The Myth of the *Vagina Dentata*: Archetypal Manifestations of the Terrible Mother

Henrique Guilherme Scatolin
Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), São Paulo, Brazil

This article has the objective of studying the myth of the *vagina dentata*. Based on an exploratory review of the literature and on clinical experience, the present article discusses this myth through manifestations of the archetype of the Terrible Mother and its manifestations in the contemporaneous clinic in the context of Analytical Psychology. The presence of the myth will first be considered in the context of cultural anthropology and then specifically on the basis of Neumann’s Analytical Psychology. In this article the author shows how the manifestation of the Terrible Mother is related to the archetype of the Great Mother, represented by horrendous figures such as serpents, gorgons, and the Egyptian Mother Goddess. The Terrible Mother has a devouring aspect and, in some cultures, is often intertwined with the symbol of the *vagina dentata*. Later, in the clinical context, these archetypical manifestations will be associated to intense degrees of anxiety associated with the anima in male patients, feeding intense degrees of aggressiveness in the shades of individuals of the male sex. In conclusion, the author emphasises the importance of manifestations of the Terrible Mother as depicted in individual symbols, in view of the process of individuation in clinical settings.

*Keywords:* Terrible Mother, myths and legends, Great Mother, cultural symbols

Introduction

In this article the author discusses archetypal manifestations of the myth of the toothed vagina. First a review of cultural anthropology will be presented as a background for an analysis based on the work of the Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann.

We find remnants of this concept of the *vagina dentata* in the works of the anthropologist Claude Lévy-Strauss, the mythologist and researcher Mircea Eliade, and the Mexican historian Félix Báez-Jorge, as well as discussions from the recent book by Persephone Braham entitled *From Amazons to Zombies: Monsters in Latin America*, published in 2015. This article will discuss the concept of *vagina dentata* in these authors, due to the importance of understanding how this myth feeds masculine archetypical fantasies and how the concept emerges in Western medicine and culture. Theories of the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss and the mythologist Mircea Eliade, as well as authors of Analytical Psychology, will serve as backgrounds with their contributions regarding the Terrible Mother, as elaborated by Neumann, for understanding this myth.
Methodology

The methodology used for this article was exploratory and qualitative. According to Cervo, Bervian, and Silva (2006), exploratory research determines the criteria, methods, and techniques for developing a study in search of information about a given object, thus aiding in the construction of hypotheses. Along the same line, Piovesan and Temporini (1995) point out that “exploratory research often leads the researcher to discover new approaches, perceptions and terminologies, thus gradually enabling them to modify their own ways of thinking” (1995, p. 321). Exploratory study aims at acquiring knowledge about the object at hand, which, in the present article, is the myth of the vagina dentata. As this study is in the area of human sciences, it will have qualitative content. But what exactly is qualitative research in the context of psychology?

According to Pinto (2004, p. 75), “Psychology, as a very complex branch of the humanities, is subject to internal and external influences from the social environment and from culture. These influences affect the researcher’s viewpoint as well as the very construction of the research”. A scholar’s sensory experience is part of his research and, in clinical contexts, the qualitative model implies a dynamic and personalised process of investigation. This constructive and interpretive model has its historical roots in cultural anthropology and, in the area of psychology, it entails transference as an instrument of research.

Pinto (2004, p. 76) also states that “The qualitative methodology of research in clinical psychology sees science as a construction of human individuality, with a given form and a given theoretical system”. Investigation is carried out as part of the phenomenon that is being investigated and this investigation interferes in the object that is investigated. Therefore, no neutrality is possible. Qualitative research is associated with the researchers’ reality and subjectivity, and unconscious influences of the researcher affect the understanding and interpretations of the phenomenon studied. For this reason, research in clinical psychology is research in action, because the action itself is being investigated and analysed on the basis of the researcher’s own beliefs and convictions.

The hypothesis being studied in this article is that: “The myth of the toothed vagina can be seen as an archetypal manifestation present in different cultures and generations”. To approach this hypothesis, the study focuses on mythological writings regarding the manifestations of this myth. Next, the myth is integrated with archetypal manifestations proposed by the school of Analytical Psychology. Besides cultural practices and the contributions by Newmann, this article will explore clinical readings that manifest the tentacles of this archetype in the clinical setting.

