

“The Woman Underwater:” Rhizomatic Body in Inuit Storytelling

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At the centre of the Inuit cosmological belief system stands a myth of Sedna, a young woman who, in her time as a human being, refuses to accept a husband, succumbs in some versions to allurements of a bird in male disguise, and, after a string of most drastic incidents, transforms eventually into a mother or Goddess of sea mammals.

However much the story of Sedna represents an interpretive challenge, its essentiality is, on the most clearly recognized level, given precisely by her power over the sea mammals, upon which most Inuit communities traditionally depended for sustenance, and thus bare survival. On deeper levels, of both profane and mythological tenors, though, the story of Sedna seems to indicate yet other exegetic potential, accountable perhaps for some of the appeal of the old myth to even contemporary storytellers, writers, and artists, and to their audiences.

Sedna was “believed to be one of the primal forces of nature,” (Seidelman 71), and her chthonian genesis is reflected in her name: the word “Sedna” can be translated as “the one who is before,” which indicates eternity, as well as omnipresence, and agelessness of her being. Her story appears, with local alterations, in mythologies of the northern regions around the globe, and the protagonist is known by several indigenous names; among them are, for example, Nuliajuk, “the poor wife,” Niviarsiang, “the girl,” Kavna, “she down there,” Takanakapsaluk, “the terrible one down there,” Arnakapfaluk, “the big woman,” Uinigumissuitung, “she who never wished to marry,” Aivilayoq, “she who gives useful things,” Imap ukûa, “mother of sea animals,” and others. These appellative variations focus upon different aspects of Sedna’s identity, but all share the common reference to her cardinal power to personify “both the tragedies of life and the mysteries of creation” (Seidelman 71).

Although the myth of Sedna naturally undergoes local and temporal permutations, its core can, most likely, be identified with the archaic version recorded by Franz Boas on Baffin Island. It tells a story of Sedna as a young girl, living alone with her father, who refuses marriage offers from all men. Eventually, however, she cannot resist the enticing wooing of a beautiful sea fulmar and agrees to flee with him. In the bird’s home she soon understands that she was deceived by false promises of good life, and realizes her mistake of abandoning the human world. In her sorrow she sings a song by which she

calls to her father and pleads with him to take her back. The father comes, and in his anger at his daughter's treatment he kills the fulmar, takes Sedna in his kayak, and they both set out for home. But the killed bird's fellows are in hot pursuit, and with their wings they stir up a heavy storm on the sea. In fear for his own life, the father offers his daughter to the birds and throws her overboard. Since she desperately clings to the edge of the boat, the father takes a knife and cuts off the joints of her fingers, which are transformed into whales, different kinds of seal, and other sea mammals. After that the storms abate, because the fulmars think Sedna dead, and the father takes her back into the boat. Sedna swears a revenge against him, and when they get home, she asks her dogs to gnaw off his hands and feet. The father then curses himself, his daughter and the dogs, whereupon the earth opens and swallows them. Since then they have lived in the underworld land called Adlivun, of which Sedna is the mistress, and where she performs her role of Mother of sea beasts that sprung from her own body.

According to Harold Seidelman and James Turner, the lasting attraction of, if not even fascination by, the myth of Sedna comes from the fact that it "raises the profoundest fears of Inuit life" (Seidelman 78). Among them were the fear of the cold and the dark, of the perilous sea upon which the Inuit depended for their unpredictable existence, and, possibly more importantly yet, the fear of separation from the family and community, with the ensuing loss of human identity. Such fears, no matter how life-threatening, must be faced, so that the unity and renewal of the community are spiritually guaranteed. These, largely metaphysical, encounters with Sedna come under the competence of the shaman, a person in "professional" charge of the spiritual health and well-being of the community, which is largely inseparable from its physical one. In a magical, ritually induced trance, the shaman's soul undergoes a hazardous journey to the bottom of the sea which is Sedna's home, where he must appease her wrath by combing and braiding her hair. Only then is she positively inclined to listen to the shaman's entreaty to release the sea animals, so that they go to the water surface to offer their bodies to the hunters, and the danger of starvation is averted.

The purpose of social healing, achieved by the shaman's performance, is also discernible in the annual Sedna festival, taking place in late autumn, just before the community was to cope with the extremities of the northern winter. The festival centered around a theatrical event directed by the *angakoq*, the shaman, and his helpers. The shaman would chant a ritual song, intended to lure Sedna to rise from the bottom of the sea to a "breathing hole" in the floor of the igloo. When she gets near, the *angakoq*

strikes the spirit with a harpoon, in a simulation of a seal hunt. Sedna has to wring herself free and escape back to her underworld realm. The reenactment of the ancient ritual is symbolically linked to the people's deepest need and desire, that of successful hunt, upon which rests all well-being, and survival itself. Some of the forces that are embodied in the regular reproductions of the myth of Sedna are implied in the vivid description of the ritual by Father David Cranz, who visited Greenland as early as in 1761:

