gardens:
 To be the wind that shakes your memories⁴³

(From A Tree Within translated by Eliot Weinberger)

This personification of the tree as woman is also often used by Paz as an allusion to the Biblical “Tree of Life” also known as the ‘Tree

of Knowledge' and also to the most ancient cross-cultural symbolic representation of the creation of the universe as the 'World Tree'.⁴⁴ For instance, the Tree of Life is an important symbol in nearly every culture. With its branches reaching into the sky, and roots deep in the earth, it dwells in three worlds — a link between heaven, the earth, and the underworld, uniting the heavens and the earth which is also the symbolic significance Paz gives to woman.

The symbolic fusion of woman and nature is thus attained through the three symbols which Rambo says represent "the sublimation of woman as seen through the eyes of the poet, in harmony and union with all life. She is a woman fused with Nature... into sustained metaphors of universal symbolic importance: water, trees and earth".⁴⁵ This last phase is the most successful for it uses the other two as its background and basis to show how nature is made the ideal, the basis of femininity and how the figure of woman is transformed and subordinated to this ideal.

Chapter V: Conclusion

From an examination of the different forms of woman and the "role which each form plays in Paz's poetic expression", it can be seen that much of Paz's philosophy of life and poetry centres on woman. She and her relationship with man through love represent the means by

which man and all humans can communicate with all life. Beginning with the universal but real woman, the poet develops her into several general types. She is always seen in relation to nature, and she is always portrayed in brief, objective images. The beloved is the tool through which the poet seeks to reach the ideal state, the “metaphysical union” of man with all life. When her relationship with man is successful, the world is transformed for the poet into a new reality of natural beauty, and she in turn is transformed by this.

In the last stage, the three symbols in nature represent “the sublimation of woman as seen through the eyes of the poet, in harmony and union with all life. She is a woman fused with Nature... into sustained metaphors of universal symbolic importance: water, trees and earth”. The most successful is this last stage, which uses the other two as its background and basis. “It is here, where the fusion of woman with all Nature is attained, that the universality of life is best expressed”.

This “universality of life” refers to the basic oneness of all life which Paz seeks through woman who becomes for him, through her feminine and creative qualities, an extension of Nature.

After this summing up, this chapter also examines the symbolic significance of woman in Paz’s poetic universe with the help of Paz’s prose writings. These include a discussion of the two mythical mothers of Mexico – the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche⁴⁶ – from whose

stories Paz derives the images of the various manifestations of woman including the evil woman in La Malinche.

The chapter also discusses how Paz personifies countries as woman, for instance, this is the case with his poem entitled, “*Noche En Claro*” (Clear Night), taken from the volume of poems, Salamandra (Salamander). In this poem Paz describes the city as:

The city unfolds
 its face is the face of my love
 its legs are the legs of a woman

 City or Woman Presence⁴⁷

(From Surrealist Love Poems translated by Mary Ann Caws)

Or in the following poem:

(It rained,
 the earth dressed and became naked,
 snakes left their holes,
 the moon was made of water,
 the sun was water
 the sky took out its braids were unraveled rivers,
 death and life were jumbled,
 dough of mud and sun,
 season of lust and plague,
 mutilated genital stars

rotting,
 reviving in your womb,
 mother India,
 girl India,
 drenched in semen, sap, poisons, juices.

What waits for us on the other bank?
 Passion is passage:
 the other bank is here,
 light in the bankless air,
 Prajnaparamita,
 Our Lady of the Other Bank,
 you yourself,
 the girl of the tale)⁴⁸

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

This poem illustrates Paz's attachment to India, his fascination with her history, religion and philosophy and as Kushigan says:

The blending of the girl the poet meets into Mother India in the first instance, then Prajnaparamita, or Perfect Knowledge, the other shore, and then into "Nuestra Señora de la Otra Orilla" (Our Lady of the Other Bank) reinforces the blending of the East and West in Octavio Paz.⁴⁹

This chapter also examines Paz's poetry to show how the major influences in his poetic credo have also contributed to the complex symbolism of woman. This examination includes a discussion of philosophical and literary trends like surrealism, existentialism and orientalism—including, as stated in the "Introduction", Buddhist and Hindu tantric philosophies and the Taoist concept of the Yin-Yang.

Tantric influences can be found in many of Paz's poems for he sees tantra's beliefs as those closely related to his own. "Tantricism which abandons generally acknowledged morality, and proposes instead a total experience which is carnal and spiritual at the same time"⁵⁰ is what Paz believes in. This merging of the carnal or erotic and the spiritual which is integral to tantric belief finds expression in Paz's poem, "*Viento entero*" (Winds from All Compass Points) taken from the volume of poems entitled *Hacia el Comienzo* (Toward the Beginning):

At the top of the world

Shiva and Parvati caress

Each caress lasts a century

For the god and for the man⁵¹

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

Here Paz compares the erotic love of the gods to that he himself experiences with his beloved, and heightens this fusion of opposites by

uniting two contradictions – eroticism and spirituality, the gods and mortal man and in that instance of metaphysical union Paz becomes one with the cosmos.

This awareness of the unity and basic oneness of all things is the very essence of Eastern philosophies. Another branch of these philosophies that greatly influences Paz's poetry is Taoism of Ancient China. "The philosophy of Taoism understands Tao as the One Thing which exists and connects the Many things. Tao, Nature, Reality are One."⁵²

This belief in the existence of the Tao is evidently one that Paz employs in his poetry especially as he sees it as an aid in his quest for the mythic lost unity where man becomes one with nature, and thus with all life.

Yet another concept that significantly influences Paz is the Taoist concept of the Yin-Yang, which is expressed in the ancient Chinese book of wisdom and divination, I Ching.⁵³ According to this concept, the cosmos is conceived as an order composed of a dual rhythm – separation and union. Paz tries to make use of this theory in his poetry as mentioned in Chapter III where he talks about the act of eroticism as a "return to the beginning, there is no you nor I, tomorrow, yesterday nor names; truth of two in only one body and soul."⁵⁴ This balance of opposites in the fusion between man and Woman, negates time and

helps him achieve liberation from ordinary human existence or in other words, “the mythic lost unity”.

At the heart of “the mythic lost unity”, lies Paz’s yearning to escape from the labyrinth of solitude which he believes man is trapped in. The unity he seeks is not just to reconnect man with himself but with nature and finally with his complementary half – Woman who is man’s “other”. This is in accordance with what Lloyd King says about surrealism. He states, “the continuing significance of Surrealism is its proclaimed intention to transform man and society by recovering the realm of the sacred through imagination and love”.⁵⁵ It is because of the influence of surrealism that Paz is able to declare in “*Piedra de sol*” (Sunstone), “The world is born when two kiss”.⁵⁶ For Paz, surrealism is, according to Wilson:

an attitude of mind based on the possibility of using poetry to transcend life’s inherent contradictions; to make man whole again, communing with his fellows, participating and reintegrated in experiences that defy time, a poetics of the timeless moment, the instante poético...he did hold that erotic love was regenerative; that woman was the answer to the riddle or mediatrix, and poetry was the key to life’s problems.⁵⁷

So, though Paz’s poems, like those of his contemporaries reflect the anxieties of a world where physical and spiritual isolation have distanced man from himself and those around him, he sees poetry as

“the key to life’s problems”. This anxiety or anguish that finds its way into his poetry is greatly influenced by Paz’s existentialist beliefs.

Existentialism which is the philosophy of human existence, therefore, studies how man is a time-bound creature whose very birth propels him towards death and it is this realization that makes man aware of his own limitations for he exists only for a limited time. Paz too echoes this uneasy awareness of the limitations of time on man when he says:

We have been expelled from the centre of the world and are condemned to search for it through jungles and deserts or in the underground mazes of the labyrinth. Also there was a time when time was not in succession and transition, but rather the perpetual source of a fixed present in which all times, past and future, were contained. When man was exiled from that eternity in which all times were one, he entered chronometric time and became a prisoner of the clock and the calendar... When one says, “at this moment,” the moment has already passed. These spatial measurements of time separate man from reality – which is a continuous present – and turn all the presences in which reality manifests itself, ... into phantasms.⁵⁸

This comment not only helps us understand Paz’s preoccupation with time but it also develops the idea of the “mythic lost unity” and its importance in Paz’s poetic universe, for as stated earlier, the concept of

the “mythic lost unity” is one where, “there is no ... tomorrow, yesterday nor names”.⁵⁹ Thus in this ideal state, time is not fragmented and man is no longer “a prisoner of the clock and the calendar”.

This chapter, therefore discusses existentialism with the help of James V. Baker’s article on the existentialist categories,⁶⁰ to show just how central a role woman plays in Paz’s quest for transcendence of these space-time limitations through art, love and religion. According to Edward Hirsh:

His poems are driven by a sometimes anguished, sometimes joyous eroticism. Most of his poems seem shadowed by the obscure absence or presence of the beloved. When the beloved is absent from the poem, Paz feels acutely cut off from nature and from himself, delivered back to his own estranging desires and to the linear flow of time. But when the beloved visits the poem, he feels the overflowing circularity of time, the dance of being, the affirmation of an eternal moment. Poetry becomes a means of attainment, the reconciliation of opposites, a way of participating in an abundant universe. It becomes a form of creative love that annuls the temporal world.⁶¹

It is this presence of woman that makes Paz’s poetic universe one in which:

all is transformed, all is sacred,
every room is the center of the world,
it's still the first night, and the first day,

the world is born when two people kiss.⁶²

In concluding this chapter it must be noted again that to Paz “woman is first of all a word, an idea, a memory and a symbol, not some realistic being. She is first of all the creative, fecund principle in poetry.”⁶³ this is the reason why Paz’s treatment of woman in his poetry has not attracted the attention of feminist criticism.

ENDNOTES

¹ Rambo, Ann Marie Remley. “The Presence of Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz”, Hispania. Vol. 51, No. 2 (1968):259-264. Rambo is a critic who has written extensively on the theme of woman’s presence in Paz’s poetry. This dissertation will therefore make several references to her writing.

² From Eliot Weinberger’s as quoted by Tore Frangsmyr in Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures. Tore Frangsmyr, ed. Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures (Stockholm: Nobel Foundation 1991). Weinberger is one the most prominent translators of Paz.

³ All biographical information is from the following:

- (a) Octavio Paz, The Collected Poems 1957 – 1987 (New Delhi:Harper Collins, 1992) 13.
- (b) Tore Frangsmyr, ed. Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures (Stockholm: Nobel Foundation 1991).

⁴ For more on the influences of surrealism, existentialism and orientalism on Paz's poetry see:

- (a) Lloyd King, "Surrealism and the Sacred in the Aesthetic Credo of Octavio Paz", Hispanic Review Vol. 37, No. 3 (1969): 383-393.
- (b) John Zubizarreta, "Dario, Stevens, and Paz: The Modernist Connection", South Atlantic Review Vol. 56, No. 1 (1991): 47-60.
- (c) Baker, James V. "An Existential Examination of King Lear". College English Vol. 23, No. 7. (1962): 546-550.
- (d) Julia A Kushigian, "Rios en la noche fluyen los jardines : Orientalism in the Work of Octavio Paz", Hispania Vol.70, No.4 (1987): 776-786.

⁵ See 2 above.

⁶ Octavio Paz, The Collected Poems 1957 –1987 (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1992)323.

⁷ See 1 above. 259.

⁸ See 2 above.

⁹ See 1 above.259.

¹⁰ Octavio Paz, The Bow and the Lyre. Trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973) 28.

¹¹ Ibid.28.

¹² Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude. Trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961) 202.

¹³ Ibid.199-200.

¹⁴ Jason Wilson. Octavio Paz: A Study of His Poetics (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 99.

¹⁵ See 1 above. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

¹⁶ Octavio Paz, The Collected Poems 1957 –1987 (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1992)103.

¹⁷ See 1 above. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated

- ¹⁷ See 1 above All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise
- ¹⁸ Octavio Paz, Selected Poems Ed Eliot Weinberger Trans various (New York New Directions, 1984) 5
- ¹⁹ See 1 above 260
- ²⁰ Ibid 260
- ²¹ See 4(d) above 776
- ²² See 16 above 121
- ²³ See 1 above 260
- ²⁴ Octavio Paz, Libertad bajo palabra (México Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960)15 Translated by Sister Marie Therese Sister Marie Therese is a Catholic nun and academician from St Joseph's Higher Secondary School, Jaaw Having spent more than a decade in Latin America, Sister Mary Therese is fluent in Spanish
- ²⁵ See 1 above 260
- ²⁶ Octavio Paz, Sunstone Ed & trans Eliot Weinberger (New York New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1991)15
- ²⁷ See 1 above All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise
- ²⁸ See 16 above 285
- ²⁹ See 1 above All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise
- ³⁰ See 14 above 137
- ³¹ ibid 99
- ³² Octavio Paz, A Tree Within Ed & trans Eliot Weinberger (New York New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1988) 45
- ³³ ibid 605

³⁴ See 1 above. 261.

³⁵ See 4 (d) above. 780.

³⁶ See 16 above. 121.

³⁷ See 4 (d) above. 778-779.

³⁸ See 1 above. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

³⁹ See 16 above.5.

⁴⁰ See 1 above and 4 (d) above. While Rambo suggests “la orilla” to be the shore of life at which the poet stands. Kushigan on the other hand, defines it as “the Buddhist concept of the symbolic leap to the other shore” which is the “graphic and metaphorical representation of the touching of the two sides”. Kushigan further elaborates that “the water of the river which flows rhythmically between the two shores washes up on both shores, as its current flows and perpetually merges with that of the other shore”. What Kushigan is referring to here is Paz’s use of the figure of woman as a fusion of opposites, “represented by a river which stretches indefinitely, its body being in constant communication with both shores”.

⁴¹ See 32 above.62.

⁴² See 1 above.262.

⁴³ See 32 above.79.

⁴⁴ “Tree of Life.” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 1 March 2006, 25 Jan 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_life>

⁴⁵ See 1 above. All quotations from here on will be from this source.

⁴⁶ Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude (New York: Grove Press, 1961). In The Labyrinth of Solitude, Paz speaks at length on the myth of La Malinche/ La Chingada and The Virgin of Guadalupe. La Malinche was a Mexican slave girl who served as a translator to Hernon Cortes, the leader of the conquistadors in Mexico during the conquest of the native Indians by the Spanish. Hence, she is seen as responsible for the downfall of the entire Aztec Empire and is condemned as a traitor.

She was also infamous for supposedly being the first Indian woman to succumb to the sexual advances of the Spanish conquistadors. She bore a child to Cortés and is therefore seen as both the mother of contemporary Mexican identity and the bastard *mestizo* race. Thus, she is often referred to as the Mexican Eve. The Virgin of Guadalupe however, represents all those values associated with the good Mexican mother. A Virgin with indigenous features, she supposedly first appeared to an Indian man, Juan Diego, in 1531 at Teypeyac, a hill outside Mexico City which was once the shrine of Tonantzin, Aztec goddess of fertility. Being an

indigenous Virgin with whom the conquered Indians could identify, she played a pivotal role in the spiritual conversion of the native Indians to Catholicism.

⁴⁷ Mary Ann Caws, Surrealist Love Poems (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) 94.

⁴⁸ See 16 above. 291.

⁴⁹ See 4 (d) above. 779.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* 782.

⁵¹ See 16 above. 259.

⁵² Geoff Haselhurst and Karene Howie, “Ancient Eastern Philosophy On the Ancient Wisdom of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism & Confucianism”, Jul-Aug 2007, Mar-April2008 <<http://www.spaceandmotion.com/buddhism-hinduism-taoism-confucianism.htm>>

⁵³ C. F. Baynes and R. Wilhelm, Trans. *The I Ching or Book of Changes*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967).

⁵⁴ See 16 above. 19.

⁵⁵ See 4 (a) above. 383.

⁵⁶ See 16 above. 21.

⁵⁷ See 14 above. 22.

⁵⁸ See 12 above. 209.

⁵⁹ See 16 above. 19.

⁶⁰ See 4 (c) above. 546.

⁶¹ Edward Hirsch, “Octavio Paz: In Defense of Poetry”, *New York Times*, Oct –Dec 2007, April 2008. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/07/bookend/bookend.html>>

⁶² See 16 above. 21.

⁶³ Jason Wilson, *Octavio Paz: A Study of His Poetics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).115.

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Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz

Octavio Paz, the internationally celebrated Mexican poet and essayist, was born on 31 March 1914 in Mexico City.¹ Influenced by his literary family (both his grandfather and father were well-known journalists and writers), Paz began writing at a very young age. It was in 1931, at the age of seventeen that he began publishing poetry in *Barandal* (Balustrade), a magazine he founded with a group of young poets. Two years later, he published his first book, Luna Silvestre (Savage Moon) and founded another magazine, *Cuadernos del Valle de Mexico* (Notebooks of the Valley of Mexico).

A prolific writer, Paz's literary output in poetry and prose, both creative and critical has been enormous. Among Paz's most well-known poetry collections translated into English are Salamandra (Salamander, 1962), Blanco (White,1967), Piedra de Sol (The Sun Stone, 1969), Ladera Este (East Slope, 1969), Pasado En Claro (A Draft of Shadows and Other Poems, 1979), Poemas 1935-1975 (Poems 1935-1975, 1981), El Mono Gramático (The Grammarian Monkey, 1981) and Mariposa de Obsidiana (Obsidian Butterfly, 1983). Paz maintained an active presence in international literary circles and won numerous literary prizes, including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990, until his death of cancer on 19 April 1998.

