
Understanding the Role of Folklore and Gender of Aphrodite in the Age of Neopaganism

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Abstract:

Beautiful women and their role in death and destruction have been a part of folklore, whether it is Helen or Cleopatra. The Greek Goddess Aphrodite comes under the category of trouble-makers. In pre-Abrahamic Greece the Goddess was famous for Troy and during Abrahamic age she was called the White She-Devil as she symbolized sensuality. This article aims at knowing about the Goddess and her cult and how the very concept of the Goddess has undergone a sea-change, such that today there is a church named the Church of Aphrodite dedicated to her in the US. The data have been collected from the blog Priestess of Aphrodite, the article titled "The Cult of Aphrodite: The Battle Continues," published in the website Cyprus inform, a book titled *Pagan Portals - Aphrodite: Encountering the Goddess of Love and Beauty and Initiation* by the Neopagan writer Irisanya Moon, and the book *Temple of Love* by Laurelei Black, who is a Neopagan priestess of Goddess Aphrodite.

Keywords: Folklore, Gender, Aphrodite, Sensuality, Neopagan

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Introduction

Folklore and gender work in a very interesting manner. In the Greek legend of Judgment of Paris, the three Greek Goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, appear in front of the Trojan prince Paris and ask him to tell who of them is the most fairest. Paris is confused and in his confusion chooses Aphrodite. This begins the chain of events that lead to the destruction of Troy. Till today, we wonder what could have happened had Paris accepted the offer of either Hera or Athena.

Ares and Aphrodite

Aphrodite was married to Hephaestus who is the god of metal work and masonry and forging things. Aphrodite was unhappy and established an affair with Ares, the God of war. Helios informed wily Hephaestus who made a trap. He made an invisible net around her bed that he had made for himself and Aphrodite. He told his wife that he was going away for a moment. Aphrodite invited Ares to the bed and as a result both got trapped. Helios informed Hephaestus about the happenings and Hephaestus was angry instead of surprise. He invokes all the gods to witness what Aphrodite and Ares were doing. This brought shame to the Goddess and Ares. It was after Poseidon persuaded Hephaestus that Ares was released from the trap and was later banished (Moon, "*Pagan Portals:*

Aphrodite Encountering the Goddess", Chap. 3). The illegal relation between Aphrodite and Ares highlights that beauty, love and sensuality can only lead to ruin and destruction. For this apparent reason, Aphrodite the Goddess, who is linked to all these attributes, is often seen as a trouble maker. But how far the information is true there is no evidence.

Psyche and Eros

In every love story, readers come across a character that creates a bit of trouble in the life of the lovers. Psyche was a beautiful lady whose beauty was envied even by Aphrodite. Even after being beautiful the girl was not getting a suitor. Her parents went to the oracle. The oracle was guided by Apollo who was instructed by Eros to tell that Psyche would be married to a horrible beast. Eros had been instructed by Aphrodite to influence men in a way that no one sees the beauty of Psyche.

Aphrodite got angry when she found Eros falling for Psyche. Eros became a beast and married Psyche. Psyche could be with Eros only at night. This was the condition because Eros was in disguise. Psyche was not happy about it. Her sisters were jealous about Psyche getting a good husband. After all, he was a divine being in the guise of a beast. They told her that the beast would kill her. They told her to kill the

beast. Psyche took a knife and a lamp with her when she went to meet the beast at night, but when she saw the face of Eros, the oil from the lamp got spilled on the face of Eros. Eros cried and told Psyche had betrayed him and left her. Psyche in her attempt to reunite with Eros ended up in meeting Aphrodite. Aphrodite gave Psyche errands like getting the Golden Fleece, getting water from the dreaded river of Styx. She was enraged when Psyche was able to complete the task successfully. Aphrodite gave Psyche the last task to get the elixir of beauty from the underworld without opening it. Psyche got it but on the way she opened the box out of curiosity. Luckily for her, Eros escaped from Aphrodite and rescued Psyche. Zeus intervened and made Psyche immortal and the two lovers lived together. Here, Aphrodite appears to be having a negative role (Moon, “*Pagan Portals: Aphrodite Encountering the Goddess*”, Chap. 3).

