Questions

I wonder why it is the case that at this time within the western cultural imaginary white working-class women are *expected* to be strong and to speak their minds, to possess a wealth of common-sense wisdom. And I wonder why a white working-class woman who makes no secret of enjoying sex is so liable to be called a slut, a whore. Why are black women *expected* to be spectacularly powerful mothers, to find ways out of no way to provide for their children? Why are out-spoken black women so often assumed to be as well pillars of moral authority? And why, once again, are black women so much more vulnerable than whites to the charge of ‘whore’ or ‘welfare mother’? Why are Latina women simultaneously hyper-sexualized in the cultural imaginary, and hyper-maternalised? Why are Asian women imagined to be so studious, so industrious, and such cheap massage parlour prostitutes? Why is the figure of the Jewish mother so filled with manipulative power and conniving knowledge in ‘our’ imaginations? Why is it the case that within the western cultural imaginary the knowledge, power and authority of these women is simultaneously *acknowledged and always under threat*? And why is it that, collectively, the knowledge, power and authority of white middle-class christian women is simply never taken all that seriously?

More questions: why are white christian fundamentalists and conservative Catholics so bent on claiming for themselves exclusively the right to re-define the mother, to force her complete obedience to their choices for her? Why have certain christian fundamentalists so recently begun to make a very public issue out of virginity – even to the extent of (p)raising the miraculous possibility of re-virgination? What name is often enough used to label any troublesome woman who might dare to engage in sexual intercourse outside of wedlock? It would seem that the threat of the whore is alive and well in the twenty-first century …
It’s not just the fundamentalists (of all flavours) whose words and actions concern me. I wonder why so many allegedly ‘liberal’ western males (and some females as well!) are so loathe to extend the notion of basic human rights to women in other cultures. Why do they hem and haw and insist that, out of ‘respect’ for the other culture, other religion, other tradition, they can’t possibly ask those other men to respect women who, whorishly, dare to expose the skin on their ankles, or simply dare to leave their homes without a male escort? Are these western men (and women) satisfying their own desire for veiled virgin-whores and mother-always-at-home through these ‘other’ women?

I do not believe that anyone can provide a definitive answer to these questions, but then that’s not the point. The point is that the questions do in fact make sense. They are intelligible to us as questions, which means that they do in fact address a ‘something’ in our midst. Could it be that this ‘something’ is a trace of the ferociously feminine sacred?

**Endnotes**

1 See Ali and Scelfo, ‘Choosing Virginity.’ For a glimpse into the politics of sexual abstinence programs see Debra Rosenberg, ‘The Battle over Abstinence,’ *Newsweek*, 9 December 2002. For a heart-rending personal account of ‘virginity gone too long’ see Catherine Von Ruhland, ‘I Don't Want to Die a Virgin,’ *Good Weekend: The Age Magazine*, 18 September 2004, and for a highly amusing British encounter with virginity (as an export from the USA), see John O'Farrell, ‘Celibacy and the City,’ *The Guardian*, 25 June 2004.