Paz's work as a Mexican diplomat had been a major factor in shaping his literary genius. As a diplomat he travelled extensively, from Spain to the United States, Paris, France, Japan, and India. These travels significantly moulded his poetic career and enabled him to learn more about different world literatures, arts and philosophies. Chief among these were surrealism, existentialism, orientalism, including Buddhist and Hindu tantric and Taoist philosophies.² Each of these became a major influence and featured prominently in his poetry making each poem, as Eliot Weinberger had put it, "a secret religion of the modern age",³ an expression of sociology, history and philosophy, simultaneously presenting such diverse themes as the eternal present, the "living language of myth",⁴ the quest for modernity and eroticism, to state just a few.

Among these is the recurring theme of woman in Paz's poetry. This dissertation therefore explores this particular theme by studying the different manifestations, roles, functions and symbolic significance of woman in Paz's poetic universe.

In reading the poetry of Octavio Paz, one is struck by the central place of woman, the sense and presence of her: "Woman stretched out made in the image of the world/The world a bundle of your images."⁵ In fact, the image of woman, as in the quoted lines, appears in all its universality ("Woman... in

the image of the world”) and its multiplicity of forms and meanings (“The world a bundle of your images”) in a majority of Paz’s poems regardless of whether or not these poems deal with the theme of love. As Ann Marie Rembley Rambo said, “She seems to be the focal point of both his philosophy of life and his poetry”.⁶

An examination of Paz’s poetry reveals the truth of this statement for almost all of Paz’s poetry reflect in one way or another this symbolic significance of woman. For instance in one of his prose poems called “Toward the Poem”, Paz says:

To cut the umbilical cord, kill the Mother; the crime that the modern poet has committed for all, in the name of all. The young poet must discover woman⁷.

(From Selected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger. Spanish original not available.)

These lines are a plea for the poet to turn to woman, who Paz feels, has too often been taken for granted or else ignored. Yet the underlying message here is also one in which he sees woman as a redeemer of modern man’s dilemmas. To truly understand this significant role woman plays, a study of Paz’s view on modernity is crucial.

In his Nobel Lecture Paz spoke of science and technology and said, “the instruments of progress , have shown with alarming clarity that they can easily become destructive forces”,⁸ as seen through use of the atomic bomb, the two world wars, all of which have culminated in the nuclear arms race. This race for power and material wealth has resulted in man living a plentiful yet empty existence, most aptly described by Paz as “mankind living in a spiritual wilderness.” (LPN, p.7)

Commenting on his personal search for modernity, Paz states,

In this pilgrimage in search of modernity I lost my way at many points only to find myself again. I returned to the source and discovered that modernity is not outside but within us... One day I discovered I was going back to the starting point instead of advancing: the search for modernity was a descent to the origins. Modernity led me to the source of my beginning, to my antiquity. (LPN, p.5)

Thus while for Paz, a search for modernity was but a search for the beginning, he sees woman or the symbolic significance of woman as a means to the recovery of spirituality for she is a part of that beginning, she is the source of all human life.

The poem therefore stresses the need for modern man to turn to woman because to Paz, the further man moves away from woman the deeper he sinks in the spiritual quagmire of the modern age. While displaying the symbiotic

relationship between man and woman which is similar to the relationship of the child with its mother, linked by the umbilical cord, the poem also speaks about the absolute essential of one for the other.

In Paz's view, it is woman who holds the key to love, and as with all poets he believed that love was undoubtedly the very essence of poetry. Thus, it is only when a poet or in this case, modern man finds love through a woman that he can achieve physical and spiritual liberty that makes him one with nature.

In another poem entitled "*Noche En Claro*" (Clear night) Paz compares woman to a city:

*La ciudad se despliega
 su rostro es el rostro de mi amor
 sus piernas son piernas de mujer
 Torres plazas columnas puentes calles
 río cinturón de paisajes ahogados
 Ciudad o Mujer Presencia*

(The city unfolds
 its face is the face of my love
 its legs are the legs of a woman
 Towers plazas columns bridges streets
 river belt of drowned landscapes

City or Woman Presence) ⁹

(From Surrealist Love Poems, translated by Mary Ann Caws)

This description of city as a woman illustrates how Paz's world is one which is moulded by the influence of woman. This personification of the city as a woman is heightened by the fact that just as all life evolves from the feminine womb, the city too is the centre of all life. The two share similar feminine qualities like fertility, creativity, and fecundity. Thus, the beauty of the city is one Paz cannot compare with anything else but woman.

In another poem, Paz uses this same technique in comparing woman to nature. Describing his beloved, Paz surrealistically describes the beauty of the woman as one akin to the beauty of nature at its best when he says:

*vestida del color de mis deseos
como mi pensamiento vas desnuda,
voy por tus ojos como por el agua,
los tigres beben sueño en esos ojos,
el colibrí se quema en esas llamas,*

(dressed in the color of my desires,
you go your way naked as my thoughts,
I travel your eyes, like the sea,
tigers drink their dreams in those eyes,

the hummingbird burns in those flames,) ¹⁰

(From Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger)

While this poem compares woman with nature yet its beauty lies in the fact that this poem, paints a vivid picture of how Paz sees woman as the very essence of humanity and life itself. His description of woman as the colour of his desires and the nakedness of his thoughts make her an integral part of life which man cannot do without.

This is similarly true in a short poem entitled “*Pasaje*” (Passage) taken from the volume of poems *Hacia el Comienzo* (Toward the Beginning) where Paz describes a woman as:

Más que aire

más que agua

más que labios

ligera ligera

Tu cuerpo es la huella de tu cuerpo

(More than air

more than water

more than lips

lighter lighter

Your body is the trace of your body)¹¹

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

While this poem, like the former describes woman as a fundamental part of life, yet in this poem she is said to be “More than air”, “more than water” and “more than lips”. This description stresses how woman for Paz is not only vital but more important than the basic necessities of life for, while air, water and love are important for the physical aspects of life, woman to Paz, is more important than all of these because she signifies spirituality without which mankind as stated earlier would be spiritually barren. Thus, this poem marks woman as the quintessential element in man’s spiritual well being.

In another poem entitled “Olmec Goddess”, Paz while referring to the goddess links her with the image of the mother and in doing so, he emphasizes the maternal instinct in woman, as when he says:

(The four cardinal points
are gathered in your navel.

In your womb the day is pounding, fully armed.)¹²

(From Selected Poems translated by Mark Strand. Spanish original not available.)

In this poem, the Goddess, symbolic of woman is regarded as the centre of the cosmos. The reference to the navel as the point in which all the four

points of the compass meet is also analogous to the umbilical cord that binds all men to the mother. Further, the essence of maternity is heightened by the mention of the womb in which the day is the foetus. So for Paz, each day is created by woman as she herself is the centre of all creation much like nature.

Thus as seen from these examples, woman is a symbol of creativity who inspires the poet, of spirituality without whom man's life would be a desolate wasteland or a "spiritual wilderness",¹³ and finally of fertility, the mysterious source of life whose influence on man can never be underestimated. This symbolic significance of woman is the moving force of Paz's poetry. Woman thus appears in Paz's poems in different forms, displaying different feminine qualities.

Commenting on the poetic universality of female characters in poetry, S.H. Butcher writes:

With all outward marks of difference, whether of fashion or of manner, and in spite of a caprice that has become proverbial, female character can be reduced to certain elemental types of womanhood. These essential types are few. Maiden, wife, mother ... here are the great determining relations of life. They form the groundwork of character. Accident may modify character, circumstances may stamp it with a particular expression, and bring into relief this or that dominant feature.

But there remains an ideal mould in which the type is cast. Once the deeper springs of feeling are moved, circumstances are thrust aside, and woman's action may almost with certainty be predicted.¹⁴

Paz's treatment of woman in his poetry echoes this thought put forth by Butcher. While the figure of the "maiden, wife and mother" can be seen in Paz's figure of the girl, the beloved and the mother, he also includes two other forms of woman in his poetry, that of the frustrated woman and the evil woman. So while woman appears in many forms in his poetry, "there remains an ideal mould in which the type is cast" and this ideal mould is, for Paz, of woman as the link to connect man with "the mythic lost unity."¹⁵

According to Eliot Weinberger, Paz's philosophy and poetry centre on his firm belief that poetry constitutes, "the secret religion of the modern age" which is "the mythic lost unity".(LPN, p.1)As he put it:

For Paz the revolution of the word is the revolution of the world, and that both cannot exist without the revolution of the body: life as art, a return to the mythic lost unity of thought and body, man and Nature, I and other. (LPN, p.1)

It is in the search for this "mythic lost unity of thought and body, man and Nature, I and the other" that Paz had turned to the exploration of the role

of woman in human relationships and through her symbolic representation, the relationships of humans with nature and the universe.

Since the central thrust of Paz's philosophy of poetry hinges on the concept of "the mythic lost unity" and, since the role of woman in human relationships is paramount to the concept, this chapter therefore attempts to explore the symbolic significance of woman in his poetry by first exploring his concept of poetry in general, and his treatment, in particular, of "poetry and love as instruments in [the] search for a metaphysical union".¹⁶

Central to Paz's concept of poetry is his concept of time and his belief in 'the eternal present'.¹⁷ A reading of The Labyrinth of Solitude reveals that Paz like the Aztecs believes that time on its own is not made up of a past or future but is one "continuous present" and it is only "when man was exiled from that eternity in which all times were one [that] he entered chronometric time and became a prisoner of the clock and the calendar".¹⁸ This concept of time is closely linked with Paz's concept of myth. For myth is what Paz refers to as the "time when time was not succession and transition, but rather the perpetual source of a fixed present in which all times, past and future, were contained." (TLS, p.209)

So while modern interpretations of time "separate man from reality... Mythological time" to Paz, "is impregnated with all the particulars of our

lives: it is as long as eternity or as short as a breath, ominous or propitious, fecund or sterile.” (TLS, p.209) Therefore, though contemporary man has rationalized the myths yet he has not been able to destroy them.

Furthermore, Paz feels that in myths like in poetry time exists independent of dates and hours, helping man to emerge from his solitude and become one with creation. This affirms Paz’s belief that:

every poem we read is a re-creation, that is, ceremonial ritual, a fiesta...[and] in the reciting of poetry, ordinary time ceases to operate and is replaced by original time. (TLS, p.210)

Thus for Paz, poetry like myth is the only way to return to that pristine state of paradise where time stands still and becomes an eternal present. This utopian state of Edenic innocence that Paz refers to in his poetry is but an attempt to recover the mythic lost unity and it stands in sharp contrast to the grim realities of life. This again highlights the fact that in Paz’s poetry there always seems to be a conflict between his poetic vision and reality. Wilson writes:

All Paz’s writings envisage some *act* of communion beyond words, a faith that poetry *changes* the poet and the reader, ushering in the poetic society based on love, liberty and desire, the waking dream lived in broad daylight. The tension of Paz’s

writing stems from this utopian intention, for actual history is a 'nightmare', is reductive and repressive.¹⁹

This 'nightmare' stems from modern man's "Solitude – the feeling and knowledge that one is alone, alienated from the world and oneself."²⁰ Paz himself speaks of this conflict between the vision (spiritual communion with all life) and reality (solitude of man) in The Labyrinth of Solitude by stating that:

Communion and solitude are opposite and complementary...Death and birth are solitary experiences. We are born alone and we die alone. When we are expelled from the maternal womb, we begin the painful struggle that finally ends in death...Is birth death, and is death birth? We do not know. But although we do not know, our whole being strives to escape the opposites that torment us...but at the same time everything impels us to return, to descend to the creative womb from which we were cast out. What we ask of love (which, being desire, is a hunger for communion, a will to fall and to die as well as to be reborn) is that it gives us a bit of true life, of true death. We do not ask it for happiness or repose, but simply for an instant of that full life in which opposites vanish, in which life, death, time and eternity are united. In some obscure way we realize that life and death are but two phases – antagonistic but complementary – of a single reality. Creation and destruction become one in the

act of love, and during a fraction of a second man has a glimpse
of a more perfect state of being.²¹

Thus for Paz it is love, erotic love in particular, that is able to reunite
man with all life. In Libertad bajo palabra, Paz writes:

se derrumban
por un instante inmenso y vislumbramos
muestra unidad perdida, el desamparo
que es ser hombres, la gloria que es ser hombres
y compartir el pan, el sol, la muerte,
el olvidado asombro de estar vivos;

(they collapse
for an immense instant and we glimpse
our lost unity, the helplessness
that is being men, the glory that is being men
and sharing bread, sun and death,
the forgotten amazement of being alive.)²²

(From Libertad bajo palabra translated by Sister Marie
Therese)

The experience of this momentary amazement at being alive brought about by erotic love heightens Paz's vision of spiritual liberty where the lovers are reunited with their "lost unity".

A central symbol of this 'unity' in Paz's poetics is 'light', a traditional symbol of the spirit. To Wilson, "Light is an image of Eden and infinity; it inaugurates '*un reinado dichoso*' (a happy kingdom); it is formless perfection."²³ Further, he states:

The dawn of light is the dawn of the world in poetry, and the result is language perceived sensuously. Real man, buried under a civilized mask, is a fragment of this cosmic light. Through woman this light can be recovered in the *instante* of erotic love which leaves the poet dazzled. (OP: ASHP, p.78)

Therefore, in Paz's poetry, we find that erotic love is considered by Paz as a means of achieving transcendence from man's solitude, and it is in this way that woman becomes an integral part of Paz's vision. Since in Spanish the words 'woman', 'word' and 'poetry' are all feminine, "Paz subtly confuses their identity; they merge as incessant analogies of each other, each always overflowing into the next" and so in his poem "woman is first of all a word, an idea, a memory and a symbol, not some realistic being. She is first of all the creative, fecund principle in poetry." (OP: ASHP, p.115) And it is in this way that Paz links the act of love to that of poetry, for just as the

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poet makes love to words, love is “*el diálogo corporal y espiritual entre dos seres libres*” (the corporeal and spiritual dialogue between two free beings).

(OP. ASHP, p.115)

In The Bow and the Lyre Paz defines poetry as “the search for lost man”²⁴ and it is for this reason that Paz’s poetry is always seen as a search for the mythic lost unity, where modern man can be reconnected to the prelapsarian state through woman, who acts as a symbol of transcendence.

According to Wilson:

Paz’s claim is that man has severed himself from nature culturally, through excessive reliance on his intellect or his analytical reason, placing them above the voice of his feelings and experience...in 1945 Paz affirmed that the word in poetry – liberated from its numbed, asymbolic contexts – is capable of ‘reconciling’ man with the stars, the animals and his roots.²⁵

Again, to Paz, a poem is an attempt to transcend language even though the poetic creation he believes “begins with violence to language”.²⁶ Explaining the process, he concludes that it involves two basic acts. In the first, there is an “uprooting of words. The poet wrenches them from their habitual connections and occupations...the second act is the return of the word”.²⁷ It is in this way that poetry takes on an important role for Paz because the poet has a heightened ability to struggle with the word and

wrench from language new possibilities of expression and feeling by turning it into symbols of surrealistic realities.

This is also helpful in understanding his concept of love, for even as poetry is an attempt to transcend language into different planes of reality, love is an attempt to transcend the solitude of man into an ideal state. As Paz says in The Labyrinth of Solitude:

Love is one of the clearest examples of that double instinct which causes us to dig deeper into our own selves and, at the same time, to emerge from ourselves and to realize ourselves in another...In the life of every man there are periods that are both departures and reunions, separations and reconciliations. Each of these phases is an attempt to transcend our solitude, and is followed by an immersion in strange environments.²⁸

Further, Paz states that:

Love...is an antisocial act, though not deliberately so. Whenever it succeeds in realizing itself it...[becomes] a revelation of two solitary beings who create their own world, a world that rejects society's lies, it abolishes time and work, and declares itself to be self-sufficient.²⁹

Again for Paz, love, an act synonymous with poetry lures man back to what is elementary, the forgotten origin, where body and spirit are one. This is why Jason Wilson says that in Paz, "Love and poetry are the two faces of

the same reality both are attempts to recover Edenic man”,³⁰ for as Rambo states:

For Paz, life and poetry are so closely related that his poetry becomes an active part of his search for an explanation of existence...Paz equates poetry and love as instruments in this search for a metaphysical union.³¹

In this way woman, becomes for Paz, an embodiment of love, or as Wilson says “woman is man’s salvation from a spiritual and sensual aridity; she is the refreshing ‘other’ both in real life and in the poem”.³² Thus for man to be able to commune with nature and the world at large, he needs a woman for “she is the wound through which man must penetrate to recover paradise”.³³ In other words, she is the link for man to achieve the mythic lost unity, which as explained earlier, is seen as man’s longing to return to a utopian state of paradise, to recapture the lost innocence of a primordial past when he was one with nature, and God.

This idea of the mythic lost unity or the limitedness of contemporary man is expressed in two ways by different existentialist schools of thought. Christian existentialists explain it in terms of the Original Sin and man’s search for ways to reconnect the severed ties with God. The “non-Christian atheistic existentialists”³⁴ however use the concept of “estrangement.” This concept of the estrangement of man from nature has been a major theme in

literature since Rousseau and the Romantic Movement. This “estrangement” is even declared as one of the eight distinct existential concepts by Emmanuel Mounier. In Existential Philosophies, Mounier writes:

The very essence of religious history is to reconcile man to himself and with Nature. Sinful-Man is, however, the victim of an accidental estrangement, the estrangement which separates him from God because of Sin (and the results of Sin) committed by the whole of creation including himself. (EP, p.34)

In Paz’s poetry, we find that the concept of the mythic lost unity is one that is greatly influenced by this school of existentialism. For although Paz believes that man has lost his roots at the dawn of time yet he also believes that “All paradise is not lost”³⁵ and it is only through woman that primigenial innocence can be regained and restored.