That infernal Proserpine has her abode under the sea in a big house, in which due to her powers all sea animals are held captive. In a tub filled with fish oil that stands under her lamp swim the sea birds. The door is guarded by two erect, dreadfully biting seals. Often there is also one big dog that does not sleep for more than a mere blink of an eye, so he can be very rarely taken by surprise. In times of great want at sea, one of the angakoqs must, for a good reward, undergo a journey to these places. His *torngak* or, *spiritus familiaris*, who instructed him previously, leads him through the earth or the sea. Then he passes through the realm of the souls, who all live most ravishing lives. But then comes a grey abyss or *vacuum*, and above it a narrow wheel, smooth as ice, that turns very fast. When he has luckily passed that, the *torngag* leads him by the hand along a rope stretched above the abyss between the seal guards, directly into the palace of that infernal fury. At the first glimpse of the uninvited visitors she begins to shake and foam with rage... But they take a firm grasp of her, drag her by the hair, and rip off her unclean pendants, with the help of whose *charmes* she holds back the sea animals. These then immediately travel to the surface. The hero finds his way back easily and without all danger. (qtd. in Duerr 37-39, translation mine)

Hans Peter Duerr, a German ethnologist and cultural historian, interprets the image of Sedna as the ur-mother of life itself, to whom all forms of life must alternately return for the sake of rebirth through death. She is thus not an evidently malevolent creature as presented in Father Cranz's account – which was, understandably, informed by his specific cultural and religious credentials – but, rather, a being whose image gives expression to the more ambivalent, pre-moral state of existence in general, and of human conscience in particular, as conceived by the native communities inhabiting the north, the space of ultimate human possibility.

From the comparative point of view it is worth noting that the myth of Sedna, focussing as it does on a quintessentially female figure, and grounded as it is in the distinctive geography of the north, epitomizes the counterbalance of the native, versus the non-native perspectives of the discursive identity of the north. Whereas the native perspective of the northern habitat may persuasively be regarded as that of the insider, the non-native one generally manifests the outsider's gaze, to which the north usually appears "as a place of extremity and masculine adventure" (Grace 145), where the female element can hardly carve a niche for itself. The authenticity of the story of Sedna thus attests to the truth of Sherrill Grace's observation, issuing from her extensive research in the field of northern culture and discourse, that "the greatest adventure, the most difficult and yet the most necessary, is the adventure of words and representation, never more so than when one is faced with the overwhelming languagelessness of the North and the silencing of death" (Grace 147).

It can hence be argued that through the myth of Sedna the Canadian Inuit people have productively contributed to the creation of a truer, more balanced picture of the north and of its imaginary, which forms an integral constituent of Canadian national identity as a whole. Sherrill Grace resumes:

Whether as a "friendly" place of potential resource wealth and a space for dangerous adventure or as a barren land empty of little but snow, ice, wolves, and the threat of starvation and death, Canada has become to be equated with the North. What the explorers, traders, geographers, historians, and politicians constructed in economic, cartographic, historiographic, and political terms, our artists have trained us to see, feel, and recognize as a Canadian identity. We have been – and continue to be – constructed and represented as "the men of the North," whose place in history... is to guard "the true North strong and free," with a "Northern Magus" (Trudeau) for a prime minister and a wine labelled "49 North." (Grace 124)

Speculations about the unique position of the myth of Sedna in traditional Inuit cosmology, as well as in contemporary discourse nourished by the aesthetic imaginary of the north, provide, admittedly, yet another interpretive option. Given the undeniable focus on the physicality of the body in the story of Sedna, and, especially, the transformative and metonymic potential of Sedna's body, thanks to which new, perfectly self-contained forms of life are (self)produced from the minute parts of the original structure, we may perhaps suggest a reading of the story as an epitome of the

notion of rhizome, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari on several occasions throughout their complex work commenting on modern culture. Rhizome, they explain, is:

the antithesis of a root-tree structure, or ‘arborescence’, the structural model which has dominated Western thought from Porphyrian trees, to Linnaean taxonomies, to Chomskyian sentence diagrams. Arborescences are hierarchical, stratified totalities which impose limited and regulated connections between their components. Rhizomes, by contrast, are non-hierarchical, horizontal multiplicities which cannot be subsumed within a unified structure, whose components form random, unregulated networks in which any element may be connected with any other element. (qtd. in Bogue 107)

It was, conceivably, their “philosophy of difference,” their rejection of any totalitarian paradigm of thought, that inspired Deleuze and Guattari to embrace the idea of rhizome as an expression of more level, and less restrictive perspective of viewing the world, as well as of blending its discursive potentialities. Such conception of blending of culturally specific language registers is meaningfully present in works of contemporary artists who set to the task of retelling the story of Sedna to contemporary audiences in contemporary contexts. One of them is Cindy Cowan, a playwright and adult educator from Baffin Island, who transformed the myth of Sedna into a stage performance. In the introduction to her play *A Woman from the Sea*, the author provides the audience with an early warning about the origins of her protagonist, and of possible dangers of misperception that are soon to be faced: “When a character is not actually involved in a scene, she or he remains onstage and continues to underscore the local scene with business... Sedna waits or drinks from her wineskin, does yoga, and at times seems to be simply a seal basking in the sun” (Filewood, ed. 341). From the beginning, Sedna is seen with a variety of prospects – and surprises - ready at hand:

