

# Resurrecting the She-Bear

## Circumpolar Mother of Spiritual Feminism

by Kaarina Kailo

*Dans le contexte de la chasse aux ours, cet article examine comment certaines croyances peuvent influencer les divinités féminines terrestres et célestes*

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*The she-bear needs to be resurrected in her role as a unifying symbol of woman-centred femininity.*

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*représentées par l'ourse tout en analysant les représentations et les pratiques misogynes qui sont apparues suite aux contacts avec les chrétiens.*

Since primeval times, the bear has been a central socio-religious symbol and organizing principle for Arctic peoples and for cultures in the northern latitudes around the world. In this article I describe aspects of ancient bear hunts and bear worship from the North as they relate to women. The historically multilayered material on bear cults provides us with glimpses of the divine heavenly/earthly feminine as it was epitomized in the she-bear, but also of misogynistic representations and practices that resulted, probably, from Christian contact. In the hierarchical, patriarchal world order and world view, both bears and women came to be objectified, and balance was lost from gender relations, as well as from human/animal relations.

The bear was a totem-animal with culturally and historically shifting gender and s/he was a mediator between human and animal realms, both an animal *and* a human. The Greek word *Arctos* means "bear," and the regions under the constellation of stars known as the Great Bear have been named after the Queen of Heaven's skyworld throne. Many Arctic peoples saw themselves as descending from a bear lowered to the earth from Ursa Major and/or from a woman who had spent a winter in the bear's

lair, producing half-furry offspring. The affinities between the ancient peoples who celebrated the bear through elaborate bear-hunt rituals and communal feasts include peoples as diverse as the Ainu of Japan, the Canadian Cree Indians, Finno-Ugric peoples (the Sami, the Finns, the Ostyaks, the Voguls, etc.), and several Northeurasian Indigenous nations. No other animal has attained such universal prominence as the bear, nor had associated with it, over such a wide geographical area, so many and varied customs. The further back we go in history, the more prominent is the role specifically of the she-bear, whose area of worship extended over vast areas of North America and Old Europe (Eastern Europe) from North to South. The celestial animal incarnation of a Goddess was known around the world under numerous endearing names: St. Ursula, Nokàm, Dea Artio, Ursel, Dea Artioni Licinia Sabinilla, Artemis Calliste, Hongatar, Osmotar, and so on. She has been known as

the Goddess of the bear sark, or bearskin shirt, which was supposed to give warriors bear-like strength and courage, thus turning them into *berserkers*, as fearless, tempestuous, and invincible in battle as the she-bear defending her cubs. (Walker 363)

The she-bear needs to be awakened from her millennia of hibernation and resurrected in her role as a unifying symbol of woman-centred femininity. Fiercely maternal, independent, and awe-inspiring, the she-bear could be seen as the feminist "totem" *par excellence*, for her image combines strength and devotion, shamanistic mediumship, individual and communal healing, as well as love with strong boundaries. As both Mother in Heaven and Mother Earth,

she is also the prototype on which the Heavenly Father seems to have been modelled, but with increasing demonization of the feminine and of Mother Earth. The "Honey-paws"<sup>1</sup> (see poem at end) is a sweet role-model for feminists seeking to move beyond the most divisive politics of difference and towards a politically informed and spiritually uplifting politics of af-finn-ity, in-finn-ity.<sup>2</sup> As most Northern, ancient Central, and Southern European cultures worshipped the she-bear, she can unite women of different ethnic backgrounds around a shared icon. The symbolism of the bear allows women to climb back on the cosmic tree, the umbilical cord through which the bear-shamans assured connection between all realms of being and living. As there are in the west no true symbolic containers for female passion and spirituality beyond patriarchal prescriptions, the bear in her den fills this gap, providing women with imagery of the divine feminine in its full spectrum.