Once this connection between the woman and the mythic lost unity is established, it becomes a task for the poet to display this link through poetry and for Paz, surrealism and Eastern philosophies are the keystones to validate and endorse this claim. While a more detailed discussion of these philosophies will be made in the concluding chapter, this chapter briefly illustrates how they form the keystones for Paz in his task to link woman and the mythic lost unity.

On examining the influence of surrealism on Paz's poetics, it is seen that Paz is not attracted to the surrealist techniques but rather to their view of the important role played by imagination. It is also surrealism that "enabled him to revalue and affirm the role of poetry in the twentieth century in terms of a liberating, quasi-religious vocation."³⁶ In surrealism, Paz finds a way to transform reality through the imagination so that the conflict between his poetic vision and reality can be neutralised. As Lloyd King says:

The peculiar alternation of hope and despair in his poetry, it may be remarked here, is closely related to this tension between an ideal yearning and the wretchedness and intransigence of reality. And in order to explain his belief in the efficacy of the imagination, Paz joins the Surrealists in attributing to poetry a magic potential.³⁷

In this way, surrealism gives Paz a chance to transform reality in such a way that his quest for spiritual liberty in the mythic lost unity can be achieved through love and poetry. According to Wilson:

The Surrealist attitude is grounded in a series of 'rotating signs' or analogies, a chain of metaphors where each stands for the other...in that to speak of desire is to speak of love, to speak of erotic love is to speak of woman, poetry, liberty, the world and so on. This chain of analogies can be reduced to three notions

that Paz called the incandescent triangle' or burning synonyms':
 love , poetry, liberty. It is the nucleus of Paz's poetics.³⁸

However, while the surrealists believe that the imagination is simply a means of discovering the Absolute, "for Paz the poem *is* the Absolute, the primary manifestation of the sacred."³⁹ Thus for Paz, poetry which is equated by Wilson with woman and spiritual liberty, is the way to reconnect modern man with the mythic lost unity or the realm of the sacred.

It is also this same quest that draws Paz to the East. The stress that Taoism and Buddhist Tantricism lay on the concrete, natural man while rejecting discursive thought and logic link them with the surrealist attitude and deeply influences Paz. It creates for him a new reality, one which is

a system of relationships, whether the dynamic, alternating rhythm of the yin and yang or what Paz, through Buddhism has called a network of relationships, an impersonal reality where God is just another part of the system that is the divine system.⁴⁰

However, it is Tantra's central act *maithuna* or ritualised copulation which best reflects Paz poetics. According to Wilson:

In this act, the conventional, linguistic polarities which are employed to 'understand' the world melt away, for 'reality' is one, an experiential fusion of the active- passive, male-female principles. This fusion is in terms of acts of 'real' copulation

where the woman's body is an analogue of the cosmos.(OP:ASHP, p.133)

And in this way

Paz draws a parallel between Tantra's maithuna and surrealism's revaluation of love between man and woman, where woman's body becomes the altar. (OP:ASHP, p.131)

Thus Paz's poetics when viewed from his concept of poetry and love, and the external poetic influences such as surrealism and the Eastern philosophies, is one which can be defined as a quest or a search for the mythic lost unity, largely through the exploration of the role of woman in human relationships and through her symbolic representation, the relationships of humans with nature and the universe.

It is in this 'search' that woman emerges in three different forms corresponding to three different stages in Paz's "development of the presence of woman".⁴¹ In the first stage, woman is seen as "the brief universal image of the girl, the mother, the frustrated woman, or the evil woman." (TPWPOP, p.259) She then appears, in the next stage, as "the beloved in a love relationship which expresses both the positive and negative sides of love", and finally she appears in "a transformed natural state in which there is a fusion of her feminine qualities with those of natural objects". (TPWPOP, p.260) The "role" (TPWPOP, p.260) that each of these forms plays in Paz's poetic

expression which will be determined in the subsequent chapters will finally lead to an evaluation of woman as “an instrument and a symbol of transcendence” (TPWPOP, p.259) in Paz’s poetic universe.

ENDNOTES

¹ All biographical information is from the following:

(a) Octavio Paz, The Collected Poems 1957 – 1987 (New Delhi:Harper Collins, 1992) 13.

(b) Tore Frangsmyr, ed. Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures (Stockholm: Nobel Foundation 1991).

² For more on the influences of surrealism, existentialism and orientalism on Paz’s poetry see:

(a) Lloyd King, “Surrealism and the Sacred in the Aesthetic Credo of Octavio Paz”, Hispanic Review Vol. 37, No. 3 (1969): 383-393.

(b) John Zubizarreta, “Dario, Stevens, and Paz: The Modernist Connection”, South Atlantic Review Vol. 56, No. 1 (1991): 47-60.

(c) Baker, James V. “An Existential Examination of King Lear”. College English Vol. 23, No. 7. (1962): 546-550.

(d) Julia A Kushigian, “Rios en la noche fluyen los jardines : Orientalism in the Work of Octavio Paz”, Hispania Vol.70, No.4 (1987): 776-786.

³ From Eliot Weinberger’s as quoted by Tore Frangsmyr in Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures. Tore Frangsmyr, ed. Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures (Stockholm: Nobel Foundation 1991). Weinberger is one the most prominent translators of Paz.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Octavio Paz, The Collected Poems 1957 –1987 (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1992)323.

⁶ Ann Marie Remley Rambo, "The Presence of Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz", Hispania. Vol. 51, No. 2 (1968):259-264. Rambo is a critic who has written extensively on the theme of woman's presence in Paz's poetry. This dissertation *will therefore make several references to her writing*.

⁷ Octavio Paz, Selected Poems. Ed. Eliot Weinberger. Trans. various. (New York: New Directions, 1984) 20.

⁸ See 1 (b) All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

⁹ Mary Ann Caws, Surrealist Love Poems (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).94.

¹⁰ Octavio Paz, Sunstone. ed. & trans. Eliot Weinberger. (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1991)5.

¹¹ See 5 above.271.

¹² See 7 above.5.

¹³ See 1 (b).7.

¹⁴ S. H Butcher, trans. Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art.(New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1951) 400.

¹⁵ See 3 above.

¹⁶ See 6 above.259.

¹⁷ See 3 above.

¹⁸ Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude. Trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961).209. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

¹⁹ Jason Wilson, Octavio Paz: A Study of His Poetics.(London: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 5.

²⁰ See 18 above.195.

²¹ Ibid.196-197

²² Octavio Paz, Libertad bajo palabra.(Mexico:Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960) 100. Translated by Sister Marie Therese. Sister Marie Therese is a Catholic nun and academician from St. Joseph's Higher Secondary School, Jaiaw. Having spent more than a decade in Latin America, Sister Mary Therese is fluent in Spanish.

²³ See 19 above. 77. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

²⁴ Octavio Paz, The Bow and the Lyre.Trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973) 244.

²⁵ See 19 above. 81.

²⁶ See 24 above. 28.

²⁷ Ibid.28.

²⁸ See 18 above. 202.

²⁹ Ibid. 199-200.

³⁰ See19 above.99.

³¹ See 6 above.259.

³² See19 above.114.

³³ Ibid.113.

³⁴ Emmanuel Mounier, Existential Philosophies. Trans. Eric Blow.(London: Rockliff, 1951) 35. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

³⁵ See19 above.154.

³⁶ Ibid.3.

³⁷ See 2 (a) above. 387.

³⁸ See19 above.30.

³⁹ Ibid.45.

⁴⁰ See19 above.133.

⁴¹ See 6 above.259-260. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

Chapter II: The Basic Manifestations of Woman

Having discussed the significance of Paz's search for the mythic lost unity and the vital role played by woman in this search, the study will now examine how woman in her diverse forms or manifestations appears in Paz's poetry.

This chapter is therefore a discussion of the four basic manifestations of woman as "the brief universal image of the girl, the mother, the frustrated woman, or the evil woman".¹ These figures represent, for Paz, the image of the complete woman in all her facets.

The first manifestation of woman found in Paz's poetry is that of a young girl representative of the universal qualities of feminine youth. As the girl begins the sequence, she is the very essence of innocence, and being so makes her connection to nature the strongest. She is always seen in a positive light, an image of freshness as in "*Andando Por La Luz*" (Walking through the Light), taken from the volume of poems, Salamandra (Salamander):

Adelantas la pierna

izquierda el día

se detiene sonríe

*y se echa a andar ligero
bajo el sol detenido*

*Adelantas la pierna
derecha el sol
camina más ligero
a la largodel día
varado entre los árboles*

*Caminas altos senos
andan los árboles
te sugue el sol el día
sale a tu encuentro el cielo
inventa nubes subitas*

(You lift your left
foot forward the day
stops and laughs
and starts to step lightly
while the sun stands still

Breasts high you stroll

the trees walk the sun
 follows the day goes
 to meet you the sky
 invents sudden clouds)²

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In this poem the reader's attention is focussed on the aura that the girl possesses and the spellbinding effect she has on those around her. Nature, in this poem is seen to be in dependent on her, and the line "while the sun stands still" is suggestive of how nature pays obeisance to her. Just as she creates the day, she is also the source of joy. Every action that the girl makes is reflected in nature, "you lift your left foot...the day...starts to step lightly", "you stroll/ the trees walk, the sun follows" almost as if nature tries to emulate her every move. Thus in this poem, the girl is seen as a goddess, a creator and a life force and her innocence is stressed through the associations with everything that is purest in nature.

In "Piedra de Sol" (Sunstone), Paz describes the girl as:

una presencia como un canto súbito,
como el viento cantando en el incendio,
una mirada que sostiene en vilo

el mundo ya es visible por tu cuerpo,

es transparente port u transperencia,

(a sudden presence like a burst of song,
like the wind singing in a burning building
a glance that holds the world and all

.....

The world is visible through your body,
Transparent through your transparency.)³

(From Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger)

This transparency through which he can see the world is nothing more than the innocence of the young girl. It is through her that the poet is transformed and can see the world in a new light. The girl is also a source of harmony and melody for he associates her presence to that of a sudden outburst of melodious song. And her innocence makes the song she represents one akin to nature, and can therefore be readily compared to the wind. The “burning building” here, symbolic of man, is a concrete, artificial structure that stands in sharp contrast to the natural girl. The image of the “burning building” is also a reference to modern man’s predicament, for he burns even while the girl as “wind” sings in an air of innocence and is nonchalant about his predicament.

This is similarly true in “Carta de Creencia: Cantata” (Letter of Testimony: Cantata) but in this poem, it is the girl who undergoes transformation, and Paz shows how she, through love is able to transform and reinvent herself to become one with nature:

Amar: una variación,

... ..

Invención, transfiguración:

la muchacha convertida en fuente,

la cabellera en constelación,

(To love: a permutation,

... ..,

Invention, transfiguration:

the girl turns into a fountain,

her hair becomes a constellation)⁴

(From A Tree Within translated by Eliot Weinberger)

Here the poet’s infatuation with the girl transforms his world so that he no longer sees her simply as a woman but as an extension of nature. The “transfiguration” turns the girl “into a fountain,” and “her hair becomes a constellation.” In examples such as these, the girl exemplifies Paz’s philosophical endeavour to reconcile man and nature through the presence of woman, where she becomes the mediating principle by which this

reconciliation, (as yet not achieved) can be established in the future. In the words of Rambo:

The frequency of these optimistic images suggests the poet's almost subconscious vision, as it were, of woman as a part of Nature, a vision he cultivates to gain understanding, achieve tonality, and to infuse his poetry with the presence of woman.⁵

The girl can also be seen as “a symbol for an ideal”, (TPWPOP, p.260) which is Paz's search for the “metaphysical union”, but as yet she remains only as a “possibility, the freshness of a future opportunity, an unattained ideal”. (TPWPOP, p.260) The figure of the girl is therefore innocence personified and she carries with her the potential of turning herself into a life force for man yet because she is also seen only as a promise of the future she also carries with her the potential of being transformed into the evil woman and become a threat to him. Thus, in “Viento Entero” (“Wind from all Compass Points”) the girl is described by Paz as:

entre dos tamarindos una niña descalza

y su mirar sin tiempo

Un latido idéntico

muerte y nacimiento

(a barefoot girl
 between two tamarinds
 and her timeless gaze
 An identical throbbing
 Death and birth.)⁶

(From The Collected Poems, translated by Eliot Weinberger)

This description of the girl as being barefoot is not accidental but plays a significant role in determining her generic role. Firstly, it lays emphasis on her close affinity with nature, especially heightened by her position between the two trees, which according to Paz's poetic philosophy symbolize fecundity, "the girl and the tree are to be instruments for the fulfilment of the poet's physical, psychological and spiritual desires."⁷ Next, her gaze which is described as "timeless"⁹ makes it clear that the girl captures the true essence of 'the eternal present' or what Paz referred to as "the perpetual source of a fixed present in which all times, past and future, were contained."⁸ The linguistic implication of the lines "her timeless gaze/ an identical throbbing/ death and birth" indicate the possibilities of the girl turning into the much desired figure of the beloved or the mother thereby enriching man's life, or else she could transform either into the frustrated or evil woman both of whom cannot help man in his search for metaphysical union but lead to spiritual death instead.

Thus this figure holds in her power man's future for it is she who determines it. The potential of the girl to transform into the evil woman echoes Butcher's thoughts that, "Accident may modify character, circumstances may stamp it with a particular expression, and bring into relief this or that dominant feature."⁹ In "Piedra de Sol" (Sunstone), this transformation of the girl occurs suddenly and the contrasting images of the girl and the evil woman make this transformation more prominent, as when Paz says:

*te pareces al árbol y a la nube,
eres todas los pájaros y un astro,
te pareces al filo de la espada
y a la copa de sangre del verdugo,*

you're a tree and a cloud, all birds
and a single star, the edge of a sword
and the executioner's bowl of blood¹⁰

(From Sunstone, translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The severed ties with paradise that Paz feels can be reconnected only through the mediation of woman, finds expression once again in Paz's treatment of the mother, a figure who comes next in the sequence. Although

this figure rarely appears yet the essence of maternity is present in many of Paz's poems. Paz "envisions her as the universal and natural mother".¹¹

The maternal figure in Paz's "Olmec Goddess" epitomises this universal quality of woman in the form that the mother embodies:

The four cardinal points

are gathered in your navel.

In your womb the day is pounding, fully armed.¹²

(From Selected Poems translated by Mark Strand. Spanish original not available.)

In this poem, the Goddess, symbolic of woman is regarded as the centre of the cosmos. The reference to the navel as the point in which all the four points of the compass meet is also analogous to the umbilical cord that binds all men to the mother. Further, the essence of maternity is heightened by the mention of the womb in which the day is the foetus. So for Paz, each day is created by woman as she herself is the centre of all creation much like nature.

One of Paz's prose poems, "Obsidian Butterfly", a tribute to the Latin-American Goddess Itzpapalotl, tells the nostalgic tale of this deity who recalls her glorious past in the heyday prior to the advent of Christianity. Here, in this poem, woman once again takes the form of Mother Nature who dances until fruits and flowers and eagles emerge out of her, as when she says:

Yes, I mother of flint and star... Once, I would dance, my breasts high and turning, turning until I became still and then I would sprout leaves, flowers, fruit. The eagle throbbed in my belly...I am the primordial pot where man is cooked and becomes man. ¹³

(From Selected Poems, translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The reference to “the primordial pot” takes us back to the search for “the mythic lost unity” or lost paradise, where the woman acts as the bond that connects man with nature. According to Paz, “The feeling of solitude, which is a nostalgic longing for the body from which we were cast out, is a longing for a place. According to an ancient belief, held by virtually all peoples, that place is the centre of the world, the navel of the universe.” ¹⁴ Thus, the figure of the mother acts as a beacon of hope for man to regain spiritual bliss through her.

Later in “Piedra de Sol” (Sunstone), Paz once again examines this facet of the feminine that is one with nature when he says:

*Creces como una espiga entre mis manos,
lates como mil pájaros, tu risa
me ha cuerto de espumas, tu cabeza
es un astro pequeño entre mis manos,
el mundo reverdece si sonarías*

(you grow like wheat between my hands,

you throb like a squirrel between my hands,
 you fly like a thousand birds, and your laugh
 is like the spray of the sea, your head
 is a star between my hands, the world
 grows green again when you smile) ¹⁵

(From Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In this poem, Paz speaks of woman as a source of physical and spiritual regeneration and while the regeneration in this poem refers to that of the woman, yet this serves as an indication that through a relationship with her the poet too can achieve spiritual regeneration. And in this way, the woman reunites him with the mythic lost unity.

In the following lines from “Carta de Creencia: Cantata” (Letter of Testimony: Cantata), the figure of the mother is associated with the symbol of the tree, representing life and fertility:

Tu mirada es sembradora

Planto un arbol.

Yo hablo

porque tu meces los follajes.

(Your glance scatters seeds

It planted a tree.

I talk

because you shake its leaves.)¹⁶

(From A Tree Within translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In the lines above the essence of maternity is heightened when Paz refers to the fertility held in the woman's glance and the tree it creates. According to Rambo, here is Paz's "universal feminine figure capable of motherliness and [erotic] love".¹⁷ She is seen as encompassing all feminine qualities in one. Elsewhere in his poetry, Paz refers to her supernatural power which is related to the image of 'la orilla', "suggesting the shore of life at which the poet stands"¹⁸ or what Kushigan states as, the "Buddhist concept of the symbolic leap to the other shore"¹⁹

De una orilla a la otra

siempre se tiende un cuerpo,

un arcoiris.