Results and Analysis

Why start out with the myth? According to Silva and Flores (2010), myths provide us with means to understand the world through symbols and enable us to contemplate the mysteries of life and the secrets of nature. According to these authors, myths cannot be understood as simple stories, since they are part of specific social contexts and, between the lines, depict ethical or moral lesson, giving argumentation, security and coherence to the discourse.

Machado and Pageaux (1988) emphasise that myths and their narratives are fused with the history of a people, and affirm its collective ethical values and value system. From this point of view we can note how manifestations of the toothed vagina made it possible to create value systems that surrounded, and still surround, this myth reinforcing individual and collective symbolic fantasies among certain groups in both past and
ARCHETYPAL MANIFESTATIONS OF THE TERRIBLE MOTHER

To move forward in this direction, let us look at some lessons from cultural anthropology.

**Cultural Anthropology and the Myth of the Vagina With Teeth**

According to Báez-Jorge (2010), a member of the Institute of Social History of Mexico, numerous anthropological studies have demonstrated the symbolism of the toothed vagina at different times and places. In Mesoamerican culture, symbols that represent this figure correspond, at the same time, to manifestations of social values and to psychic manifestations of the peoples involved, as expressed in the figure below:

![Figure 1. The manifestations of the terrible mother in the culture of Central America (Source: https://arqueologiamexicana.mx/mexico-antiguo/mitologia-y-symbolismo-de-la-vagina-dentada).](image)

According to Báez-Jorge (2010), the above image is associated with a telluric vagina through which a dead man returns to Mictlan (which, in Aztec mythology, was the realm of the dead). Also according to Báez-Jorge, the entrance to Mictlan is through strong jaws and teeth, which may also resemble those of a lizard or a snake. In my understanding, the association of this myth to the presence of strong teeth, which must be broken by the hero, resembles the myth of the toothed vagina in other cultures, such as certain indigenous tribes in South America and the Maoris of New Zealand.

Silva and Flores (2010) point out that

this narrative teaches that Maui, a demigod, hoping to achieve immortality, sought the goddess of the dead and tried to enter her body to suck her heart through her vagina. As Maui was passing his head through her genital organ she was awakened, and strangled him with her vagina. (p. 168)

According to the above authors, in some narratives the vagina is associated with death or has a sense of being destructive.

For Báez-Jorge (2010) the symbol of the vagina with teeth may allow for many different interpretations, none of which is able to occupy a central place. According to him, if we are to understand the complexity of this figure, we must resort to researchers such as Mircea Eliade and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who analysed its manifestations in Australian and Amazonian groups, respectively.

In the words of Mircea Eliade, in his book *Myth and Reality:*
A great many myths feature (1) a hero being swallowed by a sea monster and emerging victorious after breaking through the monster’s belly; (2) an initiatory passage through a vagina dentata, or the dangerous descent into a cave or crevice assimilated to the mouth or the uterus of Mother Earth. All these adventures are in fact initiatory ordeals, after accomplishing which the victorious hero acquires a new mode of being. (1963/1972, p. 8)

As described above, in several rituals where this myth is enacted there is the figure of a hero. In her article entitled “Aruanã Dances: Myth, Rite and Music Among the Javaé”, Sonia Regina Lourenço (2008) analyses the musical ritual among the Javaés along the Araguaia River in Brazil and describes the legend of the Ijana(k)atu brothers, who marry the daughters of the sun (Txuu) and achieve sexual pleasure. According to Lourenço, this myth is an expression of vagina dentata: “When the brothers are introduced into the women’s vaginas, they kill all the piranhas inside except one, which remains responsible for the menstrual cycle” (Lourenço, 2008, p. 216).