The she-bear was a shape-shifter assuming many forms, but most often she was connected with the "feminine" elements of nature and with life-giving or death-wielding powers and energies. She was intimately connected also with the worship of fire and water, sometimes of mountains. Through the bear, many feminists can reclaim their own woman-centred turf, without appropriating rituals and practices from colonized cultures. Following the herstorical pawprints of the she-bear, women can return to their own holistic woman-centred base of being.

Through the shape-shifting bear, ancient women were celebrated for their shamanistic mediumship, for their herbal and healing knowledge, their ability to go literally "berserk" and rise up on their feet, "to raise their nature and go to their being"

(Tarkka 257) if provoked (see also Pentikäinen). In Finland, women resorted to charms to arouse their lovers' sexual energies; men, not just women, were game to be hunted and women, active and aggressive, took

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their course independently, as huntresses (Tarkka 256). The image of the bear on its hindlegs, evoked imagery of sexual arousal, "the lover's luck"

(Tarkka 258). In time, the she-bear's awe-inspiring, numinous role came to be usurped by father-centred men who tried to replace her with the image of the Heavenly Father and by subordinating bears of both sexes to an increasingly patriarchal, hierarchical world view.

A fair amount of literature can be found on the elaborate socio-dramas surrounding bear hunts and feasts in Samiland, in Finland, among the Mansi and Hanti, and among many Northeurasian peoples. The hunting, killing, and ceremonial consecration of the bear's sacred body and blood represented a religious ritual that has many parallels with the Christian communion. Echoing Christ's self-sacrifice and the redemption of mankind, the bear was seen to willingly give herself up so that humans could survive and subsist. Because the bear was the guardian of game, she was propitiated, prayers were addressed to her and songs sung, and her carcass decorated so she would continue sending animals. Instead of asking for forgiveness for their sins and carnal desires, however, the participants at the bear ritual focussed on atoning for the necessary kill by giving back to nature what they had taken from it. Instead of the Christian focus on redemption and grace,

the bear rituals were grounded in an exchange of gifts and a celebration of food, fertility, and natural balance. Both divination rites and dreams involved communication with the spirit guardians of the animals. Like the Finns, the Crees believed that if they respected the bear and observed all the taboos and prescribed rituals, the "keepers" of the animals would be pleased and inclined to release more game. However, as a result of "improper" behavior, the animals might not give themselves.

In Finland, the feast to celebrate the slaying of a bear was actually a marriage ceremony in which the bear, having descended from the heavens, was conveyed back to her/his celestial origins. This ritual was associated with a myth about primordial times, when a mythical coupling between the primordial mother and the animal worshipped by the people had taken place (Pentikäinen). After the bear ritual and feast, the bear's bones were carefully collected and often buried, and the skull hung on a tree. In Finland, the bear was placed back on the maternal tree *honka*, so that s/he could be resurrected and reunited with the ancestral bear-mother, Hongatar. In time, it was Christ who was hung on a cross and reunited instead with his father in heaven.

Like the Artemis of Ephesus with her countless breasts symbolizing fertility, Pyhä Marjatta, the "Finnish Virgin Mary," was modelled on a bear goddess who provided healing with her magic milk oozing from a thousand breasts. The goddesses associated with the Great Bear have throughout been linked with the self-sufficient ability of the bear to feed its cubs in hibernation, and the Milky Way is the soulpath of this cosmic/physical forebear. The further back we go in time, the more the boundaries are blurred between human and animal, male and female realms. Har-

mony and mutually beneficial, respectful co-existence were the ultimate goal of the bear ceremony.

The vast literature on bear rituals and hunts has patriarchal overtones, however, and it is difficult to sort out from this multilayered, historically diffuse material when and how Christian and other influences resulted in our contemporary ecological and gendered imbalance. It is also hard to know to what extent ancient bear societies were rooted in actual complementarity and balance of the sexes, as is often assumed. Still, the further one is from the bear-goddess-worshipping times—goddesses were worshipped in many patriarchal societies—the more clearly woman appears to be represented as a male possession, a piece of property comparable to game, and not as the One circulating and supplying gifts.