Yo dormiré bajo sus arcos.

(From one bank to another,

there is always

a body stretched:

a rainbow.

I'll sleep beneath its arches.)²⁰

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot
Weinberger)

In this poem, woman compared to a rainbow is the link that man requires to reach the other shore, which according to Kushigan, signifies a merger of two opposing forces, the Yin-Yang, the female and male. The imagery of the body stretched between two banks like a rainbow is one which instantly connects the woman and her beauty to the beauty of nature. The man's decision to sleep beneath this arching body indicates the fact that he is almost at peace, knowing that it is through the woman that he can reach the shore of life.

Opposing this vision of the woman who represents the function and power of love fulfilled, is the frustrated woman, one "who suffers the anxiety of failing to complete her generic role. She is the contrast to the girl, the mother and to the beloved. Not representing idealization or danger to anyone, she can only be pitied as the most pathetic figure of the group".²¹ In "Utacamud" (Ootacamund) Paz writes:

En la veranda del Cecil Hotel

Miss Penélope (pelo canario,

medias de lana, báculo) repite

*desde hace treinta años: Oh India,
Country of missed opportunities...*

(On the verandah of the Cecil Hotel,
Miss Penelope (canary-coloured hair,
woolen stockings and walking stick) has been saying
for thirty years: *Oh India,
country of missed opportunities...*)²²

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot
Weinberger)

Here the figure of the woman is one whose life is filled with regret and longing. Unlike in the other three forms, this woman, having passed from innocent youth to old age, leading a barren life, can only cry out in frustration at the opportunities she had missed.

This type of woman is exemplified in the poem “*Virgen*” (Virgin). Here Paz interprets the word “*virgen*” to mean ‘old maid’ in terms of what society considers as unproductive and non-life giving. The woman in the poem cries out to an undefined deity:

*Llueve sobre mis senos arrugados,
llueve sobre mis senos arrugados,
llueve sobre los huesos y las piedras,
que tu semilla rompa la corteza,*

la costra de mi sangre endurecida

(Rain upon my wrinkled breasts

Rain over my wrinkled breasts

Rain over the bones and stones

May your seed break the bark

The crust of my inured blood)²³

(From Libertad bajo palabra translated by Sister Marie

Therese)

Here the supplication offered to an unknown god heightens the plight of the woman. The request for rain is suggestive of the rejuvenating quality of water which the woman feels will make her whole again. There is also a strong comparison here, between the “stones” and “bones” suggestive of their similar qualities. According to Rambo; “Analogous are the ideas of sap flowing beneath the bark of plants and of the blood flowing in the human body. The rain sent by this natural god is “semilla” [seed], capable of penetrating or breaking open with new life the bark of plants and the shells which encases listless blood.”²⁴

Thus for Paz, the frustrated woman is one who has gone astray from her crucial role of being the link between lost paradise and man. The source for this frustration perhaps lies in the fact that she herself cannot identify with

nature. She is no longer able to function as an agent of nature, for the nature she symbolizes is arid and barren.

While this figure inspires sympathy, the evil woman, another deviation from the first three figures, however, is described “as an evil contrary to man [who] appears also, in contradistinction to the idealized visions of the girl and the mother... Paz sees her as potentially poisonous, ensnaring, capable of seizing and strangling his masculine spirituality, intellect and freedom”.²⁵ In “*Piedra de Sol*” (Sunstone) we see this example:

*yo vi tu atroz escama,
Melusina, brillar verdosa al alba,
dormías enroscada entre las sábanas*

(I saw your horrid scales
Melusina shining green in the dawn,
you slept twisting between the sheets,)²⁶

(From Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger.)

In the person of Melusina,²⁷ the half serpent – half beautiful woman, “there is a fusion of woman and snake in which each shares the qualities of the other.”²⁸ This type of woman is especially characterized by “the connotation of treachery and sexuality which bears in all literature and

symbolic expression.”²⁹ Commenting on the evil woman in The Labyrinth of Solitude Paz writes:

It is interesting to note that the image of the mala mujer – the “bad woman” – is almost always accompanied by the idea of aggressive activity. She is not passive like the “self-denying mother,” the waiting sweetheart”, the hermetic idol: she comes and goes, she looks for men and then leaves them.³⁰

In many ways, Paz’s figure of the evil woman is derived from the concept of the *femme fatale*, a figure well known in all literature though by different names like Eve, Lilith or Delilah. Defined as “a woman of great seductive charm who leads men into compromising and or dangerous situation, this iconic figure has existed in one form or another in nearly all cultures throughout history.”³¹ In Paz’s poetry, the evil woman like other famous *femme fatales* is one who is deceitful and manipulative. This duplicity and betrayal of the evil woman is amplified in the following lines from “Golden Lotuses (2)”:

*A los veinte dejó a su marido
por una alemana;
a los veintiuno dejó a la alemana
por un afgano;
a los cuarenta y cinco
vive en Proserpina Court, int. 2, Bombay.*

*Cada mes, en los días rituales,
llueven sapos y culebras en la casa,
los criados maldicen a la demoncia
y su amante parsi apaga el fuego.*

(At twenty she left her husband
for a German woman;
at twenty-one she left the German
for an Afghan man;
at forty- five
she lives at Prosperine Court, int.2, Bombay.
Each month, on ritual days,
it rains frogs and snakes on her house,
the servants curse the she-demon,
and her Parsi lover puts out the fire.) ³²

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

These lines clearly show just how adept the evil woman is at ensnaring men. Her promiscuity apart, the woman is also one whose association with nature is one that is dysfunctional given how Paz considers woman to be the very essence of all that is beautiful and pure in nature.

Each month, on ritual days,
it rains frogs and snakes on her house,
the servants curse the she-demon,

She is transformed into a “she-demon” who is easily identifiable with reptiles. Furthermore, the symbolic connotations of the “frogs and snakes”, “she-demon” and the “white vulture” all allude to Eastern concepts which in this case are distorted to portray a monstrous figure with whom man cannot hope to achieve a meaningful metaphysical union.

and her Parsi lover puts out the fire.

The “Parsi lover” here is juxtaposed to the man who is set ablaze like “a burning building” by the figure of the girl. While the latter allows himself to be burned in order to be one with nature, the Parsi lover stomps out the fire because he knows that the evil woman cannot help him achieve that ideal state.

Thus, this figure of the evil woman is not one which creates the kind of atmosphere conducive to love or to a metaphysical union for “the mala (woman) is hard and impious and independent like the macho (man). In her own way she also transcends her physiological weakness and closes herself off from the world.”³³

In many ways, Paz’s portrayal of the evil woman is based on the image of La Malinche,³⁴ for just as woman is able to reunite man with the mythic lost unity the woman who has turned her back to nature becomes a threat to man. As mentioned earlier, the evil woman is the result of the negative

transformation from the figure of the girl. In the following lines the effect of such a transformation is stressed to show the distressing consequences it has on man:

*te pareces al árbol y a la nube,
eres todas los pájaros y un astro,
te pareces al filo de la espada
y a la copa de sangre del verdugo,
yedra que avanza, envuelve y desarraiga
al alma y la divide de si misma,*

you're a tree and a cloud, all birds
and a single star, the edge of a sword
and the executioner's bowl of blood
the ivy that creeps, envelops, uproots
the soul and severs it from itself,³⁵

(From Sunstone, translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The first two lines are clearly a reference to the figure of the girl, a figure who is attuned to nature. The positive images of the tree, cloud, birds and star all are an attempt to reveal the goodness and wholesomeness of the girl, a symbolical ideal through whom Paz can seek a fusion with nature. Yet without warning, this ideal undergoes instantaneous metamorphosis and becomes the evil woman. Thus, in these lines Paz shows how the girl, who

stands at one end of the spectrum, can easily cross over to the extreme end, and become an antithesis of her former self. Further, the divergent imageries used to describe the evil woman stand in sharp contrast to those used to describe the girl. This juxtaposition of images suggestive of tranquillity and spiritual harmony to describe the girl and those of murder, death, blood, parasitic qualities, destructive to one's soul which are used to describe the evil woman intensifies our sense of dread when we think of the destructive power the latter has not only on man's physical well-being but on his soul as well.

According to Rambo:

Woman as a contrary to man appears also, in contradistinction to the idealized visions of the girl and the mother. Often this evil woman is portrayed as an almost surrealist, fantasy figure. She symbolizes the basic dangers in the male's relationship with the female, the potential loss of his individual personality and character, his physical and psychological fears.³⁶

Thus the evil woman is a pessimistic picture of dread and disgust however she does not predominate over all the other manifestations of woman and is merely one aspect of these manifestations.

At this stage woman is seen simply as a contributing factor to the "creation of an atmosphere or to the presentation of a moment of emotion or sensation which is not necessarily essential to the central subject", (TPWPOP,

p.260) which is the search for the “metaphysical union” (TPWPOP, p.259) through love as “a prime experience” and woman as “the most basic and obvious element in [that] experience.” (TPWPOP, p.259)

This chapter therefore serves as an exploration of the four basic manifestations of woman and an examination of the role of each manifestation, to show how man can achieve a metaphysical union with her through love in the beloved of the next chapter.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ann Marie Remley Rambo, “The Presence of Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz”, *Hispania*. Vol. 51, No. 2 (1968)259.

² Octavio Paz, *The Collected Poems 1957 –1987* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1992)102-103.

³ Octavio Paz, *Sunstone*. Ed. & trans. Eliot Weinberger. (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1991)3.

⁴ Octavio Paz, *A Tree Within*. Ed. & trans. Eliot Weinberger. (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1988) 24.

⁵ See 1 above. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.260-268.

⁶ See 2 above. 258-259.

⁷ See 1 above.263.

⁸ Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude. Trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961).209.

⁹ S. H Butcher, trans. Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art.(New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1951) 400.

¹⁰ See 3 above.9.

¹¹ See 1 above.260.

¹² Octavio Paz, Selected Poems. Ed. Eliot Weinberger. Trans. various. (New York: New Directions, 1984) 5.

¹³ Ibid.17.

¹⁴ See 8 above.208.

¹⁵ See 3 above.25.

¹⁶ See 4 above.136.

¹⁷ See 1 above.260.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Julia A Kushigian, "Rios en la noche fluyen los jardines : Orientalism in the Work of Octavio Paz", Hispania Vol.70, No.4 (1987): 776.

²⁰ See 2 above.121.

²¹ See 1 above.260.

²² Ibid.197.

²³ Octavio Paz, Libertad bajo palabra. (Mexico:Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960) 110. Translated by Sister Marie Therese. Sister Marie Therese is a Catholic nun and academician from St. Joseph's Higher Secondary School, Jaiaw. Having spent more than a decade in Latin America, Sister Mary Therese is fluent in Spanish.

²⁴ See 1 above.260.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See 3 above.15.

²⁷ Melusina also known as Melusine, is a mythical figure of European legends and folklore, and is usually depicted as half woman- half serpent. For more on Melusina, see Wikipedia, "Melusine"<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melusine>>

²⁸ See 1 above.260.

²⁹ Ibid.261.

³⁰ See 8 above.39.

³¹ "Femme Fatale Throughout History". History Television, July 23, 2008
<<http://www.history.ca/content/ContentDetail.aspx?ContentId=73>>

³².See 2 above.188-189.

³³. See 8 above.39.

³⁴. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press,1961). In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz speaks at length on the myth of La Malinche/ La Chingada who was a Mexican slave girl who served as a translator to Hernon Cortes, the leader of the conquistadors in Mexico during the conquest of the native Indians by the Spanish. Hence she is seen as responsible for the downfall of the entire Aztec Empire and is condemned as a traitor. She was also infamous for supposedly being the first Indian woman to succumb to the sexual advances of the Spanish conquistadors. She bore a child to Cortés and is therefore seen as both the mother of contemporary Mexican identity and the bastard mestizo race. Thus, she is often referred to as the Mexican Eve.

³⁵ See 2 above.9.

³⁶ See 1 above.260. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

Chapter III: Woman as “Beloved”

The figures of lovers and physical love form the second stage in “Paz’s development of the presence of woman”.¹ Here the beloved is the central figure and this chapter will therefore examine woman as a beloved in a love relationship that “expresses both the positive and negative sides of love”.² Before the figure of the beloved can be examined however, an attempt will be made to study Paz’s concept of love so as to gain a more meaningful understanding of his treatment of woman in this chapter.

As with other poets, the theme of love plays a central role in Paz’s poetry, for him however, love is not merely an experience between two people but a fusion of opposites.

In “The Bow and the Lyre”, Paz writes:

Reconciliation ...is a wall that Western thought has refused to leap over or to perforate as yet...Eastern thought has not suffered this horror of the “other”, of what is and is not at the same time. The Western world is a world of “this *or* that”; the Eastern, of “this *and* that” and even of “this *is* that”. In the most ancient Upanishad the principle of the identity of opposites is plainly stated: “Thou art woman. Thou art man. Thou art the youth and also the maiden...thou art the dark blue bird and the green bird with red eyes... Thou art the seasons and the seas.” And these affirmations are condensed by the Chandogya Upanishad in the

formula: "That art thou". The whole history of Eastern thought begins with this very ancient assertion."³

Paz, in his poetry, therefore turned to Eastern philosophies and those like surrealism and existentialism (which moved away from mainstream Western philosophies) to explore the various dimensions of human love through a fusion of opposites. The influence of such philosophies later made him state that, "There, at the heart of existence – or rather, of existing oneself – stones and feathers, the light and the heavy, being born and dying, being oneself, are one and the same."⁴

Thus, it is with this concept of the fusion of opposites that Paz analyses love. In the poem "*Custodia*" ("Altar"), Paz shows this fusion along with the Eastern and surrealistic philosophical influences in an attempt to bring out the experience of love.

*El nombre**Sus sombras**El hombre La hembra**El mazo El gong**La i La o**La torre El aljibe**El indice La hora**El hueso La rosa**El rocío La huesa**El venero La llama**El tizon La noche**El río La ciudad**La quilla El ancla**El hembro La hombra**El hombre**Su cuerpo de nombres**Tu nombre en mi nombre En tu nombre mi nombre**Uno frente al otro uno contra el otro uno en torno al otro**El uno en el otro**Sin nombres*

A name

Its shadows

He She

An i

An o

A mallet

A gong

A tower

A pool

A hand

A clock

A bone

A rose

A mist

A tomb

A spring

A Flame

A brand

A night

A river

A city

A keel

An Anchor

She male

He

Body of names

Your name in my name in your name my name

One to another one against the other one around another

One in the other

Unnamed ⁵

(From Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The “He” and “She” of the poem are initially introduced as two separate entities, but gradually they begin to take each other’s personalities until they merge together to form a completely new body which though different from the two is a part of them nonetheless. The very structure of the poem is suggestive of the fact that, the merging of the contrasting pair of words present at the beginning and at the end is a metaphor of Paz’s view that the same love and purity experienced by man at the dawn of time can be achieved only through a union of two opposites – man and woman, and as the title of the poem suggests, the woman’s body becomes the “Altar” to bring about a revaluation of love shared by these opposites.

Again the pairing up of two contrasting objects and beings points not only to the surrealistic and Indian philosophic influences but also to that of the Chinese I Ching,⁶ a book of wisdom and divination.

The I Ching or Book of Changes⁷ embodies a special system which represents the results of three thousand years of reflection on the nature of change. As a model of change processes, it has been studied by psychoanalysts, its binary notion system has attracted Western philosophers and mathematicians, but it is the poetry of its imagery which has made it popular with poets. However, perhaps the greatest influence the I Ching has

had on the world is its concept of the Yin and Yang, the balance of opposites in all things.

One poem that displays this Eastern influence in Paz's poetry is "Duration" from his book Salamandra (Salamander). Firstly the poem opens with an epigraph from the I Ching, "Thunder and Wind: Duration", which is a reading that combines thunder and wind to create a meaning called Duration. According to Kate Covintree, the I Ching refers to two opposing forces where:

The upper trigram (thunder) stands for movement without, while the bottom trigram (wind) represents gentleness within. These opposing forces are like a yin and yang. Paz was interested in the polarity of the *I Ching*, and the way it divided life into an either/ or equation that was always interdependent, like masculine and feminine. Following these meanings, Paz has used this epigraph to open his love poem [and] like a reading from the *I Ching*, Paz has separated his poems into six sections, each independent, each expanding on his understanding and feelings for his beloved. ⁸

In "Duration" Paz breaks down language to its basic elements, he uses anthropomorphism or attributes human behaviours to non human things and blurs the line that separates nature from humans, so that in the poem it is

nature who talks while the poet and his beloved lose their ability to speak and can communicate only through touch.

This act of understanding each other through touch, makes it clear that for Paz human communication between man and woman does not depend entirely on verbal or intellectual understanding of each other but rather, is a genetic code which becomes comprehensible through love. This is evident in the poem:

“Thunder and wind: Duration”

I Ching

I

Sky black

Yellow earth

The rooster tears the night apart

The water wakes and asks what time it is

The wind wakes and asks for you

A white horse goes by

II

As the forest in its bed of leaves

you sleep in your bed of rain

you sing in your bed of wind

you sing in your bed of wind

you kiss in your bed of sparks

III

Multiple vehement odor

many- handed body

On an invisible stem a single

whiteness

IV

Speak listen answer me

what the thunder-clap

says, the woods

understand

V

I enter by your eyes

you come forth by my mouth

You sleep in my blood

I waken in your head

VI

I will speak to you in stone language

(answer with a green syllable)

I will speak to you in snow-language

(answer with a fan of bees)

I will speak to you in water- language

(answer with a canoe of lightning)

I will speak to you in blood-language

(answer with a tower of birds)

Duration ⁹

(From Selected Poems translated by Denise Leverton. Spanish original not available.)