Accounts of this myth are also found in several other anthropological works. Persephone Braham (2015), for example, in her book From Amazons to Zombies: Monsters in Latin America, points out that “The vagina dentata, or devouring mother, is ubiquitous in Native American religions as well, as seen in the Mexican serpent goddess Coatlicue, from whose womb the war-god Huitzilopochtli springs” (p. 56). These various myths always refer to the presence of a hero who fights against this Terrible Mother, plunging into her womb and eliminating her deadly teeth. In some myths, after they are removed, this terrifying figure loses her phallic characteristics and becomes a woman who has taken on feminine qualities and is desirable to men.

Lévi-Strauss (2004), analysing Amerindian myths and taking the Toba-Pilaga group of South America as an example to address the mythical origin of women, relates that:

Formerly men used to hunt and store their supply of game on the thatched roofs of their huts. One day, in their absence, a group of women came down from the sky and stole all the meat. The same thing happened the next day, and the men, who did not know that women existed, set Rabbit to watch.

But Rabbit slept all the time, and the grilled meat was stolen. The next day Parrot stood guard, hidden in a quebracho tree, and he saw the women, who had toothed vaginas. After remaining quiet and motionless at first, Parrot threw a fruit down from the tree onto the women who were feasting below. The women began by accusing each other and then they discovered Parrot and began to fight about whose husband he should be. They threw things at each other, and one of the sticks went astray and broke the bone under the parrot’s tongue. Being now struck dumb and compelled to express himself through gestures, he could not make the men understand what had happened. (pp. 140-141)

Lévi-Strauss points out how, in this myth, the fearful aspect of women emerged in the myths of South America. As seen above, no one could explain what happened to the men because the parrot’s tongue was cut off with a phallic instrument thrown by the women who were fighting each other. This symbolises how women were feared, and desired the presence of a companion (or a hero) in their midst.

And can we see manifestations of this myth in North America? In analysing the symbology of the Greek monster Seylla, Marianne Hopman, a researcher at Harvard University makes a comparison with the myth of the toothed vagina, showing manifestations of this myth in several North-American tales described in the work of the ethnologist Franz Boas. According to Hopman, this myth is represented by several tales, such as the story of Tschuktetchi, where a dog barks near a woman’s house. The hero hears something inside the woman’s body, gnawing its teeth like a dog. Later this hero compares her vagina with a wolf’s mouth. Thus, the narratives about the toothed vagina provide proof of sexual symbolism (Hopman, 2012, p. 140) and these mythological
metaphors, in my opinion, give women second place to men. Female figures have negative characteristics in the collective representations of certain cultures.

Also according to Hopman (2012), in a tale of the Belle Cole Indians, the house of the toothed vagina has a door guarded by a voracious dog, and the door clamps down like jaws if the hero tries to enter. In these tales, the male figure—the hero—is always seen as surrounded by sexual symbolisms, symbolically depicting the female as a punitive figure (the negative of the feminine). In American contexts the hero risks being trapped inside the house, or the vagina (Mesoamerican telluric). In other words, in some contexts the feminine appears as threatening and vindictive.

Leaving the Americas and looking elsewhere, this myth was very common among some groups in Oceania, where the fear among Maoris of having their penis dilacerated led many of them to refuse to breed with women from other totems. Among aboriginals, the vagina with teeth was associated with death and the heroic figure sometimes fights with this figure, “tearing out its teeth”, as happens in certain Oriental and Amazonian myths.

From the examples described above we can understand how the figure of the hero, intertwined with the myth of the *vagina dentata*, is present in tales and folklore of North, Central, and South America, as well as of Oceania and other places in the world. Now we may ask how this myth can be seen in psychic reality.

**Analytical Psychology and the Myth of the Terrible Mother**

To answer this question about psychic reality, I would like to refer to the psychologist Erich Neumann. In his excellent book *The Great Mother* (2006, p. 151) he treats the fearful aspect of the feminine manifest in many symbols, including “the snake-woman, and the woman with the phallus”. Neumann highlights the destructive side of the feminine as the fatal and deadly womb, which is sometimes symbolised under “the archetypal form of a mouth with dangerous and threatening teeth” (2006, p. 148). Such depictions can be seen in the Aztec goddess of death, surrounded by sharp knives and teeth. Thus the manifestation of the Terrible Mother emanates from the archetype of the Great Mother.