She is a Selkie, a creature who is capable of being both a woman and a seal. Sedna and the actress playing her may transform at will from woman to seal by slipping in and out of her seal tail which is detachable at the waist. On Sedna’s upper body she wears a coat. The glory she once possessed as a goddess of the sea is reflected in the coat’s remaining tatters and skins. Worn with the tail it reinforces the transformation to a seal. Worn alone, it gives the impression of someone regal having fallen in the gutter. Finally, Sedna wears a head-dress

that serves as a seal mask when she lowers her head as she does now.

(Filewood, ed. 342)

The action of the play focuses on a brief verbal encounter between Sedna and a young couple George and Almira, who arrive at the sea coast to do environmental surveillance. It is only Almira who, in spite of all difficulty, is able to sense Sedna's presence in its truth, and eventually accepts her affinity with the goddess's feminine essence. Sedna's and Almira's identities begin quickly to compound. The couple is troubled by a foul smell, caused, presumably, by a dead corpse of a seal lying on the beach. But Almira notes impulsively: "The blood and the smell... It won't go away... It's me. It's me. It's me..." (Filewood, ed. 349).

It seems that the only power the contemporary Sedna is left with is that of language, and that her only joy "the adventure of words and representation." George's political rhetorics of a well-meaning environmental activist is subverted by Sedna's gleeful insinuations:

George: It is very important at this time, that the federal government be aware of the desire... that this slaughter of marine life be ended... If we try hard enough, this year could perhaps see the end... These animals surely deserve to be left in peace.

Almira: In nomine patri, et filii, et spiritu sanctu.

Sedna: (*at the same time*) In the name of the mother, the daughter, and the Holy Ghost. (Filewood, ed. 350)

Some moments later, Sedna accuses Almira directly, offering her an ironic, self-reflective linguistic mirror: "Sedna: 'You know nothing about merpersons.'

Almira: 'Oh for heaven's sake! A liberated hallucination.'" (Filewood, ed. 359).

The play combines the indigenous mythical image of a native sea goddess with the Christian notion of Annunciation – Sedna lets Almira know of her pregnancy, manages to stir her from her depressive lethargy, and the two carefully unite in delicate union and circumspect hope for a good, or at least possible, future.

Alootook Ipellie's short story "Summit with Sedna, the Mother of Sea Beasts" is a fine example of verbal parody turning and returning the outsider's gaze in all directions, reaching an effective moment of self-irony. The story is told by a shaman, giving an account of recently growing problems with placating the goddess's anger, and of his own innovative project of solving them. From the very start, though, the text operates with a

conspicuous tension between the mythical ur-motif and the language in which the motif is dressed. The opening of the story has the efficacy of a politician's speech:

As a shaman, I had many occasions to visit Sedna, the Mother of Sea Beasts. Making spirit journeys to her home at the bottom of the sea was often perilous. But these journeys were done out of great sense of duty to my people when hard time beset them.

One winter, a great famine was affecting a number of camps in our region of the Arctic. I was curious to know if other regions were having the same problem. So I made a spirit journey in order to contact all my fellow shamans. Indeed, the great famine was not restricted to our area. (Moses, ed. 255)

Unlike in the old versions of the myth, in Ipellie's text the cause of Sedna's anger is, finally, given its "proper" scientific explanation. Sedna's unhappy rage was brought about by sexual abuse by her father, to which she was subjected in childhood. (Psychoanalysis is thus one of many targets of irony in Ipellie's minimalistic text.) And since this is unexpected revelation, unexpected means must be summoned to render help to the suffering goddess, and to restore the desired order of things. The concise report then quickly reaches its end, by, again, returning to an almost painfully recognizable political jargon:

It was also the first time in the history of the Arctic Kingdom that all of its shamans had worked together to avert an almost certain threat of extinction of its people from the face of the earth. From this day on, the Inuit were assured survival as a vibrant force in what was often times an inhospitable Arctic world. (Moses, ed. 257)

And, as a private wink to attentive, and appreciative audience, the last sentence of the text goes as follows: "And, perhaps more importantly for me, in the eyes of my people, my reputation as a powerful shaman, remained perfectly intact" (Moses 257). The author hence applies a strategy of "writing back" delineated by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*, in that he "abrogates the norms of the dominant discourse and then neatly appropriates and reverses them to articulate his own cultural experience" (Grace 243).

From what has been suggested, it seems that myth has proved, in certain areas at least, to maintain some of its functional appeal. And the myth of Sedna, mother of sea beasts, has remained a part of the aesthetic identity of the native north, and through strategies of cultural blending and transformation, reaches across its speciously inhospitable borders.

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