In the poem, Paz uses simple and commonplace images: “rooster”, “water”, “night”, “wind”, “horse”, “bed”, “rain”, “sparks”, forest” and “leaves”, yet the dialog in the poem is carried out by these inert natural objects who are personified so that water talks, trees sleep in beds and woods understand the thunder’s speech. Further, the poem clearly marks out the poet as an outsider who stands outside this exclusive circle while the beloved is easily identified with these natural objects.

The intimacy of the two lovers becomes gradually more intimate as the poem progresses, and by the fourth stanza, the poet is no longer the outsider but has become one with the beloved so that he too can speak in a language which is innately accepted by nature.

In this section, Paz is the thunderclap, the traditional Chinese interpretation of the husband in this *I Ching* hexagram. He is the one who can share information and will be the dominant force. But, just as

important for Paz and this hexagram is the wind, which can also be seen as the woods. The wind/wood must understand and respond appropriately, so that the thunderclap knows it has been heard. Both husband and wife have important roles to play; they must both [simultaneously] speak listen answer.”¹⁰

By the fifth stanza, this intimacy is complete when the lovers become a part of one another. They live in each other, he in her head and she in his blood.

This fusion of opposites finds expression once again in the final stanza when the speaker can communicate with her in a language that has merged with the natural world. “This section is a conglomeration of dissimilar images, connected by their disconnect”.¹¹ The speaker, in this section identifies himself with inert objects like stone, snow, water and blood and attempts to use them as questions posed to the beloved. She, on the other hand is expected to answer in an equally natural manner: in “a green syllable”, “a fan of bees”, “lightning” and soaring “birds”.

The colour imagery of the poem also heightens this bond that the beloved shares with nature. Perhaps the most prominent colour imagery that is depicted is white which cultural and symbolic connotations associate with purity. In this poem however, though purity is hinted, yet white symbolises different things in different stanzas. For instance in the first stanza, the

“White horse” which is not paired with any contrasting image is symbolic of freedom that is outside of the yin and yang perspective, and this in turn is symbolic of Paz’s belief that love too is outside the realm of the yin and yang.

In “*La Llave de Agua*” (The Key of Water), the presence of the beloved and the success of her relationship with the poet, transforms both the beloved and the poet’s world, almost surrealistically, into a new reality of natural beauty and grandeur, as when he says:

*Adelante de Rishikesh
el Ganges es todaví verde
El horizonte de vidrio
se rompe entre los picos,
Caminamos sobre cristales.
Arriba y abajo
grandes golfos de calma.
En los espacios azules
rocas blancas, nubes negras
Dijiste:*

Le pays est plein de sources.

Esa noche mojé mis manos en tus pechos.

(After Rishikesh

the Ganges is still green.

The glass horizon
 breaks among the peaks.
 We walk upon crystals.
 Above and below
 great gulfs of calm.
 In the blue spaces
 white rocks, black clouds.
 You said:

Le pays est plein de sources.

That night I dipped my hands in your breasts.)¹²

(From, The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

Here woman is not only seen as synonymous with nature's beauty but Paz also introduces an element of spirituality, which arises from the presence of woman and her fusion with nature. In the lines "That night I dipped my hands in your breasts", Paz refers to woman as if she were a holy river with a vast spiritual repertoire. In dipping into that river, Paz partakes of her spirituality and becomes himself an extension of nature.

Another important aspect of love that Paz explores in his poetry is his belief that it is through the experience of love that man can be reconnected with the "mythic lost unity".¹³ This search for the "mythic lost unity" finds true expression in Paz's treatment of the beloved for, according to Wilson

Woman's reality abolishes all that is peripheral to the vision, for she is the complementary half to man's aloneness... Experience with woman leads to vision...and this vision through woman as concrete symbol of eternity obviates the need for language.¹⁴

The beloved also personifies the ideal relationship through which he can regain pre-Edenic innocence as shown in the introductory chapter with another quotation from Wilson that, "Love and poetry are the two faces of the same reality both are attempts to recover Edenic man".¹⁵

In " *Piedra de sol*" (Sunstone) Paz writes:

*los dos se desnudaron y se amaron
por defender nuestra porción eternal,
nuestra ración de tiempo y paraíso,
tocar nuestra raíz y recobrarlos
...
los dos se desnudaron y besaron
porque las desnudeces enlazadas
saltan el tiempo y son invulnerables,
nada las toca, vuelven al principio,
no hay tú ni yo, mañana, ayer ni nombres
verdad de dos en sólo un cuerpo y alma*

(the two took off their clothes and kissed

because two bodies, naked and entwined,
 leap over time, they are invulnerable,
 nothing can touch them, they return to the source,
 there is no you, no I, no tomorrow,
 no yesterday, no names, the truth of two
 in a single body, a single soul,
 oh total being...)¹⁶

(From Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The poem begins with a description of a sexual act but as it progresses the act becomes a spiritual journey which unites the lovers with the cosmic powers of the universe. Thus through the sexual act, the lovers are able to transcend their mortal selves to “return to the source”, to be united as “a single body, a single soul” thus achieving the “mythic lost unity of thought and body, I and the other”.¹⁷ Here, Paz clearly states his belief that it is only through love that man can retrace his steps to Paradise. The fusion of opposites as suggested by these lines is one that can be achieved only through love, and with Paz, “love and poetry are similar acts.”¹⁸

Thus, for Paz woman plays a significant role in this search for she is quite literally, the door to infinity or as he described, she is the, “sensitive presence of that unique and plural totality in which history and nature are fuse; she is the symbol of and contact with that ‘lost’ sacred element”.¹⁹

Again in “*Antes Del Comienzo*” (Before the Beginning) taken from the volume of poems entitled *Arbol Adentro* (A Tree Within) Paz talks about returning to the mythic lost unity with the help of the beloved by saying:

El mundo
no es real todavía,
el tiempo duda:
sólo es cierto
el calor de tu piel.
En tu respiración escucho
la marea del ser,
la sílaba olvidada del Comienzo

(The world
 is not real;
 time wonders:
 all that is certain
 is the heat of your skin.
 In your breath I hear
 the tide of being,
 the forgotten syllable of the Beginning.) ²⁰

(From A Tree Within translated by Eliot Weinberger)

This poem too states on the insignificance of the temporal, and how love through the sexual act is the only way to transcend it. The poet is only certain of one thing and that is the possibility of becoming one with all nature through his beloved. Her description as one in whose breath the poet can “hear the tide of being” is significant for it clearly marks the woman as the only link for man to reunite with the mythic lost unity.

Having established the significance of the sexual relationship between the man and the beloved as a union of opposing forces that aids in man’s search for “the mythic lost unity”, an attempt will now be made to show how copulation can also facilitate an achievement of liberation. This concept of liberation is an important part of the Hindu and Buddhist faith for, according to Julia A Kushigan:

Both Hinduism and Buddhism, at least in their tantric forms, predict the achievement of liberation in this life through the fusion of opposing elements: feminine and masculine, light and darkness, life and death, the material and the spiritual....which symbolizes any binary pair composed of opposing elements. ²¹

The poem “*Vaivén*” (Sway) from the main collection of poems, *Salamandra* (Salamander) emphasises this point when Paz says:

Caigo en ti con la ciega caída de la ola
tu cuerpo me sostiene como la ola que renace

el viento sopla afuera y reúne las aguas

todas los bosques son un solo arbol

(I fall in you with the blind fall of a wave

your body sustains me like a wave reborn

wind blows outside and gathers the waters

all of the forests are a single tree)²²

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The first two lines of the poem, the speaker identifies himself with a wave who is sustained by the beloved and the lines which are suggestive of a sexual act, indicate that through his union with her, he is reborn. The next two lines however, once again introduce the I Ching principle where the lover undergoes transformation to become the wind while the beloved becomes the water and together these two different elements merge so that they are fused in the body of a single tree. Here both natural elements are surrealised into a blossoming convergence indicating that the metaphor of the tree is an analogy to the union of two bodies who for a brief moment in time become one body. In this union, the rebirth occurs but it is important to note that Paz clearly indicates that the male lover who attains liberation never loses his true identity and remains “a wave”.

In another poem entitled “*Regresso*” (Return), Paz once again reiterates this theme of rebirth or the Buddhist concept of “Samsara”²³ to highlight on the positive impact of love. In the poem, the poet persona describes his state of mind at the height of a sexual intimacy with his beloved. At this time the lover sees himself no longer as a human but as a part of the cosmos, where time stands still and becomes an eternal present and where both the beloved and he shed their human bodies to become a part of the karmic cycle as when he says:

*Fluyen por las llanuras de la noche
nuestros cuerpos: son tiempo que se acaba,
presencia disipada en un abrazo;
pero son infinitos y al tocarlos
nos bañamos en ríos de latidos,
volvemos al perpetuo recomienzo*

(Our bodies flow through the plains
of night: they are time wearing itself out,
a presence that dissolves in a caress;
yet they are infinite, to touch them
is to bathe in rivers of heartbeats
and return to the perpetual beginning anew.)²⁴

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The line “they are time wearing itself out” can be seen as an explanation to describe how the lovers’ through the sexual act are able to move beyond the physical bonds of human mortality, where they no longer remain simply bodies regulated by the concept of time. Instead they, in their intimacy, are able to fight off such human limitations and love through the beloved opens the door of infinity for man, enabling him “to bathe in rivers of heartbeats”; in other words he becomes a part of the cosmos. Thus, the beloved plays a crucial role in bringing about his rebirth where he can return to the “mythic lost unity”.

For Paz:

If man really learns to love passionately; love between man and woman recovers the ‘ser total’(total being) lost a thousand years back. This naked, physical act of love breaks down the isolated ego and unites the body and the mind separated by a life-denying Christian tradition.²⁵

According to Wilson Paz’s deeply reflective mind saw the solemnity of both the philosophical abstraction and religious contemplation. His view on the Christian tradition as one that rejects the possibility of the unification of body and spirit unless through the Eucharist is one that stems from his philosophical endeavour to bring the diverse manifestations of truth under one whole. This, one may as well argue, is the humanising function of all religion.

Paz's view of love "provokes and challenges society since it is an experience beyond classification, societal morality or common sense."²⁶ This is also an experience which Christian belief has tried to tone down because of its anarchic nature which places man equal with God.

Finally, Paz's concept of love centres on two basic principles: the positive or negative sides of love. According to this principle, a relationship can only be successful if there is a fusion of the contrasting forces of the masculine and feminine or man and the beloved, and if she is able through this fusion, to reunite man to his "mythic lost unity" and to help him attain a state of Samsara or rebirth. This according to Paz, fulfils woman's generic role as being the mediating presence between man, the cosmos and his search for "the mythic lost unity". In such successful relationships, as with other positive images of woman in Paz's poetry, the bond between the beloved and nature are heightened. Here nature is always seen as something inspirational, refreshing and in full bloom. Elsewhere too, the way nature is depicted determines the image of the woman portrayed.

This successful relationship is clearly seen in "Maithuna". To Jason Wilson, the poem's title is a reference to:

the copulation between Siva and Devi, repeated as a rite by the
Tantrikas, is a metaphor (real and symbolic) of the uniting of

opposites which reveals reality: a reality unapprehended by the intellect or its concepts. The moment of union is both ecstatic and empty. It is also a repetition of the first act of creation.²⁷

In the poem Paz writes:

tu risa

moja mi frente mis ojos mis razones

Tu cuerpo incendia tu sombra

... ..

por las heladas plantas de la luna

lluvia de manos de hojas de dedos de viento

sobre tu cuerpo

sobre mi cuerpo sobre tu cuerpo

Cabellera

follaje del árbol de huesos

el árbol de raíces aeras que beben noche en ei sol

El árbol carnal

El árbol mortal

(your laughter

soaks my forehead my eyes my reasons

Your body burns your shadow

...

by the cold soles of the moon

rain of hands leaves fingers wind

on your body

on my body on your body

Hair unpinned

foliage of the tree of bones

the tree of aerial roots that drink night from the sun

The tree of flesh

The tree of death)²⁸

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

Again Wilson states that,

Woman's reality abolishes all that is peripheral to the vision, for she is the complementary half to man's aloneness; her laughter 'soaks' the poet's forehead, his eyes, his reason (water anoints, fertilises). Experience with woman leads to vision...and this vision through woman as concrete symbol of eternity obviates the need for language.²⁹

The concept of opposing forces comes into play when the woman likened to a "tree" drinks from the sun (clearly the masculine form). This act of the tree's roots 'drinking' from the sun unites the male and the female, and makes each dependent on the other, for the male is as much the tree as his beloved. The consequence of such a union is clearly stated first as a "tree of flesh", then as "the tree of death". This death however is not symbolic of

degeneration but rather of rebirth, whereby the couple experience a death in their old selves but are reborn as a single tree, a union of two different bodies.

Remarking on this concept of the Tantric philosophy of sexual love, Henri Michaux writes: “Making love with his wife, the Hindu thinks of God of whom she is an expression and particle.”³⁰ It was this sense of belonging that also seduced Paz to explore the possibility of attaining liberation or Samsara through the act of copulation.

In “*Piedra de sol*” (Sunstone), the presence of the beloved and the success of her relationship with the poet, transforms both the beloved and the poet’s world, making him see its beauty and grandeur, as when he says:

*todo se transfigure y es sagrado,
 es el centro del mundo cada cuarto,
 es la primera noche, el primer día,
 el mundo nace cuando dos se besan,
 ...
 el mundo cambia, encarnan los deseos,
 el pensamiento encarna, brotan alas
 en las espaldas del esclavo, el mundo
 ...
 amar es combatir, es abrir puertas,
 dejar de ser fantasm con un número
 a perpetua cadena condenado*

por un amo sin rostro;

el mundo cambia

si dos se miran y se reconocen,

amar es desnudarse de los nombres:

(all is transformed, all is sacred,
every room is the center of the world,
it's still the first night, and the first day,
the world is born when two people kiss,

...

the world changes, desires take flesh,
thoughts take flesh, wings sprout
on the backs of the slave, the world is real

...

to love is to battle, to open doors,
to cease to be a ghost with a number
forever in chains, forever condemned
by a faceless master;

the world changes

if two look at each other and see,

to love is to undress our names.)³¹

(From Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The positive images which these lines reveal all point to the positive effect the beloved has on her lover. It is through his experience with her that man is freed from the chains of his “faceless master” and his thoughts and desires can soar the skies like a slave who suddenly sprouts wings and is able to fly and see the real world.

It is through such a successful relationship that Paz “must seek a spiritual union with all life”.³² It is in the search for this spiritual union that he “metamorphizes familiar objects into objects of Nature and intermingles the two worlds.”³³ This is evident in his poem, “*La paleta*” (Your Face) which belongs to a collection of poems from his book Figures and Figurations. The book, a collaborative endeavour with his wife Marie José Paz is a compilation of ten short poems written in response to ten of her collage- constructions.

and in the mirror, your eyes,
 and your eyes become trees, hills, clouds.
 A path winds through the double row
 of insinuations and allusions.
 On this path I reach you mouth,
 fountain of truths just born.³⁴

(From Figures and Figurations translated by Eliot
 Weinberger. Spanish original not available.))

In this atmosphere of his wife's creation, the poet is linked to her and hence to all life. The figure of woman is also related here to the nature symbols of trees and water suggesting "fecundity, profundity and power of life".³⁵

In contrast to such poems, the negative side of love appears in poems of pessimistic tone where there is little of the glorified relation of woman to nature as in "*Cancion Desentonada*" (A Song Out of Tune):

El día es corto,

larga la hora.

Sin moverme recorro sus pasillos,

subo por sus calvarios mínimos,

desciendo por peldaños hechos de aire,

me pierdo en galerías transparentes

—pero no me encuentro,

pero no te veo.

(The day is short,

the hour long.

I walk through lots and corridors and echoes,

my hands touch you and you suddenly vanish,

I look in your eyes and suddenly vanish,

the hour traces, erases, invents its reflections

but I don't find you,
and I don't see me.)³⁶

(From The Collected Poems, translated by Eliot
Weinberger)

In poems such as these, when the love relationship is unsuccessful, the poet is unable to experience similar grand passions as seen earlier. In fact, because of the absence of the beloved “the world is seen as an empty, lonely existence”.³⁷ The beloved in this poem, fails to help him in almost every respect, for not only is he unsuccessful in finding “the mythic lost unity” but he even loses his own sense of belonging when he exclaims “I don't find you, / and I don't see me”. Her eyes which at other times held a promise of paradise now are vacant making the poet “vanish” instead. Further, because of the absence of the beloved, the poem resonates with a sense of confusion with time having to trace, erase and invent its reflections, thereby making the poet's life one filled with confusion. This absence of the beloved makes him “doubt that love can lead him to a union with humanity and in an empty environment voices his feelings of isolation”.³⁸

In “*Garabato*” (Scrawl) this absence is poignantly expressed by the poet who says:

Con un trozo de carbón
con mi gis roto mi lápiz rojo

dibujar tu nombre
el nombre de tu boca
el signo de tus piernas
en la pared de nadie
En la puerta prohibida
grabar el nombre de tu cuerpo
hasta que la hoja de mi navaja
sangre
y la piedra grite
y el muro respire como un pecho

(With a piece of charcoal
with my broken crayon and my red pencil
scrawling your name
the name of your mouth
the sign of your legs
on nobody's wall
On the forbidden door
engraving *the* name of your body
till the blade of my knife
bleeds

and the stone screams
and the wall breathes like a chest.³⁹

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot
Weinberger)

The note of frustration and anger at the beloved's absence is heightened by the description of the imagery in which nature too seems to be absent. The images of the 'broken crayon', 'wall', 'the forbidden door', screaming 'knife' and the stone that screams all point to the negative effects of love on the speaker who is no longer to communicate with nature or to speak at all and who is left scrawling the beloved's name on "a forbidden door". This door is a reference to the entry to the "mythic lost unity" which the poet is no longer able to recover because of the woman's absence.