According to Neumann (2006), this Great Mother can take the form of a Kind Mother, a Terrible Mother, or even a Kindly-Terrible Mother. The Terrible Mother has a devouring aspect and, according to Cavalcanti (1997), is associated in some cultures with the symbol of the vulva or vagina.

According to Neumann (2006) the toothed vagina is more clearly seen in the mythology of American Indians and other indigenous peoples, where a carnivorous fish is displayed in the vagina of the Terrible Mother. In other words, these myths symbolically represent this terrifying mother and the figure of the hero who pulls the teeth out of this vagina, making the mother a woman.

As a side note, I hold that there is a chauvinistic aspect in the remnants of these myths that gives strength to an understanding of pathological machismo, of hatred and anger against women which can be seen in some current societies. When balance is lacking between the feminine within the masculine, the anima becomes unbalanced and brings about a propensity to create terrible feminine myths to defend itself from this collective matriarchal base, which requires new symbolisations.

This terrible female, the terrifying mother, can be symbolised by the jaws and teeth of other animals in the myths, such as boars’ teeth. In this case, teeth take on phallic significance in monstrous mythical creatures such as winged gorgons. For Neumann, “the gorgon strangling animals with legs spread takes on the same posture as exhibitionist goddesses. In fact, the genitalia are covered up in this case and not visible, but they are replaced by the hideous physiognomy with bared teeth” (2006, p. 150).
This terrifying side of the feminine is also seen in literary tales and myths. Romero (2014) points out that what emerges in many tales is the description of the terrifying mother. According to him, the myths of the Terrible Mother “are linked to concepts, images or key ideas that are encompassed by or associated with her, such as the moon, night, water, threatening nature, death, fear, the mysterious and the unconscious” (2014, p. 50). In the construction of the feminine we can find myths and symbols that highlight negative aspects of the ancestor of the Terrible Mother and thus strengthen collective fantasies. Neumann holds that the archetype of the mother that emerges from the collective unconscious overpowers “the anima and, through fascination, leads to the uroboric incest of the death urge or to madness” (2014, p. 49). In many legends seduction becomes fatal for men, such as in the legend of the mermaids.

Also from Neumann’s work we can see that in this archetypal scenario the figure of the hero, present in so many myths, becomes more pronounced. It is clear that

The phases in the development of consciousness thus appear one after another, like the embryo that is contained in the mother in childlike dependence on her, then as the relationship between the beloved son and the Great Mother and, finally, as the heroic struggle of the male hero against the Great Mother. (Neumann, 2006, p. 133)

Throughout development the growing strength of the masculine is directly represented by consciousness in detriment to the maternal-feminine. The toothed vagina occupies the elementary place of the negative character of the feminine, denoting the symbolism of the Terrible Mother, who is eventually to be defeated by the hero.

Neumann writes that “We find images of the Terrible Mother in the oldest Indian culture at sacred sites in the Zhob River Valley” (2006, p. 135). In the course of the evolution of patriarchal values, such as the male deities of light and sun, the negative Great Mother was supplanted, but we still find its remnants in Greek gorgons and serpent heads present in many Western cultures as well as in Western myths.

One example is in the myth of the Great Snake Made of Gravel in the town of Cordeiropolis in Brazil. The myth clearly shows the negative of the feminine in this local culture. The myth perpetuates local imagination in rituals of worship to this serpent that inhabits the Lago do Cascalho, which means Gravel Lake. At certain times, snakes appear in this lake and foment the myth, bringing about collective rituals of observation. Touching one of the snakes could be fatal and people are very afraid of the snakes’ dangerous teeth and of being sucked in by them. In this cultural manifestation there is a clear expression of the fear of the Terrifying Mother that lives in the shadows of local imagination. But as of yet, no hero has managed to “break the snakes’ teeth”.