These legends around Aphrodite make the Goddess of love and beauty look complex. In the story of Hephaestus we find her involved in adultery; in the story of Psyche we find her play a sort of antagonistic role; in the incident of Paris we find Aphrodite bribing Paris to win the title of being the fairest among the three Goddesses. These tales from folklore give Aphrodite the image of a nuisance-maker. Her image takes a darker turn when we read the article “The Cult of Aphrodite: the Moral Battle Continues” from the website Cyprus Inform. We find the writer describe how the unseen battle is going on between the good and the evil. As expected, the pagan faith falls under the category of evil. The article is about the ancient city of Palaepaphos where the author visits sites like the Petra Tou Romiou and the village of Koukila. About Petra Tou Romiou the writer mentions about the legend which tells Aphrodite setting her foot there. About the village of Koukila the writer mentions how the area is linked to the legend of Pygmalion and Galatea. At this village, a man named Kinyras wedded Metharme, the daughter of Pygmalion and the high priestess of Aphrodite. Kinyras built a temple of Aphrodite. When Christianity emerged, the cult was seen as evil because Aphrodite was a symbol of sensuality which was demeaned by the church. The writer refers to the temple of Aphrodite to be an abomination that was destroyed. Even today, there is a close proximity between the monument of the Panagia

Catholics and the ruins of the temples of Aphrodite which shows the “battle” is on.

As it is a battle, Aphrodite is going to be declared evil for being the Goddess of an old Greek faith which comes under the term paganism. Gleb Botkin, the founder of the Neopagan movement, called the Church of Aphrodite, mentions in his book *Immortal Woman*, which is about a fictional composer named Nikolai Dirin who is on the run as the Bolsheviks are after him. Dirin, the character, goes to a church and prays to Aphrodite, the Goddess whom the Christian church called the White She-Devil. In a way anything that was linked to sensuality was considered evil and demeaned. But with the advent of the Neopagan movement things have changed

The earliest form of Neopagan movement dealing with Aphrodite can be observed in the construction of the Church of Aphrodite. This Church of Aphrodite was established in 1938 in America which suggests that Neopagan activities were established, unspotted in America, even if the world had not witnessed things like *Internet* and *YouTube*. Establishment of the church is based on monotheistic feminism. The followers worship Aphrodite as the only Supreme Being. The movement was founded by Gleb Botkin, a Russian, who took refuge in America after his family was persecuted by the Bolsheviks.

The main concept of the metaphysics of Gleb was that love is not an emotion but energy. He visualized the Creator as a Mother Goddess. Mr Botkin’s Church of Aphrodite, and his concept of Aphrodite being the supreme Goddess, was the earliest form of Neopaganism in America. His church is mentioned in the book *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* by Chas. S. Clifton, an academic in Pagan studies. Neopaganism is a revival movement that deals with reviving all those pre-Abrahamic faiths that got damaged with the passage of time. The cult of Aphrodite deals was one such pre-Abrahamic order which got damaged with time and is being revived now.

Why do certain Neopagans worship Aphrodite? The answer to this is a quote that is taken from an article “Modern Pagan Worship of Aphrodite – Part One – Who, What, Why and When” dated January 3, 2020 in the website Priestess of Aphrodite: “I worship Aphrodite because She is worthy of respect

and adoration . . . I worship Aphrodite to celebrate Her, to honor Her, to show veneration for the values. She represents, to express gratitude for Her blessings, and so that I may become closer to Her. Even the word “veneration” itself is associated with Her! “Veneration” comes from the Latin *Venus*, meaning “beauty, love, and desire,” and is associated with Aphrodite’s Roman counterpart. The Italian word for “worship” – *venerare* – comes from the same root (*Venere* is *Venus* in Italian).