These contrasting qualities in the beloved reflect Kushigian's views that "Woman and man are the subjects of the passionate games, the dispersal and the union of the opposing forces of which the poet speaks."⁴⁰ According to her, "These are important manifestations of liberation and ultimately Samsara, or rebirth."⁴¹

As stated earlier, woman appears in almost all of Paz's poems but just how she appears determines the tone of the poem. When she is absent, he feels acutely cut off from nature and from himself, and the poem is clouded

by confusion, frustration and anger. When the beloved is present however, Paz “feels the overflowing circularity of time, the dance of being, the affirmation of an eternal moment. Poetry becomes a means of attainment, the reconciliation of opposites, a way of participating in an abundant universe. It becomes a form of creative love that annuls the temporal world.”⁴² It is in this way that the beloved is made the central figure through whom Paz must seek “a spiritual union with all life”.⁴³

ENDNOTES

¹ Ann Marie Remley Rambo, “The Presence of Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz”_ *Hispania*. Vol. 51, No. 2 (1968)259.

² *Ibid.*260.

³ Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*. Trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973) 87-88.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Octavio Paz, *The Collected Poems 1957 –1987* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1992)288-289.

⁶ "I Ching". Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 1 March 2006, 25 Jan 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Ching>

⁷ C. F. Baynes, and R. Wilhelm. Trans. *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967) 45.

⁸ Covintree, Kate. Critical Essays on "Duration" Poetry for Students. Gale 2003. Dec-Jan 2007 < <http://www.answers.com/topic/duration-poem-7?nr=1&lsc=true> >

⁹ Octavio Paz, Selected Poems. Ed. Eliot Weinberger. Trans. various (New York: New Directions, 1984) 48.

¹⁰ See 8 above.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See 5 above.284-285.

¹³ From Eliot Weinberger's as quoted by Tore Frangsmyr in Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures. Tore Frangsmyr, ed. Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures (Stockholm: Nobel Foundation 1991). Weinberger is one the most prominent translators of Paz.

¹⁴ Jason Wilson, Octavio Paz: A Study of His Poetics (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979)137.

¹⁵ Ibid.99.

¹⁶ Octavio Paz, Sunstone. Ed. & trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1991)19.

¹⁷ See 13 above.

¹⁸ See 14 above.99.

¹⁹ Ibid.112.

²⁰ Octavio Paz, A Tree Within. Ed. & trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1988) 36.

- ²¹ Julia A Kushigian, "Rios en la noche fluyen los jardines : Orientalism in the Work of Octavio Paz", Hispania Vol.70, No.4 (1987): 780.
- ²² See 5 above.120-121.
- ²³ See 21 above.779.
- ²⁴ See 5 above.606-607.
- ²⁵ See 14 above.117.
- ²⁶ See 14 above.116.
- ²⁷ Ibid.137.
- ²⁸ See 5 above.278-279.
- ²⁹ See 14 above.137.
- ³⁰ From Henri Michaux, Un Barbare en Asie (Paris:Gallimard,1967),49 as quoted by Jason Wilson. Also see 14 above.28.
- ³¹ See 16 above.20-23.
- ³² See 1 above.261.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Octavio Paz and Marie José Paz, Figures and Figurations. Trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1999) 4-5.
- ³⁵ See 1 above.261.
- ³⁶ See 5 above.606-607.
- ³⁷ See 1 above.261.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ See 5 above. 110-113.
- ⁴⁰ See 21 above.778-779.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.779.

⁴² Edward Hirsch, "Octavio Paz: In Defense of Poetry", New York Times, Oct -Dec 2007, April 2008. <[http:// www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/07/bookend/bookend.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/07/bookend/bookend.html)>

⁴³ See 1 above. 261.

Chapter IV: Symbolic Fusion: Woman as “Water, Earth and Tree”

Having discovered the possibility of a “spiritual union with all life”¹ through a successful relationship with the beloved, this chapter will examine the symbolic fusion of woman with nature. As mentioned earlier, the manner in which nature is portrayed in a poem is often a clear indication on whether the poet’s relationship with his beloved is successful or not. This link between woman and nature is not limited to Paz’s poetry but is a concept he borrowed from Aztec mythology.

Aztec mythology is one replete with stories that show this bond between woman and nature. In this connection, Chalchiuhtlicue,² the most important of these, was often represented as a river from which grew a prickly pear tree laden with fruit, symbolizing the human heart. She was also known as “She of the Jade Skirt”³ for she was considered to be the water who was a personification of youthful beauty and ardour. In “*Piedra de sol*”(Sunstone), Paz writes about this epithet to describe his beloved as:

*tu falda de maíz ondula y canta,
tu falda de cristal, tu falda de agua
tus labios, tus cbellos, tus miradas,
toda l noche llueves, todo el dia*

(your skirt of corn ripples and sings,
 your skirt of crystal, your skirt of water,
 your lips, hair, your glances rain
 all through the night, and all day long)⁴

(From, Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger)

“Chalchiuhtlicue’s association with both water and the birth of fertility is due to the Aztec’s common association of the womb with waters. This dual role gave her both life-giving and life-ending role in Aztec mythology”.⁵ This is clearly the case with the poem, for Paz begins by associating the woman first with nature and fertility but as the poem progresses this very same woman is later transformed into the monstrous evil woman whom he describes as someone whose:

*y tus palabras afildas cavan
 mi pecho y me despuebln y vacían,
 uno a uno me arrancas los recuerdos,
 he olvidado mi nombre,*

(...sharpened words

dig out my chest, depopulate me

and leave me empty, one by one

you extract my memories, I've forgotten my name,)⁶

(From, Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger)

Another goddess Xochiquetzal⁷ was the Aztec goddess of love, flowers, fertility, games, dancing and agriculture who was believed to have always been followed by a retinue of birds and flowers. Again, to Paz, love conjured two ends of the spectrum, if successful it could bring about a union of man not only with the woman but more importantly, it would make him one with nature. If however, the union is unsuccessful, this would spell disaster and spiritual death for the man. This is what he means when he says:

enredadera, planta venenosa

flor de resurrección, uva de vida,

señora de la flauta y del relámpago

terrace del jazmín, sal en la herida,

ramo de rosas para el fusilado,

(tangling vine, poisonous plant,

resurrection flower, grape of life,

lady of the flute and the lightning – flash,

terrace of jasmine, salt in the wound,

branch of roses for the man shot down,) ⁸

(From, Sunstone translated by Eliot Weinberger)

This poem though a description of the beloved is thus surrealistic in the sense that it juxtaposes two distinctly different aspects of love. For while the beloved is the “poisonous plant” she is simultaneously the “resurrection flower”, both a source of death yet also a source of life after death. And while she is as refreshing and beautiful as a “terrace of jasmine”, a sight that is clearly soothing to the eye, yet the beloved is also the “salt in the wound”. The analogy of the salt in the wound is suggestive of the fact that the close bond woman shares with nature is only a harsh reminder of man’s own limitations and his inability, on his own for such a communion with nature.

According to Aztec mythology, another goddess Tlaltecuhli/ Itzpapalotl⁹ or the “Obsidian Butterfly” was torn from limb to limb by two rival gods, who tried to kill her. However, when the other gods heard about this they tried to placate Itzpapalotl by proclaiming that henceforth her body be turned into nature. Her eyes, for example, became the sources of springs and rivers while her hair became the trees.

Paz’s prose poem “Obsidian Butterfly” which pays homage to this goddess is a nostalgic testimony of Itzpapalotl’s past where she wistfully recalls how she once:

“would dance, my breasts high and turning, turning until I became still and then I would sprout leaves, flowers, fruit. The eagle throbbed in my belly. I was the mountain that creates you as it dreams, the house of fire, I am the primordial pot where man is cooked and becomes man...I was the tattooed noon and naked midnight, the little jade insect that sings in the grass at dawn, and the clay nightingale that summons the dead. ...In my navel the whirlwind grows calm I am the fixed center that moves the dance.”¹⁰

(From Selected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger.

Spanish original not available.)

In the poem, Itzpapalotl’s reference to her past is but an indication of how through the process of syncretism she is no longer able to bask in the glory of her magical past. According to her, at one point, she had been the centre of creation and all nature, including man, had blossomed through her.

It was the essence of this theory of woman having been the source of all nature and life that drove Paz to rediscover Mexico’s mythical past in his poems. He like the ancients believed that woman was truly a link in man’s attempt to commune with nature and thus his philosophy of love and poetry centres on this belief. For Paz as with the Romantics, the need to return to nature becomes the focal point of this philosophy. This need to return to nature

is heightened in Paz because of his belief that it was the answer to modern man's dilemma. This dilemma is what Brenda Seagall states as:

Feelings of complete spiritual and physical isolation...where man's inability to communicate with either himself or other human beings completely frustrates his own existential search for identity.¹¹

Thus, man's sense of frustration stems from his detachment from Nature, for this is the root cause of his spiritual isolation which in turn results in physical isolation from all forms of life. It is in this perspective man regards his "metaphysical union"¹² with woman as the only way to reconnect him with his severed ties with nature and all life. It is for this reason that in Paz's poetry, "the mythic lost unity"¹³ which as stated earlier is the return to the "lost unity of thought and body, man and Nature, I and the Other"¹⁴ and also a union with all life is attempted through Nature which is "made the ideal, the basis of femininity and the figure of woman is transformed and subordinated to this ideal".¹⁵

A reading of Jason Wilson's Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics suggests that for Paz, man's dilemma stems from the fact that his reliance on the intellect has severed him from nature and that this dependence makes man place the intellect above his own emotions and instincts.¹⁶ This sense of detachment is juxtaposed with Paz's belief that woman shares a strong bond

with nature, and it is this that draws him to her. Unlike man, woman combines both intellect and instincts, and this not only prevents her from being severed from nature but also makes her a personification of nature in all its aspects.

Paz's interest in Eastern philosophies is also important in this aspect for in his attempt to show the connection between woman and nature, Paz turned to the concept of the Four Elements.¹⁷ This concept is not one exclusive to Paz but is one on which many world philosophies, including Eastern philosophies are centred upon. What is common among these philosophies is their belief that all life and the universe at large is made up of basic elements. The differences however arise when it comes to determining the exact number of these elements. The Chinese, for instance, believe that there are five basic elements — water, fire, earth, air and wood — while Buddhism believes in three elements — earth, water and air — and Hinduism as well as Western Philosophies in four — earth, water, fire and air.¹⁸

Given Paz's deep interest in world philosophies and in Eastern philosophies in particular, it is not surprising therefore that he fused this concept most central to such philosophies in his own poetic credo. This fusion in Paz's poetry however, takes the form of three basic elements — earth, water and tree. While the first two are common to Hindu and Western philosophies, the third, is one influenced by Chinese philosophy. Further, this fusion of

woman with the three elements also points to the symbol of the womb, the mysterious feminine source of life that makes woman a creative force akin to nature.

As both woman and nature represent both physical solidity and spiritual profundity to the poet, they always appear related through “the same three poetic symbols of water, earth and tree...Since their qualities represent what Paz idealizes in woman, these three symbols with their many variations carry the feminine presence through all the poems.”¹⁹

The first of these – water, is simultaneously suggestive of the source of life without which nothing can exist, and an endless stretch of water contained within the boundaries of two distinct shores. These shores are symbolic of life and the spiritual paradise or the Buddhist concept of ‘Samsara’²⁰ or rebirth. Thus, while woman too is vital for man’s existence, she also acts as the bridge that connects man to the other shore for she, like the water stands mid way between these two shores.

Water is also a universal poetic symbol suggesting fecundity, timelessness, continual change and purity leading to spirituality. In Paz’s poetry too, there is a metaphoric union of woman and water and the bond between them is not simply of oneness, where the woman becomes an extension of Nature. This is clearly evident in the following poem:

abres mi pecho con tus dedos de agua
cierras mis ojos con tu oca de agua
sobre mis huesos llueves, en mi pecho
hunde raíces de agua un árbol líquido,

(you open my chest with your fingers of water,
 you close my eyes with your mouth of water,
 you rain on my bones, a tree of liquid
 sending roots of water into my chest)²¹

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

Here, just as water acts as a cleansing agent, the woman purges man of all his worldly flaws. The process of cleansing him is written in detail. She begins with his emotions, “you open my chest with your fingers of water”, and once this is done she moves on to his sense of sight by kissing both his eyes with her “mouth of water”. It is only when this is done that she works on his skeletal frame, implying that the process of change can only be complete when man is stripped to the bones, when the bones are cleansed and man himself is reborn and replanted in nature as “roots of water”. This is important for, to Paz, woman herself is “a tree of liquid” symbolizing the fact that she is an integral part of the nature he yearns to belong to. Once the process is complete, the woman forms a bond with man by sending her roots into his

chest. This once again implies that through a fusion of these two opposing forces, man through the woman becomes an extension of nature just as she herself is. Thus in many ways, this “tree of liquid”, who is the woman, is for Paz, the very tree of life.

In Paz’s poetry, water symbolism is always linked with the image of woman for like water Woman symbolizes fertility, freshness and inspiration besides profundity and the power of life. In “*Estrella Interior*” (The Interior Star) Paz writes:

Reposa la mujer en la noche

Como agua fresca con los ojos cerradas

A la sombra del árbol

Como una cascada detenida en mitad de su salto

Como el río de rápida cintura helado de pronto

... ..

Como el agua del estanque en verano reposa

En su fondo se enlazan álamos y eucaliptos

Astros o peces brillan entre sus piernas

La sombra de los pájaros apenas oscurece su sexo

Sus pechos son dos aldeas dormidas

Como una piedra blanca reposa la mujer

Como el agua lunar en un cráter extinto

A la orilla del agua a orilla de un cuerpo.

(Sleeps the woman at night
 Like fresh water with eyes closed
 Under the shade of a tree
 Like a waterfall arrested in the middle of its flow
 Like a fast-flowing river promptly frozen with ice

 Like water in a pool reposing in summer
 At its depth entwining poplars and eucalyptus
 Stars and fishes shine beneath her feet
 The shadow of the birds scarcely hide
 Her breasts are two sleeping hamlets
 Like a white stone rests the woman
 Just as moon-like water in an extinct crater
 From the shores of water to the shore of the body)²²

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

Commenting on the poem Rambo writes:

In the first few lines we notice the use of similes in series which establish a rhythmic pattern and form the basis for the transformation. In these the woman is constantly compared to water. Suddenly the poet passes from the use of similes to a direct metaphor in which the

woman is the water... He then expands the metaphor from the body of water outward to include surrounding land.²³

Thus, while the first stanza is filled with similes that emphasize the fusion of woman with nature, where she becomes water, a tree, then a waterfall and finally a river, in the next stanza, the descriptions are developed in a progression from the point of physical similarities to a deeper more philosophical one. For instance, the last line “From the shores of water to the shores of a body”

sustains the equality and the fusion between the two. The use of the term “a la orilla” objectively indicates the shore from the body of water and subjectively, the brink of a new life for the poet, the potential entrance into the life of another.²⁴

In another poem, Paz once again refers to the cleansing and healing effect of water which is personified in the body of the woman. The poem, entitled “Deprecación” (Prayer) is a poem that talks about the poet’s reflections on death and his prayer for woman’s help as when he says:

Pido

no la iluminación:

abrir los ojos,

mirar, tocar al mundo

... ..

pido

frente a la tos, el vómito, la mueca,

ser día despejado,

luz mojada

sobre tierra recién llovida

y que tu vos, mujer, sobre mi frente sea

el manso soliloquio de algún río

(I ask

not for illumination:

to open my eyes,

to see, to touch the world

... ..

I ask

facing the coughing, the vomit, the grimace,

to be a perfect day,

damp light

on earth fresh with rain,

that your voice, woman, on my forehead may be

the soft soliloquy of some river.)²⁵

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The lines above indicate that for Paz, it is only woman who can soothe him even in the final moments before death. While the comparison of the woman with a river highlights the significance of woman as she becomes for him, a source of beauty, peace and healing that erases any trace of the squalid world he inhabits. The whispered endearments he longs for are his final wish to ease him of his pain and suffering.

This final wish in which he associates woman with a river could also be read as an allusion to the Hindu ritual of cleansing a person's soul by drinking or bathing in the Ganges river, whereby a drop of this sacred water on the lips of a dying man can bring him salvation. If the poem's last line is examined within this context, then the fact that most Hindu Goddesses are connected with water would give this poem a new dimension. For just as Paz alluded to Mexican goddesses in some of his poems, his deep interest in Hindu philosophy has led him to introduce this concept too, where woman is compared not just to any river but a holy one which is in turn associated with godhead.

The earth, on the other hand is seen as a solid basis of life, profundity and substance. In Paz's poetry, the poetic symbol of the earth, though an important symbol on its own, is always accompanied by the other elements. In

the following lines there is a fusion of the figure of the woman with not just the earth but with the other three elements – water, fire and air as well.

