

Love Bite Bites off More than it Can Chew

Book review

Debye Highmountain

1991

a review of

Lovebite: Mythography and the Semiotics of Culture by John Moore, Aporia Press, distributed by Counter Productions, P.O. Box 556, London SE5 0RL UK, 44 pages.

Myths are sacred stories that help to guide people through different stages of life, and which reveal the powers that form and influence people's lives. They also foster a deeper contact with reality, and address the fundamental mysteries of human existence. Both celebratory and constructive, myths are a source of pleasure as well as a form of adaptation.

Here in the realm of myth is where John Moore begins his essay *Lovebite: Mythography and the Semiotics of Culture*. The point of departure is a discussion of a particular kind of myth—a fairy tale—likely to be familiar to most readers, thereby evoking the openness and receptivity of childhood, recalling a time before the rational adult mindset has formed.

This familiar fairy tale, Little Red Riding Hood, takes on less familiar qualities in the ensuing discussion. Red Riding Hood is the embodiment of the archetypical virgin aspect of the triple goddess (virgin-mother-crone) about to be initiated into the ecstatic potential of her sexuality. The forest represents that which is wild and untamable and provides the setting for the initiation process and the subsequent transformation. The grandmother, as the Crone, the most powerful aspect of the triple goddess, is associated with the totem animal of the wolf. It is she who is to perform the initiation, imparting “a corporeal mnemotechny, a physical knowledge of interconnectedness.”

In the process whereby Little Red and grandmother are both swallowed and consumed by the wolf, a relationship is established between the alimentary and the sexual. This relationship is disrupted by the father, who slays the wolf, revealing himself to be in the service of death. Death, in turn, is equated with the control complex, which “aims to replace anarchy with coercion, or mana (a form of innate empowerment based on universal interrelatedness) with power (a structure which affects subjugation through disconnection and dissociation).”

After demonstrating how the story illustrates the intrusion of the death-oriented control complex, Moore then embarks on a richly detailed discussion exploring the nature of this shift, focusing especially on early taboos placed on eating and sex, the role of consanguinity or blood relationship in primal communities, and the origin of male domination and female subjugation.

Male Envy and Fear

Moore's argument is strong and coherent when he examines the psychic underpinnings of patriarchy. He postulates that the most meaningful kinship ties in primal communities were between women. Male exclusion from the core of these communities and awe of the female capacity to give birth gave rise to envy and fear. Moore interprets male rites such as ritual transvestism and subincision as evidence of male desire actually to be women. Such

attempts are always doomed to fail because “mimesis cannot be equated with participation.” The unbearable psychic tension which results leads to a defensive response in which any dependency on women is completely denied, leading ultimately to a denial of death.

Less successful is Moore’s discussion of taboo and its relationship to the control complex. First he asserts that “at the fons et origo of human existences, primal people refrained from eating their animal relatives, regarding flesh eating as disgustingly cannibalistic.” He further states (quoting Levi-Strauss) that food taboos applied only to animals and not to plant consumption, and that this arrangement allowed for the unrestricted expression of sexuality. It is only with the introduction of taboos against incest and cannibalism that the control complex gains in strength, for incest is at “the heart of matristic consciousness and lifeways,” and “the anarchic model offsets voluntary limitations in consumption against unlimited sexual expression.”

Such assertions don’t necessarily correlate with available information. For example, there is archeological evidence for the existence of animal hunting that dates back 1.5 million years, and one of the primary characteristics of human beings (compared with other primates) is an unparalleled degree of hunting and meat consumption. And how are we to know about how primal people felt about eating meat? And which primal people? People living today, 2000 years ago, 10,000 years ago, or 1.5 million years ago? Perhaps it is only late 20th century vegans from affluent societies who feel that meat eating is “disgustingly cannibalistic.”

Cannibalism a Fantasy?

Another example that doesn’t fit Moore’s theory is that of the Polynesians. In addition to taboos on meat, women were forbidden to eat certain plant foods such as coconuts, and men and women were forbidden to eat together, going so far as to have separate cooking and dining facilities. And yet the Polynesians were comparatively some of the most sexually unrepressed people that we know about. Granted, at the time these observations were made, the Polynesians had developed complex political and cultural forms, and yet they still managed to maintain a high degree of sexual freedom.

Moore’s comments regarding cannibalism are also less than satisfactory. He states the origin of the word itself as the mispronunciation of the name of a Caribbean tribe. But there is fairly strong evidence that this tribe, the Caribs, were in fact cannibals, and there is evidence suggestive of cannibalism that dates back to the Neanderthal era.

Other areas where cannibalism is evidenced include Polynesia (among the Marquesans, Maoris and Tahitians), Southeast Asia, and Mesoamerica. Even the practice of consuming the wafer representing Christ’s body seems to be a vestige of cannibalism. Essentially, what Moore is giving us is myths about myths, and myths about scientific theories. It is apparent that he is consciously using intuition as well as empirical evidence as ways to knowledge, but to dismiss glibly some of the darker aspects of the human past as products of the imagination is possibly to generate further denial, which may allow the psychological imperatives lying behind such phenomena to continue to function. Such a facile dismissal resembles neither meticulous scholarship nor visionary dreaming as much as wishful thinking.

Moore concludes the essay as he began, in the realm of myth, this time explicating a story told by the Native American shaman Tenskwatawa (the brother of Tecumseh, also called the Prophet). Unlike the Red Riding Hood story, which illustrates the genesis of the control complex, Tenskwatawa’s story is redemptive, offering us a way out, clues to successful resistance, guideposts to reentering “the global dreamtime...in all its variegated forms.” In the analysis of the myth, Moore shows how such resistance must be spiritual in nature, consisting of a recovery of totemic consciousness and a reactivation of the female principle, all of which is “part of a holistic liberatory praxis which heals and restores harmony to psyche, community, and cosmos, even as it annihilates the pathology of control.”

In *Beyond Geography*, Frederick W. Turner states that the “primitive mythic world is a numinous one, and great power carries with it the possibility of great terror. As well as it expresses the joy and play of life processes, myth also expresses those darker tides of existence that no amount of electricity and reason may ever obliterate.” Utopian

and mythic visions will be crucial in the process of transforming ourselves into a viable, sustainable species. Also crucial will be the willingness and ability to view the origins of human society and culture without illusions.

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