The above statements on the veneration of Aphrodite link to sensuous love. Love is the root of worship. Love is the inspiration. . . We worship a Deity because we love them, because we admire their virtues, because we respect their work in this world (and in others), and because we want to, not because we have to” (“Reclaiming Worship as a Modern Pagan – Priestess of Aphrodite”). The author rightly mentions why the Neopagans worship Aphrodite. The Goddess is worshipped as she represents Divine and Earthly love. Here, love is not limited only to the feelings between two individuals. Here love means passionate love and even lust, familial love, love for friends, love for objects, love for yourself. And the deity also represents self-compassion where it is taught to be content with whatever one has. The examples of Aphrodite involved in the adultery with Ares, the trouble-maker between Psyche and Eros, also her role in the damage of Troy portray her as a negative agent. Now with Neopaganism the view towards those incidents have also changed.

In “Aphrodite Stories and Myths” (Chap. 3), “*Pagan Portals: Aphrodite: Encountering the Goddess of Love and Beauty and Initiation*” by Irisanya Moon, the writer looks deeper into the folklore and tries to understand the Goddess. In the relationship with Ares, the author finds the Goddess to be having her own desires. In the incident of Eros and Psyche, the Goddess tests the sincerity of the love of Psyche because towards the end of the legend she accepts Psyche as her son’s wife and in the incident with Paris the Goddess of Beauty is trying to hold on to her position of being the Goddess of Beauty by playing her cards. She knew the desire in Paris and was playing the game accordingly. So, she won the contest as to who was the fairest Goddess among Hera, Athena and herself.

The author feels these legends show the various facets of Aphrodite. The Goddess has her own miscomings, too. This makes the author feel close to the Goddess. She finds her more relatable and approachable. After all, no one is perfect. The importance of the cult of Aphrodite is visible when we come to learn about the Greek poet Sappho of Lebos. In this age, where we hear too much about *LGBT* things, we must know that the word Lesbian comes from the home city of Sappho. The city is Lebos and the term Sapphic love also comes from the lady Sappho who was a famous poet of her time, also known to have a number of female lovers. And apart from that she was a priestess of the temple of Aphrodite. In the book, *Temple of Love* by Laurelei Black, towards the end of the last chapter, Sappho, the poet has a vision of Goddess Aphrodite and longs to be with the Goddess while jumping down the cliff at the feeling that there is no purpose of living in the mortal world.

The important aspect of Sappho is that *LGBT* things were not big issues back then and, of course, one has to consider that the society in those days was a pagan one. Every cult has its rituals and festivals. We can get a glimpse of the rituals of the present-day Cult of Aphrodite or worshippers of Aphrodite in Chapter Four titled “Aphrodite in the Present time” in the book *Pagan Portals: Aphrodite Encountering the Goddess of Love and Initiation*. Irisanya Moon mentions that some Neopagans tend to reconstruct the rituals according to the texts of the old times while some try to keep the rituals fixed to the present. Some hold the rituals in public and some remain reclusive. The Hellenic Reconstructionists hold the festivals of Aphrodite in the months of July and August. The author mentions about a group called Temple of Aphrodite that gives a monthly opportunity to worship the Goddess and has its own chain of priests and priestesses that keep rotating to take the responsibility of the worship. The rituals contain cleansing, singing hymns, giving sacrifice, offering libation, then praying and, finally, a closing.

The cult of Aphrodite has also its own festivals. Aphrodisia was a famous festival in Cyprus in spring in the past. The festival had sensual settings and feasting. In Aphrodisia, cleansing was done; then the place was sanctified by the blood of dove, and

offerings were made. The images of the Goddess were carried round the town. In the current time, the ritual of using blood of dove has been replaced with giving incenses and flowers. The other important festivals are as follows:

4th of each month – offering.

14th February – the Feast of Eros.

1st April – commemoration of Aphrodite subduing Ares.

Fall Equinox – mourning the loss of Adonis.