In suggesting that we awaken the she-bear as a unifying symbol of eco-spirituality, I am not suggesting that feminists adopt her, however, as yet another anthropomorphic symbol for self-extension and psychic self-glorification. Respecting nature implies realizing that plants, animals, and

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*The consecration of the bear's sacred blood represented a religious ritual that parallels the Christian communion.*

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other natural objects are infused with their own spirits and being. To give up anthropomorphic for shamanistic thinking means remembering that bears are not just symbols for something feminist: the she-bear is woman and animal. Therein lies her mystery.

The shamanistic world view of the Finns housed spirit beings that were conceived of as both male and fe-

male, and this is also true of the bear. However, the impact of Christian views on gender roles led to the gradual disappearance of references to the she-bear and an imbalance whereby mythologies focussed more on "bearwomen's" negative, destructive, "evil" aspects than the full spectrum of their real and symbolic attributes. The bear cult—apparently a particularly male-centered ritual—is not then necessarily empowering to contemporary women's self-image. Women are generally mentioned only in connection with taboos and restrictions on their participation, based on their "ceremonial impurity." For example, certain parts of the bear were taboo to women, it being male prerogative to eat them (particularly front parts, the head, and the heart). Young menstruating women were believed to be powerful and hence forbidden to look at the dead bear (Mistassini Cree, the Ostyak, the Sami, the Finns) or were

required to leave the dwelling into which it was taken (Montagnais, Micmac, Finns). But the taboos were not necessarily expressions of sexism (Edsman 47).

Among circumpolar women, Sami women, for example, seem to have carried out a collective purification ritual on everyone's behalf. They would sprinkle red alder juice on the hunters returning from the bear hunt, a rite which may have served to blur the boundaries between "the bleeding and the bled," the guilty and the innocent. Sami women were "unifiers," mediators, and their exclusion from parts of the ceremony does not necessarily imply a sexist division of spiritual labour (Stephens). We cannot automatically project today's asymmetrical gender relations on past societies. Still, the references to women's ceremonial impurity require careful attention. It was no doubt under Christian influence that the female body and its functions came to be seen as pathological or "impure" or at least reinforced in this negative light.

The holy hole in which the she-bear hibernated was, however, itself associated with powerfully woman-centred symbolism. In many cultures it was thanks to the shamanistic, soul-seeing abilities of women that the bear's den could be located. The Sami, for example, believed that women had telepathic links with and spoke the same language as the bear. In many northern cultures, the bear's lair was an image of women's sacred space, not only through association with reproduction and rebirth of nature, but because of actual practices celebrating women's blood mysteries (Rockwell). A woman undergoing menstrual initiation was likened in some Native cultures to a bear in a cave; the bear's annual autumn descent into the den, her hibernation suggestive of death, and the ensuing spring-time rebirth echoed birth-giving, an appropriate symbol of initiation (Rockwell). Among other beliefs, it was thought that bears survived during hibernation by sucking their own paws for sustenance. She-

bears can thus be seen as the single parent, independent, self-sufficient mothers of the animal world, and alone through this, they are powerful images of active, autonomous, self-nurturing femininity. The bear was celebrated also as a herbalist and spiritual healer, associated in distant times with women's wisdom and medicinal knowledge. Withdrawing into the solitude of her cave and surviving the winter through her self-sufficiency, the she-bear can evoke for modern women the arts of multidimensional self-help and healing—meditation, introspection, and shamanistic reliance on one's own resources.

While rounding up the she-bear, the androcentric "hunters"—ethnographers, historians, religious men—have created representations of the "hole" and of female sexuality that condense numerous negative images and associations; the earth's, the bear's, and the woman's fertility coalesce in images such as the "vagina with teeth" and associations with evil pagan practices, black magic, and witchcraft. Self-defined women rooted in their own spiritual traditions beyond male control began to converge with images of animals and monsters, needing male hunters and mythmakers to kill them or to bring them under control.