Since myths reflect the moral values of their respective contexts, it might be noted that myths about snakes that swallow people also persist in other places in Brazil. Such snakes belong to the Eunectes murinus family, the famous anaconda snakes. During the mating ritual, the female which is always larger than the male, devours the last male that attaches to her body. She swallows it entirely and then fasts. This species lives in aquatic environments, symbolically in the great maternal womb, waiting to devour any heroic penis that may try to break its teeth.

Cavalcanti (1997), in his reading of Neumann’s work, discusses the example of the Egyptian Mother Goddess. This goddess, a vulture, gives protection and shelter, but she can also bring death and is depicted as the goddess of death that devours corpses. “The mysteries of death are in the sphere of the Terrible Mother and take on the characteristic of devotion, but also of an imprisonment that swallows her offspring back into her womb” (1997, p. 170). The vagina dentata carries out the function of the door to death or of the devouring
ARCHETYPAL MANIFESTATIONS OF THE TERRIBLE MOTHER

mouth, symbols of devouring aggression and possession, all of which are “characteristics of the negative sphere polarity of the female archetype” (1997, p. 170). The uterus becomes help when it a tube swallows, suffocates, and dissolves. According to Cavalcanti, the deep entrances that lead to the interior of certain places represent the entrance into the vagina in its negative character, symbolising the negative side of the female archetype. If, on the one hand, the Great Mother is the distributor of life, on the other, her terrifying aspects take the form of monsters, such as the Medusa and the Gorgon, which are devouring and possessive representations of this mother.

The Clinical Manifestations of the Toothed Vagina

Following this brief discussion on the cultural manifestations of the archetype of the toothed vagina, I would now like to look at its clinical aspects. For this purpose, the article will bring in the case of the patient Adriano.

This 22-year old patient was seeking psychotherapy due to complaints of invasion by his mother and his father. He complained that he did not have enough internal space. This young man had never related deeply with any woman, and he brought up criticisms that exposed his hatred for the external world and the people around him. Throughout the psychotherapy Adriano showed certain characteristics of his shade. He attacked women, thus denoting a poorly developed anima, and he noted that this movement required broader listening. I therefore brought this hate into the therapeutic context and he exposed all his aggressiveness and machismo, thus revealing a very rigid animus that would not open up to this more tender side of his personality.

When attacking women, he noted that this indicated an obstacle to his internal growth. All his psychic energy was surrounded by terrifying images, feeding the imago of the Terrible Mother and its indications, through the archetype of the toothed vagina, which were manifest in his superficial relationships with women. In this way, he could not deepen love relationships with women, did not manifest a healthful relationship of his anima, and maintained a complete imbalance in the constitution of his self.

In the psychoanalytic setting I tried to scale down this Terrible Mother and bring in a more open mother, showing that not all women represent the tentacles of a gorgon, an ugly woman, even if the tentacles of his Great Mother were terrifying. This was a very difficult task because his world was full of phallic symbols such as a dream about the mouth of an enormous skull that swallowed up his legs and caused him enormous night-time fear.

These terrible dreams, with sharpened objects, gradually gave in to more healthy configurations. In his process of individuation, the Terrible Mother is, which he felt was somewhat invaded, began giving space to healthier configurations of his anima, as his aggressiveness and anxiety was “emptied” of this shade. Adriano transferred his psychic energy to new relationships, but fear of deep relationships continued. And there is an interesting clinical fact that I have also observed in other young people: how the archetype of the toothed vagina dentata, through her tentacles, paralyzes many young men in their internal conquests, feeding their fears and anxieties. This symbolically denoted how this archetype, with its sharpened teeth, holds its children in its tubes, making growth through their own sap impossible. Finally, Adriano left psychotherapy since he could not bear being separated from the tentacles of this Terrible Mother on the therapy. He returned to the arms of the Gorgon.

(Here I open a parenthesis. The archetype of the vagina dentata also predominated in neurotic mail patients whom I have seen in psychotherapy, feeding partial love relationships, without being very deep. The
Terrible Mother held and fed these young men in her primary imago, blocking any expansion of the anima and occasioning strong episodes of anxiety. I close the parenthesis.