There are festivals held according to the moon cycle. They are as follows:

May's Dark moon – Aphrodite is put to sea.

Three days after June's new moon – Festival for Athena.

October's dark moon – A time of mourning, madness and release.

There are also some personal holidays celebrated to mark dedication, initiation and connection. Recently, the rituals have gone modernized with people dancing to pop music around the altar of Aphrodite. The author mentions the relationships with gods evolve with context, time and need. The example of how the rituals have evolved can be discovered in the online article, "Celebrating Beltane during COVID-19 Pandemic" published on 3rd May, 2020. Here, the writer, who is a Priestess of the Goddess, informs the readers how she and her group celebrated the festival.

Beltane marks the arrival of Summer. The priestess and her pagan group celebrated the festivity by arranging a get-together with the help of the online ZOOM application. As the festival of Beltane deals with compassion, the priestess tells her followers to perform the act of compassion, like wearing facemask, patronizing small business, and giving/ supplying groceries to those who are needy and were unable to go out due to the pandemic.

The Neopagan festivals also remove a lot of misconceptions/ideas about love and women. One example is the Aphrodite's Day which the Neopagans celebrate on 14th February every year. The article "Let's Say Goodbye to That Sad Martyred Saint Instead – Happy Aphrodite's Day" published on 14th Feb., 2019 mentions about a campaign where

reconsideration is being demanded about naming the day of 14th February. Many taboos related to Aphrodite's Day can be banned like linking the day to consumerism, conflicted sexuality, or tragic love. Instead the festive day can be observed with full joy dedicated to Goddess Aphrodite.

The author even goes on to describe a pre-Abrahamic festival named Parentalia. The festival lasts for eight consecutive days where the dead ancestors were honored and valued. The temples were closed and marriages were postponed for later dates/months. On the final day of the week, a festival named Lupercal was celebrated. This festival is dedicated to Goddess Juno (for the Romans) and Hera (for the Greeks), who are the Goddess responsible for counseling love and marriage. Women longing/pleading for children were categorically involved in the festival. There was also a practice of casting lots or lottery about who will be whose partner during the celebration. When the church came to power it substituted things with the names of saints.

During pre-Abrahamic week of Parentalia, Aphrodite being the Goddess of beauty was also worshipped as she represented the maiden element of the triple Goddesses. Here, again, 'maiden' does not mean a virgin because the Goddess had a lot of affairs to her credit. Here, 'maiden' means a lady who did not depend on her lover or husband for power, identity and security. In a manner, these festivals celebrated by Neopagans bust a lot of myths around love, virginity and women. The writer complains the current form of 14th February celebrations which show love as a form of weakness and falling, and this needs to be renamed as Aphrodite's day as that would make people look at love as something empowering and sacred. This is how Neopagans involved with the cult of Aphrodite function.

To conclude, this paper deals with the Goddess of love and beauty who had earned notoriety mainly due to the affair of Helen and Troy. At the end of pagan age, the image of Aphrodite got even more abomination as sensuality was not a part of the church. With the advancement of time, the approach to the Goddess has changed with the phenomenon called Neopaganism. For the Neopagans, love is not the body but the love of a mother Goddess sustaining creation. That is what the idea one gets from the Church of

Aphrodite. For the Neopagans, the Goddess of love is not limited to just two individuals. Love can be the love one gets from family or friends or the feeling of containment. The Cult of Aphrodite was open to Lesbians, like Sappho, which states that the ancients were far more progressive than us today. The flaws in Aphrodite have made her more relatable and approachable to her devotees. The paper also tries to highlight how in the current times commercialization, tragic stories, conflicted sexuality, and consumerism have turned an emotion called love to be synonym to weakness, a liability, or failing, or a flaw, and how that view can be changed by adopting the view of the Cult of Aphrodite, which sees love as something empowering for the person, their family and their kinsmen. Above all, Aphrodite is the Goddess of Love, and not the White She-Devil.

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