*ojos que son la noche que se entrea bre y el día que despierta, el
 mar
 que se tiende y la llama que habla, pechos valientes: marea
 lunar,
 labios que dicen sésamo y el tiempo se abre y el pequeño
 cuarto se
 vuelve jardín de metamorfosis y el aire y el fuego se enlazan, la
 tierra y
 el agua se confunden*

eyes that are the night half-open and the day that wakes, the sea stretching out and the flame that speaks, powerful breasts: lunar tide, lips that say sesame, and time opens, and the little room becomes a garden of change, air and fire entwined, earth and water mingle.²⁶

(From A Tree Within translated by Eliot Weinberger)

Thus in the poem, Paz makes woman the centre of all life, an omnipresent source who simply has to say the magical word “sesame” before all four elements intermingle and become one. This fusion of such contrasting

elements is indicative not only of the fusion of opposites but more importantly, they reinforce Paz's view that woman is the very centre of creation.

The fecundity of woman is expanded in the final symbol — the tree. Taken from the perspective of the concept of the elements as stated earlier, it is only in Chinese philosophy²⁷ that we find the mention of a fifth element — wood. Although the effect of Chinese philosophy in Paz's poetic career cannot be understated, and while this concept of including a fifth element is unique to Chinese philosophy, trees have played an important role in many of the world's mythologies and religions, and have been given deep and sacred meanings throughout the ages. Thus the significance of the poetic symbol of the tree in Paz's poetics is definitely an amalgamation from different sources.

The most ancient cross-cultural symbolic representation of the universe's construction is the 'World Tree'. For instance, the Tree of Life is an important symbol in nearly every culture. With its branches reaching into the sky, and roots deep in the earth, it dwells in three worlds — a link between heaven, the earth, and the underworld, uniting the heavens and the earth; in Jewish and Christian mythology, a tree sits at the centre of both Heaven and Earth; the Egyptian's Holy Sycamore stood on the threshold of life and death, connecting the worlds; the Bodhi tree in Buddhism, is a symbol of Enlightenment; and to the Mayas, it is Yaxche, whose branches support the heavens.²⁸

In Paz's poetry, the tree is a symbol that stands mid way between water and earth and is sustained by both. It represents life, "based in reality and reaching vertically toward the infinite".²⁹ Thus, for Paz the fact that the tree is all at once a part of earth and sky was the ideal symbol to show case his theory of how Woman though a mortal just like man, is not restricted to man's limitations, for she is also a part of the "mythic lost unity" and only through union with her can man regain the joy of Paradise.

This thought is echoed in one of Paz's poems entitled "*Noche, Dia, Noche*"(Night, Day, Night):

Bajo la mata de tu pelo

tu frente:

glorieta,

claridad entre ramas.

Pienso en jardines:

Iser viento que remueve tus memorias

(Under the leafy canopy of your hair,

your forehead:

a bower

a clarity among the branches.

I think about gardens:

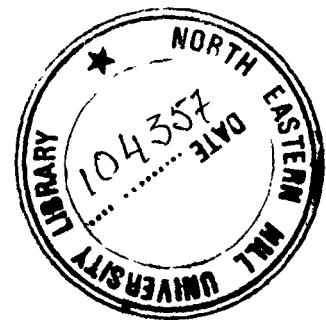
To be the wind that shakes your memories)³⁰

(From, A Tree Within translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In these lines, Paz readily identifies the woman as a tree. The physical descriptions of the woman are no longer by human standards, but instead her hair becomes a “leafy canopy”, her forehead a bower and it is here, in her presence that the poet undergoes a revelation which makes him think about his primordial past. Here the “gardens” are a direct reference to the Garden of Eden, the lost Paradise, a key concept in Paz’s poetics. Further, her presence makes him long to share this sense of belonging, of being one with nature, making him declare that he would be the wind that would make her remember the past they once shared. Again, the reference to both the tree, and the “gardens” allude to the Tree of Knowledge³¹ – the root of man’s present dilemma, for it was only after having bitten the fruit of this particular tree that man was banished from paradise to live a life of hardship. According to Christian belief, it was this act that severed man’s ties with God and with Paradise, even though man lives each day with the longing to return to this paradise. This desire thus could be looked at as an attempt to relive the joys of paradise and perhaps to undo the catastrophic blunder for which modern man still suffers.

In “*En la Calzada*” (“On the Highway”) this image of the tree is once again described in relation to woman. In the poem, the series of metaphors all help make the tree a symbol of fecundity but also and most importantly, it is the woman, in the form of the girl, who is transformed into a tree, thereby sharing its symbolic qualities. The poem also takes the form of an advice to man in general on how to interact with the figure of the girl.

*Quisiera detener una joven,
 cogerla por ...y plantarla entre un castaño
 y otro;
 regarl con una lluvia de verano;
 verla ahondar en raíces como manos que enlazan
 en la noche otras manos;
 crecer y echar hojas y alzar entre sus ramas una
 copa que canta;
 brazos que sostienen un niño, un tesoro, una
 jarra de agua, la canasta del pan que da
 la vida eterna;
 ...rozar su piel de musgo, sus pies de savia
 y luz,
 hablar con ella un lenguaje de árbol de enfrente;
 envolverla con brazos impalpables como el aire
 que pasa,*



Would you like to capture a young maiden
 catch her ...and plant her ...;

 water her with the rain of summer,
 see her deepening her roots like hands
 which embrace at night other hands
 grow and bring out leaves and lift up
 in her branches a cup that sings
 arms which hold a child, a treasure,
 a jar of water, a basket of bread
 which gives life eternity,
 ... gently touch her skin of moss
 her feet of sap and light,
 speak to her in the language of a tree directly
 enfold her with impalpable arms like air that passes”³²

(From Libertad bajo palabra translated by Sister Marie Therese)

The reference to the “young maiden” in the first line marks the poem as one dedicated to the figure of the girl. This would explain the dominance of the positive images when Paz describes the girl. Here nature, shown as refreshing, full of vitality and a life force is the ideal state that the poet longs for. As the girl is representative of these qualities of nature, she becomes the only link he has to achieve this union with nature. Commenting on the poem,

Rambo states that, “The poem is an expression of Paz’s future desires, of what he ideally would like to do.”³³

The form of nature that the girl adopts in this poem is once again a combination of Water and Tree, although the metaphor of the tree is predominantly the central focus of the poem. Her hands, compared to roots hold in them the promise of transforming the desire for a union into a reality if only she were to embrace man. The implication of promise that the girl holds is once again emphasised by images suggestive of maternity, vitality, and eternal bliss in words like

arms which hold a child, a treasure
a jar of water, a basket of bread
which gives life eternity

Even the language he suggests is that of a tree, almost as if to emphasize that human language is inadequate to communicate with this child of nature and that the only true way to converse with her is by using the language of nature which is like the “impalpable arms like air that passes”. What he means to say is that, man’s embrace should be with such gentleness and tenderness that the effect is like a gentle breeze that passes almost unnoticed yet which can be felt and experienced.

This personification of the tree as woman is also often used by Paz as an allusion to the Biblical “Tree of Life”³⁴ also known as the ‘Tree of

Knowledge'. As stated earlier, a single bite from the fruit of this tree gave man intellectual supremacy over all creatures but the price he had to pay was to lose eternal bliss in the Garden of Eden. Paz's poem entitled "Quartet", which is included in his volume of poems aptly named A Tree Within, talks about this Tree of Knowledge, but this time, Paz surrealistically identifies this tree with the very figure who is held responsible for the fall of man – woman. Instead of placing the blame on the woman for having tempted him to commit the sin, which had cost him his place in Paradise, Paz uses her as a tool through whom man can once again be reconnected to this utopian state.

*El árbol es mujer y en su follaje
oigo rodar el mar bajo la tarde*

*Como sus frutos con sabor de tiempo,
frutos de olvido y de conocimiento.*

The tree is a woman and in its leaves
I hear the sea rolling under the day

I eat its fruits with the taste of time,
fruits of forgetting and fruits of knowledge.³⁵

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In the poem it is no longer the woman who undergoes a transformation but instead the tree is synonymous as a woman. The reference to the leaves here points to the woman's body and the sexual connotations of the poet eating its fruits cannot be missed. Here the fruit no longer spells banishment for the couple but instead allows him to live in an ideal state where he can forget his existential dilemmas and yet remain aware of man's vast spiritual potential. It is in this sense that Woman is the key for man to reclaim his lost inheritance.

In poems such as these, we see the pattern of Paz's search for the "mythic lost unity". The poems reveal the positive images of woman and show her fusion with nature, to emphasise the key role of woman as a symbol in bringing about the "mythic lost unity".

The symbolic fusion of woman and nature is thus attained through the three symbols which Rambo says represent "the sublimation of woman as seen through the eyes of the poet, in harmony and union with all life. She is a woman fused with Nature... into sustained metaphors of universal symbolic importance: water, trees and earth".³⁶ This last phase is the most successful for it uses the other two as its background and basis to show how nature is made the ideal, the basis of femininity and how the figure of woman is transformed and subordinated to this ideal.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ann Marie Remley Rambo, "The Presence of Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz", Hispania. Vol. 51, No. 2 (1968)259.
- ² "Chalchiuhtlicue". Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 3 March 2006, 25 Jan 2008 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalchiuhtlicue>>
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Octavio Paz, Sunstone. Ed. & trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1991)4-5.
- ⁵ See 2 above.
- ⁶ See 4 above.12-15.
- ⁷ "Xochiquetzal. Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 3 March 2006, 25 Jan 2008 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xochiquetzal> >
- ⁸ See 4 above.8-9.
- ⁹ Cline Austin, "Tlaltecuhtli: Tlaltecuhtli, Earth Goddess in Aztec Religion, Mythology", 4 April 2008 < <http://atheism.about.com/od/aztecgodsgoddesses/p/Tlaltecuhtli.htm>>
- ¹⁰ Octavio Paz, Selected Poems. Ed. Eliot Weinberger. Trans. various (New York: New Directions, 1984) 17.
- ¹¹ Segall, Brenda, "Symbolism in Octavio Paz's "Puerta Condenada", Hispania Vol. 53, No.2 (1970): 212 -219
- ¹² See 1 above.259.
- ¹³ From Eliot Weinberger's as quoted by Tore Frangsmyr in Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures. Tore Frangsmyr, ed. Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures (Stockholm: Nobel Foundation 1991).
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ See 1 above.261.

¹⁶ Jason Wilson, Octavio Paz: A Study of His Poetics (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁷ "Classical element" Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 3 March 2006, 25 Jan 2008
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xochiquetzal> >

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See 1 above.261-262.

²⁰ Julia A Kushigian, "Rios en la noche fluyen los jardines : Orientalism in the Work of Octavio Paz", Hispania Vol.70, No. 4 (1987)779.

²¹ Octavio Paz, The Collected Poems 1957 – 1987 (New Delhi:Harper Collins, 1992) 4-5. .

²² Octavio Paz, Libertad bajo palabra (Mexico:Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960) 5. Translated by Sister Marie Therese. Sister Marie Therese is a Catholic nun and academician from St. Joseph's Higher Secondary School, Jaiaw. Having spent more than a decade in Latin America, Sister Mary Therese is fluent in Spanish.

²³ See 1 above.262.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Octavio Paz, The Collected Poems 1957 – 1987 (New Delhi:Harper Collins, 1992) 560-563.

²⁶ See 21 above.62.

²⁷ See 17 above.

²⁸ "Tree of life". Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 5 March 2008, 2 April 2008
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_life>

²⁹ See 1 above.262.

³⁰ See 21 above.79.

³¹ "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil". Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 5 March 2008, 2 April 2008
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_Knowledge_of_Good_and_Evil>

³² See 22 above. 46.

³³ See 1 above.263.

³⁴ See 28 above.

³⁵ See 21 above.494-497.

³⁶ See 1 above.264.

Chapter V: Conclusion

From an examination of the different forms of woman and the “role which each form plays in Paz’s poetic expression”,¹ it can be seen that much of Paz’s philosophy of life and poetry centres on woman. She and her relationship with man through love represent the means by which man and all humans can communicate with all life. Beginning with the universal but real woman, the poet develops her into several general types. She is always seen in relation to nature, and she is always portrayed in brief, objective images. The beloved is the tool through which the poet seeks to reach the ideal state, the “metaphysical union” (TPWPOP, p.259) of man with all life. When her relationship with man is successful, the world is transformed for the poet into a new reality of natural beauty, and she in turn is transformed by this.

In the last stage, the three symbols in nature represent “the sublimation of woman as seen through the eyes of the poet, in harmony and union with all life. She is a woman fused with Nature... into sustained metaphors of universal symbolic importance: water, trees and earth”. (TPWPOP, p.264) The most successful is this last stage, which uses the other two as its background

and basis. "It is here, where the fusion of woman with all Nature is attained, that the universality of life is best expressed". (TPWPOP, p.264)

This "universality of life" refers to the basic oneness of all life which Paz seeks through woman who becomes for him, through her feminine and creative qualities, an extension of nature. Thus while on the one hand the presence of woman in Paz's poetry can be looked at from the fact that he sees her as an indispensable partner with whom his yearning for the "mythic lost unity"² can be realized, yet Paz's Mexican origins also have a deep influence in making her such a dominant figure whose shadow looms large over all his poems. This is because Mexican culture since the Spanish Conquest has been divided between a socio-political patriarchy and a spiritual matriarchy.

To understand this dominance and the symbolic significance of woman in Paz's poetic universe a reading of Paz's prose writings can be of much help. In The Labyrinth of Solitude,³ for instance, Paz speaks at length about the mythical mothers on which Mexican history is centred. These are the figures of La Malinche and the Virgin of Guadalupe that Paz has also talked about in some of his poems.

In chapter four of the book, entitled "Sons of La Malinche" Paz writes about La Malinche, the most controversial of all the Mexican female archetypes. Known as the Original Mexican Mother, Malinche is considered

to be the mother of the first 'mestizo' or the modern Mexican. Given as a gift to Hernán Cortés, the leader of the conquistadors in Mexico during the Spanish Conquest, La Malinche was a tribute by the Indian leaders in Tabasco, along with twenty other women, gold and poultry. It was only later that she served him as a mistress and a translator. Therefore, while initially, she was treated as a goddess by the Indians, Malinche is said to have betrayed Mexican culture by falling in love with Cortés and turning away from her origins, helping him to communicate with the different Indian groups in order to subdue them.

According to the Mexican poet, translator and essayist, Heriberto Yépez:

Malinche, who emerged as a symbol in the most decisive moment of our history, the Conquest, is universally despised in Mexico. In Mexican intellectual tradition, she is "La Chingada," the violated, seduced by Cortés and a traitor to the Nation... Traditionally the birth of the mestizo (the modern Mexican) is explained as the combination of two elements, the white masculine (the Spanish conqueror) and the Indian feminine. In this way, the feminine and the Indian have become identified metaphorically as a kind of inferior, shameful being. Malinche is identified with this inferior half, and the feminine and the indigenous within us is what we still have of Malinche... Her portrayal as a man killer is an essential aspect of her myth, in keeping with the myth of the origin of the Evil Woman as the Betrayer, the Unfaithful, the Vengeful.⁴

While this revelation of the Mexican psychology helps us understand why the image of the evil woman occupies an equally important place in Paz's poetry as the other more optimistic figures of the girl, mother and the beloved, yet another important aspect of this influence of La Malinche on Paz as a poet is that, she becomes one of the main influences in his search for "the mythic lost unity". According to Paz:

The strange permanence of Cortés and La Malinche in the Mexican's imagination and sensibilities reveals that they are something more than historical figures: they are symbols of a secret conflict that we have still not resolved. When he repudiates La Malinche – the Mexican Eve...the Mexican breaks his ties with the past, renounces his origins, and lives in isolation and solitude...the Mexican and his Mexicanism must be defined as separation and negation. And, at the same time, as a search, a desire to transcend this state of exile.⁵

So while Paz's "Mexicanism" may have cast woman as one of the reasons for modern man's dilemma, which is "separation and negation" yet the treatment of woman in his poetry is much more complicated. For instance, though La Malinche, symbolized as the evil woman does make her appearance in many of his poems, yet she is overshadowed by the more optimistic figure of the beloved who helps Paz "to transcend this state of exile" for:

Man is the only being who knows he is alone, and the only one who seeks out another. His nature – if that word can be used in reference to man, who has invented himself by saying “No” to nature – consists in his longing to realize himself in another. Man is nostalgia and a search for communion...Communion and solitude are opposite and complementary...Woman has always been for man the “other”, his opposite and complement. (TLS, p.195)

Although, La Malinche has inspired Paz’s image of the evil woman, yet as mentioned in Chapter I, Mexico’s history dating back from the Aztecs to the present, is one which is strewn with historical and mythical feminine figures. Chief among them is that of the mythical figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe who stands in sharp contrast to La Malinche.

Tradition says that in 1531 the Virgin Mary appeared before a peasant named Juan Diego at Tepeyac, a hill to the north of Mexico City, and told him that she wished to have a church built there. When the bishop of Mexico asked Juan for proof of what he had seen, the Virgin appeared again to the peasant and instructed him to gather roses in his cloak and take them to the bishop. As a result, when Juan unfolded the cloak before the bishop, a miraculous image of the Virgin appeared where the roses had been.

Regarded as a reincarnation of the Virgin Mary, the Virgin of Guadalupe through the process of syncretism is also linked to the Aztec corn

goddess, Tonantzin and it is for this reason that to this day, she stands as the Mexican symbol of protection, purity, intercession and motherhood.

