

# Feminine, feminine/maternal: constructions to express it

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“Words are planks [boats?] that are thrown into the abyss.”

Paul Valéry (cited from memory).

"Men are the sons of women... We are more likely to be the mother of a man than anyone else."

Jacques Audiberti, *Evil Runs*.

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Reading the theme of our workshop "Construction of the feminine position in both sexes" [\[1\]](#) , I could not help but ask myself: what feminine position? More precisely, what construction of the feminine position in both sexes are we talking about?

Like Jacques Press [\[2\]](#) , I will start from Freud's two 1937 texts, "Analysis with End and Analysis without End" [\[3\]](#) and "Constructions in Analysis" [\[4\]](#) , to underline to what extent the second constitutes "an attempt to work through the unthought" [\[5\]](#) of the first. Indeed, we note that the unthought, the refusal of the feminine, the unanalyzable, this "rock of origin" which is the obstacle of all analysis [\[6\]](#) , will find a possibility of being elaborated by a specific technique, used by the analyst in session, "construction": we will call it, for what concerns our subject, the *construction of the feminine* .

Why "construction," a term that might seem inadequate since it is reserved solely for the analyst in the *here and now* of his practice? I am asking the question of the construction of a feminine where it seems enigmatic and lacking in Freud. To construct is to add something of one's own to the very place of what does not come. Adding something feminine and bringing it out—or softening the obstacles to its emergence—would therefore be a construction, the analytic act par excellence for developing it.

Thus, after Freud – or at the same time as him, responding in this way to his exhortation at the end of the 1932 text on femininity [7] – there were several *constructions of the feminine* that opened a breach in the obstacle he had erected. The list of these different constructions is long, very long. We point this out, to highlight the veritable Babel of *constructions of the feminine* in analytical literature since Freud. My initial question is thus legitimized: what construction of the feminine position in the two sexes are we talking about? Construction(s) which, for me, must necessarily be written in the plural.

## WHAT TO CHOOSE? OR, MORE

## EXACTLY, SHOULD WE CHOOSE?

I would be tempted to say no. Curiously, in my analytic practice, I found myself thinking of this or that theory, in my attempt to understand the problematic of the feminine of this or that analysand. We generally use these implicit theories, often without our knowledge, in the approach to our patients. But, here, it is more particularly a question of the reference to a construction on the feminine of this or that author in particular and/or of that other, constructions sometimes complementary, often contradictory, always explanatory, to which we can relate in our attempt to interpret the feminine in this or that analysand. This is what the brief clinical narratives that I am going to present will testify.

The parents of Sami [8], 9 years old, came to consult me on the advice of the school psychologist, although they did not seem very concerned by a problem which, from their point of view, would go away on its own with age. Their son, who is otherwise very handsome, wants to be a girl and has been fixated on the Barbie doll since the age of 2. This is what he later confirmed to me: "I know I'm not a girl, but I like being a girl... I don't want to be like Barbie, I feel like Barbie; in fact, when I get out of the pool, I lift my lock of hair with a movement of my head [he mimes it] because I feel I have Barbie's hair..."

His mother tells me that she breastfed him until he was 2 years old and that he wouldn't accept any other food, not even milk in a bottle. This meant that he nursed day and night, every three hours, for his first two years! She made him sleep next to her, and he could only doze off by holding her bare breast. She tried to wean him at 18 months old, but she couldn't bear to see him cry. So she continued to breastfeed him and put him to bed next to her, until his own mother took the baby from her every night to prevent him from changing his mind

again. "My mother loves him very much. She's kept him since he was very young, since our houses are adjoining. It's so much more practical!"

Furthermore, this grandmother's husband died young, leaving her destitute with five daughters. She then opened a beauty and body care salon for women at home, with the help of her daughters. Sami's mother works with her, as do her four sisters, all of whom are very attached to the child and take great care of him. In addition, the father owns a women's hair salon, located across the street from the house. After school, Sami does his homework either at his mother's (grandmother's and aunts') beauty salon or at his father's hair salon. It should be noted that the child has a brother, three years younger, for whom the father admits to having a great soft spot: "He takes over my whole heart... While I have never spent time with Sami, I am very close to the little one. Sami is very jealous of him..."