I would like to stress that I have observed manifestations of the *vagina dentata* in some homosexual patients. In many of the stories of these patients, there was a Terrible Mother who was invasive with her tentacles. These mothers were so invasive in the remote infancy of these patients that many showed a poorly developed anima, which fed their fear of the opposite sex, occasioning states of extreme anxiety toward women in general. In these cases, due to the precariousness of individuation in the clinical setting, this archetype showed its prevalence, occasioning strong episodes of paralysis.

If, on the one hand, I observed this in homosexual patients, I have also known “machista” patients in the extreme of the animus, who could not enter their feminine side, since it was badly “developed”. The result consisted of attacks against the feminine. In the aetiology of the phylogenesis of archetypical fantasies of these macho patients I observed a fantasy of attacks on the feminine in their shades, since the non-metabolized aggressiveness from infancy, due to the invasion of the Terrible Mother, made good relationships with the opposite sex an impossibility. This invasion fed “machistic” attacks on the women who were beyond their family spheres: When they attacked, something of the shade was projected and, when it was projected, something badly sedimented was present, denoting a poorly developed anima.

The fact of preserving the Terrible Mother inside them, which, in this case, was the wife, demonstrates how this archetype feeds cultural relationships in some small towns in Brazil. As in Oceania, when the Maoris looked to this archetype to preserve the women from their Totem and fed fantasies that women of other tribes had toothed vaginas, my patients who manifested this archetype criticized the women in neighbouring towns, preserving the local feminine in its family context. This justifies the fact that many “macho” men hold onto their women by making them untouchable. In the setting, this spouse was preserved in the terrorific image, assuming the tentacles of this mother. The other women, especially the independent ones who made a confrontation by constituting their anima, were castigated by the men’s jealous and perverse comments. These attacks fed the manifestations of this Terrible Mother through the archetype of the toothed vagina. Thus, attacks on femininity by patients of the masculine sex denoted an aggressivity present at the base of the anima of these patients, who failed to accept a complementation with the animus. Nevertheless, the Great Mother was preserved in her essence, being occupied by the figure of the wife, the Great Queen. This Terrible Mother was also manifested in various dreams where the famous Anaconda appeared with its huge mouth filled with teeth, occupying a central position in the homosexual anxiety of these patients.

**Conclusion**

Thus, from the collective representations of the myth of the toothed vagina we can see how the Terrible Mother manifests herself in many ways in contemporary society. These developments range from individual to social manifestations that permeate the collective imaginary through symbolic formations that appear in dreams, myths, and legends. However, we should take a very critical look at this myth of the *vagina dentata*, since the male figure of the hero is highlighted as he removes the teeth from this dangerous vagina and symbolically turns the woman over to the world of desire. Thus, in its negative manifestation, I see this myth as portraying a fragmented masculine unconscious that stirs up the substrates of hatred often directed at female representations and where the hero, in some cultures, is either punished by being trapped inside the vagina, or else praised for having pulled the teeth out of this vagina. The negative of the feminine, in its extreme portrayal, can thus
symbolically trigger off collective movements of hatred that are present in myths and legends, both Western and Eastern.

Leaving aside the negative cultural aspect of this myth and now considering clinical contexts, I believe it pertinent to differentiate cultural and individual symbols.

According to Jung “It is above all clinical psychology that deals with the study of symbols; so, its material consists of so-called natural symbols as opposed to cultural symbols” (2011, p. 272). Actual symbols are products of unconscious contents and manifest archetypal images. Cultural symbols express eternal truths and are expressed by existing religions that construct “collective representations” of civilised societies (Jung, 2011, p. 272). In the context of the myth of the vagina with teeth, it is most important to understand manifestations of the Terrible Mother depicted through natural symbols, if one is to also understand processes of individuation in clinical settings. This is because the failure to grasp the negative of the feminine blocks any comprehension of the anxiety and fear related to the enigma of women that many patients today hold in their shadows. Thus, this myth often sustains manifestations of the persona in numerous male patients and protects them, through strongly crystallised personas, based on the moral values of the groups to which they belong.

References