According to Paz:

She is the Mother of orphans. All men are born disinherited and their true condition is orphanhood, but this is particularly true among the Indians and the poor in Mexico... In addition, the Virgin – the universal Mother – is also the intermediary, the messenger, between disinherited man and the unknown, inscrutable power: the Strange. (TLS, p.85)

It is interesting to see how woman, when seen from the Virgin of Guadalupe's perspective becomes for Paz an "intermediary...between disinherited man and the unknown", (TLS, p.85) an unknown which can also be taken to mean the "mythic lost unity", the Utopian state that is at the core of Paz's poetic quest. Though this figure of the Virgin can in strictest sense only be compared to Paz's image of the girl, yet her positive qualities, especially her intermediary attributes become the source for such images of the mother and the beloved.

Thus in Mexico, the image of the evil La Malinche exists side by side with that of the benevolent Virgin of Guadalupe. John M. Samaha, who had been referred to in Chapter I, believes that syncretism has produced two very important Mexican stereotypes in viewing woman at least from the Christian point of view:

For women under this social order, their lives are a constant cycle between the image of Mary and Eve, the former being the goal of every woman and her position after obtaining the role of motherhood. The second image, that of the Eve, expresses the other side of the reproductive cycle of women, which is that of sexual intercourse. In this cycle of imagery, women are given only two roles that they must constantly play out throughout their lifetimes. While pregnant, women in this subculture are often viewed as bearing the physical mark for their sin of desire and intercourse. Upon the birth of a child, women then lose the stigma of Eve and become more like Mary, the mother of Christ, and therefore the mother of Christianity. Historically, such cycles integrated with the machismo ideals prevalent in society to further define the gender dynamic in Mexico. Women were 'perceived as manifestations of either Mary or Eve, and thus good or evil, depending on their status.'⁶

While Paz's poetry is strewn by images of woman in all her different forms, influenced by Mexican history and myths, we also find that at times, he treats the symbol of woman through personification in which cities and nations have been compared to woman. This is the case with his poem entitled, "*Noche En Claro*" (Clear Night), taken from the volume of poems, Salamandra (Salamander). In this poem, Paz describes the city as:

La ciudd se despliega

su rostro es el rostro de mi amor

sus piernas son piernas de mujer

... ..

Ciudad o Mujer Presencia

Abanico que muestras y ocultas la vida

... ..

tu risa el sol entrando en los suburbios

tu pelo al desatarse la tempestad en las terrazas del alba

tu vientre la respiración del mar la pulsación del día

tú te llamas torrente y te llamas pradera

tú te llamas pleamar

tienes todos los nombres del agua

... ..

Aquí la presencia se vuelve terrible

replegada en sí misma la Presencia es vacío

lo visible es invisible

Aquí se hace visible lo invisible

(The city unfolds

its face is the face of my love

its legs are the legs of a woman

... ..

City or Woman Presence

fan that revels or conceals life

your laughter is the sun buried in the suburbs
 your hair unpinned is a storm on the terrace of dawn
 your belly is the breath of the sea and the pulse of day
 your name is downpour and your name is meadow
 your name is high tide
 you have all the names of water

 here presence becomes awesome
 folded into itself Presence is empty
 the visible is invisible
 Here the invisible becomes visible.)⁷

(From Surrealist Love Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In this poem, Mexico is personified as the beloved whose “laughter is the sun buried in the suburbs” and in whose belly there beats “the pulse of day”. This association of the “City or Woman Presence” with nature reveals the softer side of the city’s beauty. But it is also here that it becomes a contradiction, much like the woman, for it is described as a place where “the visible is invisible” and “the invisible becomes visible”. This points to the contradictory nature of woman herself, because for Paz, the visible woman is but a shadow of the invisible cosmic powers which makes her an extension of

nature, but it is also in woman, that man can see the possibility of achieving the “mythic lost unity”.

In another poem entitled “A Tale of Two Gardens” Paz once again personifies a nation as a woman, but this time it is India. In the poem Paz becomes, according to Makarand Paranjape, well known poet and critic, “a lover, a poet, a passionate pilgrim at the shrine of life”⁸ when he says:

Llovía,

la tierra se vestía y así se desnudaba,

las serpientes salían de sus hoyos,

la luna era de agua,

el sol era de agua,

el cielo se destrenzaba,

los ríos tragaban pueblos,

muerte y vida se confundían,

amasijo de lodo y de sol,

estación de lujuria y pestilencia,

estación del rayo sobre el árbol de sándalo,

tronchados astros genitales

puđriéndose

resucitando en tu vagina,

madre India,

India niña,

Este

empapada de savia, semen, jugos, venenos.

(It rained,
 the earth dressed and became naked,
 snakes left their holes,
 the moon was made of water,
 the sun was water
 the sky took out its braids were unraveled rivers,
 the rivers swallowed villages,
 death and life were jumbled,
 dough of mud and sun,
 season of lust and plague,
 season of lightning on a sandalwood tree,
 mutilated genital stars
 rotting,
 reviving in your womb,
 mother India,
 girl India,
 drenched in semen, sap, poisons, juices.⁹

(From The Collected Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

This poem is significant in two aspects – firstly, in its personification of India as a woman, Paz identifies this country not only with woman in general but more importantly with Marie-Jose, a woman he met in India and who he later married. Secondly, it is a poem that showcases Paz’s attachment to India, his fascination with India, her history, religion and philosophy.

In the poem, India seen as a woman becomes for Paz, as Dinu Roman puts it, the Tantric “Para shakti”,¹⁰ or “woman is transfigured into a living symbol and earthly manifestation of the Divine Mother of the Universe”. The poem therefore shows a true picture of how woman like India is a fusion of the good and the bad where “death and life were jumbled”. Tantra according to Roman, is also known as “Vama Marga i.e. The Left Hand Path, due to the fact that women, who are of lunar influence, negative polarity or the left, play an essential role in this Science.”(TLHPL, p.3) Thus, this poem like others of its kind reflects how the Indian philosophic influences have also contributed to the complex symbolism of woman in Paz’s poetic credo.

Many of Paz’s poems display such Tantric influences and on close examination, we realise that this is because, Paz saw Tantra’s beliefs as those closely related to his own. To Roman, sexuality carries society’s stigma of being a sin and an impurity, but he goes on to say:

To understand the Tantric attitude toward sexuality requires a totally open mind and a reversal of perspective... we must first come to view the human dimension as vibrating in identity with the sacred, divine aspects of Creation. From this sacred perspective, sexuality is seen as reproducing at a smaller scale the continuous and beatific interaction of a Cosmic process which is manifesting the entire Universe from the Absolute Reality. In this new vision, "sin" disappears, being replaced by pure beatitude and total love. Sexual union is thus a form of meditative discipline with profound psycho-mental and spiritual effects. (TLHPL, p.3)

This Tantric belief is echoed in Paz's philosophy of love as expressed in his Labyrinth of Solitude where he states:

In our world, love is an almost inaccessible experience. Everything is against it: morals, classes, laws, races and the very lovers themselves. Woman has always been for man the "other", his opposite and complement.¹¹

Thus as stated earlier, Paz's poetic mission was to unite himself with this "other" through sexual union so as to attain and recapture the "mythic lost unity". The true import of Tantra therefore lies in the fact that according to Tantric belief "any profound fusion of the complementary opposites, or reintegration of polarities into the origins of the whole, automatically brings a breakthrough into higher levels and leads to a gradual re-discovery of primordial spontaneity and unity (Svantantrya)."¹² Further, "this

transcendency of opposites is a transcendency of the Cosmos because this movement abolishes the duality.”¹³

This awareness of the unity and basic oneness of all things is indisputably the very essence of Eastern philosophies. It was this that lured Paz to learn and explore Eastern philosophies for they voiced his very own beliefs. These Eastern philosophies while separated by religion and culture all stress “the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness. All things are seen as interdependent and inseparable parts of this cosmic whole; as different manifestations of the same ultimate reality.”¹⁴

The tenets of Hinduism are closely linked with those of Buddhism and thus, in Paz’s poetry too we find many references to the Buddhist belief in the concept of “the symbolic leap to the other shore”¹⁵ as explained in Chapter IV. In Paz’s poetry there are several references to “las dos orilla” or “the two shores” as seen in Chapter IV. Commenting on the frequency of this image in Paz’s poetry, Kushigan says:

“Las dos orillas” implies the confluence of opposing elements, their continuity and contiguity in time and space. Rather than situating the image in a topology which is binary in the sense of oppositional, which would infer division between East and West, the image of the two shores suggests the blending of opposites.¹⁶

Another Eastern philosophy that greatly influenced Paz's poetry was Taoism. Taoism is one of the great religions and philosophies of Ancient China. Founded by Lao Tzu in 440 BC during the Ching Dynasty, Taoism is still considered one of the important philosophies in the world. "The philosophy of Taoism understands Tao as the One Thing which exists and connects the Many things. Tao, Nature, Reality are One."¹⁷

Tao can be defined as a 'path', or 'road'. The way of the Tao is the way of nature and of ultimate reality. Tao is often described as a force that flows through all life. A happy and virtuous life is one that is in harmony with the Tao and with nature. In his famous book entitled Tao te Ching, Lao Tsu writes:

There is a thing, formless yet complete.

Before heaven and earth it existed.

Without sound, without substance,

it stands alone and unchanging.

It is all-pervading and unfailing.

One may think of it as the mother of all beneath Heaven.

We do not know its name, but we call it Tao.

Deep and still, it seems to have existed forever.¹⁸

This belief in the existence of the Tao is evidently one that Paz employs in his poetry especially as he sees it as an aid in his quest for the "mythic lost

unity” where man becomes one with nature, and thus with all life. For according to Lao Tsu, “Being one with Nature, he is in accord with the Tao. Being in accord with the Tao, he is everlasting”.¹⁹

Yet another concept that significantly influenced Paz was the Taoist concept of the Yin and Yang, the balance of opposites in all things. According to this concept, the cosmos is conceived as an order composed of a dual rhythm – separation and union. Paz tries to make use of this theory in his poetry as mentioned in Chapter III which talks about the fusion of opposites between man and woman. According to Kushigan:

In cosmological terms, the woman symbolizes the elements, for example, water, and man symbolizes light, among other positive elements.

Woman and man are the subjects of the passionate games, the dispersal and the union of the opposing forces... These are important manifestations of liberation and ultimately Samsara, or rebirth.²⁰

Thus, Paz’s orientalism reflected in his poetry, is the result of his personal experiences in the East and also of his deep interest, and exhaustive study of Eastern philosophies and literature. While these eastern concepts greatly influence his work, yet as mentioned in Chapter I, literary trends like surrealism and existentialism help in shaping his poetic style.

While a more detailed study of these trends has been attempted in Chapter I, this chapter will recapitulate their main principles so as to give a more holistic picture of Paz's poetic universe.

As mentioned earlier, surrealism began as an opposition to logic, the fundamental principle of bourgeois thinking. Absurdity, contradiction, and to a large extent, passion and desire were its main medium of thought. Greatly influenced by the psychology of Sigmund Freud, the surrealists also believed that man's real thoughts were hidden in their subconscious minds and in their dreams, and that an artist should understand and show this unconscious world through his work. Paz's poetry which centres on the quest for the "mythic lost unity" is thus seen as an attempt to express his deep desire for communion with nature and all life. According to Lloyd King, "the continuing significance of surrealism is its proclaimed intention to transform man and society by recovering the realm of the sacred through imagination and love".²¹ Further he states that, "Surrealism as a communal effort becomes a contemporary manifestation of man's desire to recover his true identity, to relate to the universe in a state of original innocence".²²

Existentialism on the other hand, is the philosophy of human existence. It studies how man is a time bound creature whose very birth propels him towards death. This, according to the existentialist school of thought, makes

man aware of his own limitations for he exists only for a limited time. Paz too echoes this uneasy awareness of the limitations of time on man when he says:

We have been expelled from the centre of the world and are condemned to search for it through jungles and deserts or in the underground mazes of the labyrinth. Also there was a time when time was not in succession and transition, but rather the perpetual source of a fixed present in which all times, past and future, were contained. When man was exiled from that eternity in which all times were one, he entered chronometric time and became a prisoner of the clock and the calendar...When one says, "at this moment," the moment has already passed. These spatial measurements of time separate man from reality – which is a continuous present – and turn all the presences in which reality manifests itself, as Bergson said, into phantasms.²³

This comment not only helps us understand Paz's preoccupation with time but it also develops the idea of the "mythic lost unity" and its importance in Paz's poetic universe.

In "An Existential Examination of King Lear", James V. Baker²⁴ speaks at length about the basic principles of existentialism and while he lists five "basic existentialist categories", this study will only examine the last three as they refer to Paz's poetic credo. According to Baker, the third category is:

experiencing certain elementary emotions, such as fear, love, or hate; the existentialists have made particular capital out of the study of an emotion which is called anguish. Anguish is experienced in difficult decision or choice, but existentially anguish is defined as one's feeling in the face of existence as a whole, being distinguished from fear, which is fear of some specific object or ordeal. Fourth, the human experience of time and of being headed towards death. And, finally, the possibility of transcendence of these space-time limitations. Space – time limitations may be overcome in three ways: through art, through love, and through religion.²⁵

This theme of “Anguish” (AEEKL, p.547) described by Baker stems from what Emmanuel Mounier calls “estrangement”²⁶ as discussed in Chapter II. In Paz’s poetry, we find that the concept of the “mythic lost unity” is one that is greatly influenced by this school of Existentialism. For although Paz believes that man had lost his roots at the dawn of time yet he also believes that it is only through woman that “Original innocence” can be regained and restored. And in this way woman for Paz becomes the symbol of “transcendence of these space-time limitations”. (AEEKL, p.547) Thus in Paz’s poetry, the “Space – time limitations” are overcome by poetry, love through woman and by the religious principles of not only different religions but by world philosophies as well.

Paz's poetry which is a result of a blending of different philosophies, religious beliefs, history, sociology and literary trends can be viewed as a quest for a union with nature and all life. And it is in this quest that Paz reveals the primary role played by woman in helping man achieve this utopian state of mind, body and soul. For it is only on experiencing a "metaphysical union",²⁷ and the ineffability of love with woman is man poised to reflect on the oneness of creation, and it is through woman that the unknown is made known and the known unknown. She becomes for him the life force who as stated in Chapter I, reinvents time for the poet for, having discovered her, means an end to the previous life and a beginning for one more enriched and consequential. Making him declare:

Ciudad Mujer Presencia

aquí se acaba el tiempo

aquí comienza

City Woman Presence

time ends here

here it begins²⁸

(From Surrealist Love Poems translated by Eliot Weinberger)

In concluding this chapter it must be noted again that to Paz "woman is first of all a word, an idea, a memory and a symbol, not some realistic being.

She is first of all the creative, fecund principle in poetry.”²⁹ this is the reason why Paz’s treatment of woman in his poetry has not attracted the attention of feminist criticism.)

I don't think that Paz's treatment of woman in his poetry has not attracted the attention of feminist criticism.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ann Marie Remley Rambo, “The Presence of Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz”, Hispania. Vol. 51, No. 2 (1968)259. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

² From Eliot Weinberger’s as quoted by Tore Frangsmyr in Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures. Tore Frangsmyr, ed. Les Prix Nobel / Nobel Lectures (Stockholm: Nobel Foundation 1991).

³ Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

⁴ Heriberto Yépez, “Clock Woman in the Land of Mixed Feelings: The Place of Maria Sabina in Mexican Culture.” uruweb 2002. Uruweb Ethnopoetics: Discourses. Sept-Nov 2007 < http://www.ubu.com/ethno/discourses/yepez_clock.html >

⁵ See 3 above.87-88. All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

⁶ John M. Samaha, "Our Lady Of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol." The Mary Page. Ed. Michael P. Duricy. 4 Apr. 2008. The Marian Library/International Marian Research Institute. April 2008.

<<http://www.udayton.edu/mary/meditations/samaha6.html>>

⁷ Mary Ann Caws, Surrealist Love Poems (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).94.

⁸ Makarand Paranjape, "Passionate Pilgrim", 4 November 2007, 17 April
<<http://www.lifepositive.com/mind/arts/new-age-fiction/Paz.asp>>

⁹ Octavio Paz, The Collected Poems 1957 – 1987 (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1992) 298-301.

¹⁰ Dinu Roman, "The Left Hand Path of Love", August 2007, May 2008-10-17
<http://www.templex.org/Tantra/the_left_hand_path_of_tantra.htm> All quotations from here on will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

¹¹ See 3 above.197.

¹² See 10 above.

¹³.Ibid.

¹⁴ Octavio Paz, The Bow and the Lyre.Trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973) 87-88.

¹⁵ Julia A Kushigian, "Rios en la noche fluyen los jardines : Orientalism in the Work of Octavio Paz", Hispania Vol.70, No. 4 (1987)785.

¹⁶ Ibid.776.

¹⁷ Geoff Haselhurst and Karene Howie, "Ancient Eastern Philosophy On the Ancient Wisdom of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism & Confucianism", Jul-Aug 2007, Mar-April2008<<http://www.spaceandmotion.com/buddhism-hinduism-taoism-confucianism.htm>>

¹⁸ Jane English and Gia-Fu Feng, Tao Te Ching (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) 24.

¹⁹ Ibid.25.

²⁰ See 15 above.778.

²¹ Lloyd King, "Surrealism and the Sacred in the Aesthetic Credo of Octavio Paz", Hispanic Review Vol. 37, No. 3 (1969): 383.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See 3 above.209.

²⁴ . Baker, James V. "An Existential Examination of King Lear". College English. Vol.23, No. 7. (1962): 546-550.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 546-547.

²⁶ Emmanuel Mounier, Existential Philosophies. Trans. Eric Blow.(London: Rockliff, 1951) 35.

²⁷ See 1 above.259.

²⁸ See 7 above.94.

²⁹ Jason Wilson, Octavio Paz: A Study of His Poetics (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).115.

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