Today the muzzled bear, with one foot in chains, is paraded along the streets of Istanbul and Moscow by profit-oriented men who make her do tricks so that they can make money. The increased loss of respect experienced by the bear parallels attitudes towards women. Far from being celebrated as the life-giving forest or as the heavenly goddess, the bulimic/anorexic carcasses of modern western women are decorated, like the muzzled bear, for the male gaze, for media, and advertising exploitation, not for the expression of balanced kinship relations. In the dominant western discourses, women's bodies have been represented solely as patriarchal images, leaving them with identifications based only on male fantasy. Among these fantasies we find the very notion that women and bears are



A. M. Matejko, "Demeter," mixed media, 21" x 54", 1992.

inimical or that boundaries are needed to separate women from nature.

The bear is even today a central mediating figure in circumpolar writings between a "mother/forebear" and the female subject. As an alternative image for desire and the body, the bear is a most appropriate figure for an oppositional politics of representation. As a more challenging "first principle" even than gender, the she-bear allows for the subversion of the prevailing patriarchal dualisms (body/mind, nature/culture, woman/man, animal/human, primitive/civilized, etc.) without the dangers of reverse sexist essentialism; after all, the ancient shamanistic bear is a figure of the in-between.

The she-bear is waking up in the wake of the feminist spiritual revolution. If we relearn the rules of respect, of giving back and not taking from Nature what we do not need, perhaps she will re-emerge from her exile and



A. M. Matejko, "Artemis," mixed media, 21" x 54", 1993.

hibernation. Without the balance-oriented worldview espoused by *bearpeople*, *bearlovers*, we may well lose our *bearings* and face an ecologically unbearable future. The western world has been barking up the wrong tree, that of mere economic growth, much too long.

### Honeypaws Forever A Prayer to the Bear

Honeypaws, in Heaven  
Sacred is your name  
Wake up, Sweety  
Get up, and leave  
your hot and steamy lair  
Honeypaws on Earth  
Taboo is your name  
May you keep on sending  
our daily, sacred food  
Grandmother, Sweetypie  
time is up, to wake you up  
Time to Raise Your Nature, Go to  
your Being  
Go Beserk,  
The Hunters are coming  
McCutters of your Trees  
Please forgive us  
Meady Mother  
Mother of Mountains, Mother of  
Streams  
and of Sacred Trees  
For the plunder  
and the rape,  
of Your Mother Earth  
Your sap is bleeding  
Your skin is scarred  
and your soil sore, eroded  
Please send us healing  
Mother Earth, Queen of Heaven  
Please restore  
the growth, grow back  
Your Meady, Furry,  
Grassy skin  
Give us back  
our sense, and self,  
Our tender Teddy Bear  
Treehunters are coming  
to round you up,  
to ring you in,  
Wake up, Mother Earth,  
Grandmother, Woolly ear  
Help us restore the Balance  
Amen  
Awomen  
The little Honeypaws

of the Future

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<sup>1</sup>Honey-paws is one of the many terms of endearment used by the Finns when referring to the bear.

<sup>2</sup>I am underlying the "Finn" in my Finnish background, not to engage in nationalistic chauvinism but to underline that I try to ground my own political/spiritual practice in my own roots, my own ethnicity, taking no short-cuts through other peoples' spiritual rituals and beliefs.

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## LYN LIFSHIN

### Rosh Hodesh

feels the new  
moon strip what's  
jagged, catch her  
up. It takes  
what jars,  
smoothes it  
out like the  
oval her mother's  
hand fit in,  
moved over her  
calves and  
thighs, each hair a  
sin she wanted  
to no longer  
have to think  
of. The moon's  
lips like the  
tide, gulp  
prints, the  
skeleton of  
a life she  
leaves behind

*A collected volume of Lyn Lifshin's poetry, Cold Comfort (Blacksparrow Press), will be released in February 1997.*

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