Living in an immense "original and maternal madness" [9], without distance from the body of a mother who offers herself in physical intimacy, skin to skin, without limits (contact as gratifying for the child as for the mother), imbued with the feminine in a proximity with all the transgenerational "femininity" of his mother, Sami could have been torn from this symbiosis by a father, a separating and masculinizing third party. However, the father is absent from the child's world, is uninterested in him, preferring his brother; moreover, he has a job that is also immersed in a feminine universe. Faced with this lack of masculinizing supports to identify with his father's virility, Sami bathes in the ubiquity of an excess of the feminine, in an excessive primary identification with his mother, in the absence of a sufficiently valorizing and virilizing paternal identification model.

Faced with the destabilization I could feel as an analyst, confronted as I was with a problem touching on sexual identity, Freudian theory was certainly a valuable resource for me. But it was Stoller's developments on the "protofeminine stage" that imposed themselves on me, I would even say directly, despite the controversy they are the subject of. Unlike Freud for whom the masculine is primary, Stoller postulates that "protofemininity" is a primary feminine stage in the relationship with the mother:

"[Protofemininity is] the state induced by the fusion that occurs in the mother-baby symbiosis [...] the longer, more intimate, and more mutually pleasurable the symbiosis, the greater the probability that the boy will become feminine; and this effect will persist if the boy's father does not interrupt the fusion qualitatively and quantitatively... To the extent that fusion is reinforced by having been encouraged, the feeling of being like her (like the mother)—identified with her—interferes with his masculinization." [10]

Femininity would therefore come first for Stoller, in both girls and boys. Thus, the boy would build a protective screen against the attraction of returning to this femininity and to the primary identification with his mother created by the symbiosis he had with her. He will develop a "symbiosis anxiety," repudiating (repressing?) this femininity to assert his masculinity, helped in this by his father. Sami would therefore be stuck in what Stoller called the "protofeminine stage" which prevents his disidentification with the feminine side of his mother, to move towards identification with his father, in the conquest of his masculinity.

For Lama, 37, it is the conquest of femininity that will pose a problem. I will not go into the details of an analysis begun almost two years ago, but I will focus my remarks on what interests us directly. She came to see me about a major difficulty that had lasted for years: she had always wanted to start a family, to have children, but could not get married. She went out with several serious men who initially wanted to marry her, but at one point there was a blockage, she could not take the relationship any further. In fact, she felt that she was unable to maintain the man's interest over time, because she did not like the game of seduction. One day, when her cousin had introduced her to his fiancée, she arrived saying: "If this is what being a woman is, it's not me... She's not even pretty, but she knew how to be a woman and please him." » I intervene to rephrase it as a question: "being a woman?" She continues: "being a woman is not me. It's not like me, all this femininity stuff... Why do you have to be flirtatious, seductive, sexy? It takes a huge effort to be attractive. It's a very heavy task for me. I'm incapable of it... Why all these clothing stores, lingerie stores, body care stores? I've never enjoyed shopping like my friends. Makeup, sexy clothes, a plunging neckline, heels... all these trappings for playing the game of seduction, that's not me... The seductress, the flirt, the woman who knows how to play her role to seduce a man, it's an art, and I'm deprived of this art. It's beyond my capabilities, as if I should have means that I don't have. I am a woman, but I don't take pleasure in femininity. Yet, I feel that I want to be a mother with children... I feel like a mother, I feel this maternal side too much, I love it... This

fusion with the child is marvelous, it is the very example of bliss... But being a woman supposes having the side of the game of seduction plus the maternal side... I see myself in the maternal side, not in the other.

Listening to this speech, a host of theories came to mind in Freudian terms of castration, partialization of a fetishized body, representation of the woman as a phallic conqueror, Lama constructing a phallic component around feminine attributes. All this would certainly be explanatory and very relevant. But strangely, it was Winnicott who came back to me iteratively in my associations, when I tried to make sense of this split between a beatific maternal who seems depulsionalized, and a feminine endowed with formidable phallicized attributes which act on man in terms of seduction.

Indeed, for Winnicott, in both men and women, there exists a *pure feminine element*, unrelated to the instinctual motion, which he calls *is*, in relation to a *pure masculine element*, related to the instinctual motion, which he says *does* [11] : "*After being-doing and being done to . But first, being.*" [12] This *after* therefore supposes an anteriority of the feminine position, which we find in several authors, notably in Stoller, as reported above, and in Melanie Klein, as she describes it in her conception of "a primitive feminine phase" [13] in the sexual development of the girl and the boy. Moreover, let us note that the two masculine and feminine components need each other to manifest themselves, which confirms, if necessary, psychic bisexuality.

In Lama's division between the maternal and the feminine, can we not find the *pure feminine* in his representation of the fusional maternal, which has nothing to do with the drive, and the *pure masculine* in his representation of the seductive feminine, which acts and seduces? Consequently, do we not see Winnicott's *pure feminine* rather on the maternal side, and Lama in the dissociation of the feminine and the maternal?

We frequently encounter this dissociation of the maternal and the feminine in female analysands, but also in the representation that some male analysands have of the feminine/maternal (mythology, religions, literature, cinema, observation of everyday life... are full of examples on this subject).

For Jean-Louis, 54, the dissociation seems to be of the same order as for Lama, in what he reports about the representation he has of his wife: "When my wife goes to work or when we go out, she dresses very sexy, wears high heels, puts on makeup... All her feminine side goes on the attack! When she comes home, she transforms into a mamma and dresses like a sack of potatoes. I can love her any way I like, but it's as if she's the one putting up barriers as soon as she's home. She becomes the mamma without any feminine seduction." » For others, the dissociation appears much more in relation to a problem that more directly calls into question the non-confluence of the tender and sensual currents in love life, in the sense given to it by Freud, in the split between the mother and the whore [14] : Karim, 32, has had mistresses since his wife had children: "I cannot ask the mother whose mouth kisses my children to give me fellatio! Since she became a mother, I feel as if something is no longer working in my desire for her. In any case, during all her pregnancies, I was never able to have sexual relations with her..." Charles, 34, suffers from impotence: "I desired Joëlle a lot. We had extraordinary sexual relations, twice a day sometimes... Everything went wrong as soon as we planned to have a baby. I can no longer penetrate her... I can't even get an erection! "As soon as the woman turns to the mother's side, there is a resurgence of the Oedipal situation and inhibition of incestuous impulses towards her. Let us cite as an illustration the Freudian aphorism: "To be, in love life, truly free and, therefore, happy, one must have overcome respect for women and become familiar with the representation of incest with the mother or sister." [15]

Escaping dependence on this Oedipal mother, but above all freeing oneself from the omnipotent primitive mother, is what Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel finds common in both sexes. She herself mentions Stoller [16] to say, with him, that the refusal of the feminine would be the fear of the attraction of primary femininity, of the primitive symbiosis with the mother, of the internalization of a terrifying maternal imago (is it not the attraction of the original repressions described by Freud in 1925 that we find?) [17] . The primary identification with the mother that we saw in Sami would prevent him from accessing virility, the dissociation of the maternal and the feminine in Lama would block his path to accessing femininity through the representation of a depulsionalized maternal, whereas, in Karim and Charles, this dissociation would inhibit their virility as soon as their wives orient themselves towards the maternal.

Thus, the construction we arrive at from the refusal of the feminine would be the desire to free oneself, on the one hand, from the incestuous attraction towards the Oedipal mother and, on the other hand, from the anxiety in the face of the attraction towards the omnipotent archaic mother, and this in both sexes. The refusal of the feminine then takes on meaning for us in the anxiety in the face of the maternal, the Oedipal maternal which seduces, the primary maternal which engulfs. If we return to what we had developed at the beginning, the unthought, this impassable, unanalyzable, unworkable "rock of origin" now appears to us as being the feminine/maternal, and the construction which will come to "replace the piece of reality which we deny in the present by another piece which we had also denied in the period of a distant childhood" [18] will bear on the elaboration of this terrifying primary maternal, constantly pushed downwards so that it no longer reappears, which constantly pushes upwards to try to reappear: consequently, it would be *the feminine/maternal which suffers from its reminiscences* .

I cannot help but mention the great anthropologist Françoise Héritier for whom "women make their daughters while men cannot make their sons... To reproduce identically, man is *obliged to pass through a woman's body* " [19]. This is injustice (procreation, the maternal), and not penis envy and castration, she asserts.

To conclude, I will mention that the constructions I have developed do not speak directly of the castration complex and emerge from the association feminine/passive and

masculine/active. Not that these distinctions are not of great interest, but to return to my initial questions, far from any claim of exhaustiveness, I have chosen a few constructions, from what I have called a Babel, in the search for insight into the understanding of the feminine in certain analysands. For others, there would certainly be different theories to say *it*. The question remains open.

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