



The Sage And The Serpent: Feminine Wisdom In Myth And Mysticism

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Abstract: This paper explores the archetype of the feminine sage in mythology and mysticism, focusing on how intuitive, esoteric wisdom embodied by female figures often exists in creative tension with institutionalised, patriarchal authority. We examine Hindu mythology in depth – the goddess Saraswati as the personification of wisdom and revered women sages like Gargi and Maitreyi – alongside brief comparative insights from Western traditions, including Sophia of Gnostic lore and the Greek goddess Hekate. Through literary and philosophical analysis, we illuminate how these “sage” figures, often symbolised by the serpent as a conduit of hidden knowledge, challenge or subvert orthodox power structures. We also consider modern retellings and interpretations in literature, film, and feminist theory that reclaim and reinterpret these archetypes for contemporary empowerment. The study underscores a recurrent theme: feminine wisdom as a force of insight and transformation, frequently marginalised by official dogma yet persistently resurfacing as a guiding “serpent” of truth.

Index Terms - Feminine archetypes, sage archetype, mystic archetype, mythology, religious studies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout world mythology, wisdom is often personified as female, from ancient goddesses of knowledge to wise crones in folktales. This personification reflects an archetype of the Mystic/Sage in feminine form: a figure who possesses profound insight, intuition, and often uncanny knowledge of mysteries. Yet alongside reverence for such figures, myth and history show a pattern of tension between this intuitive feminine wisdom and the institutionalised authority of established orders. The very title of this study, “The Sage and the Serpent,” evokes that dichotomy. In many cultures, the serpent symbolises secret or forbidden knowledge – for example, in the biblical Eden story – and is frequently associated with goddesses or wise women. Female wisdom figures have at times been portrayed as serpentine or allied with serpents, signifying both their knowledge and the subversive threat it poses to orthodoxy. This paper investigates how feminine wisdom figures, as expressions of the mystic/sage archetype, navigate the space between intuitive knowing and authoritative doctrine.

We begin with a focus on Hindu mythology and culture, where the embodiment of knowledge itself is a goddess – Saraswati – and where ancient scriptures surprisingly include learned women such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi engaging in philosophical debate. These Indian examples provide a rich case of culturally sanctioned feminine wisdom coexisting with a patriarchal tradition that often constrained women’s roles. We then briefly compare parallel figures from Western antiquity: Sophia, the female personification of divine Wisdom in Hellenistic and Gnostic thought, and Hekate, the Greek goddess of witchcraft and liminality who was linked to the wisdom of the occult. Each of these figures – Saraswati, Sophia, Hekate, and the historical women sages – highlights aspects of the feminine sage archetype. They also illustrate conflicts or negotiations between experiential, intuitive knowledge, “gnosis,” inner illumination, and the structures of formal authority, be it Vedic orthodoxy, Church dogma, or societal norms. Finally, we examine modern retellings and interpretations of these myths in literature and feminist thought, observing how contemporary

culture is re-engaging with the archetype of the wise woman, often reframing the once-pejorative image of the “witch” or the serpent in positive terms. In adopting an interdisciplinary approach – drawing on mythology, religious studies, and feminist theory – this paper aims to demonstrate that the feminine wisdom archetype has been a persistent, if tension-fraught, current in human spiritual imagination, one that continues to inspire new meanings in the present day.

II. SARASWATI AND THE RIVER OF WISDOM IN HINDU MYTHOLOGY

Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, music, and wisdom, is usually shown in serene form, with four arms holding a book (the Vedas), a mālā (rosary) for meditation, a pot of water, and a vīṇā (lute), symbolising the many facets of wisdom. A swan (hamsa) at her feet represents discernment between true and false, while a peacock nearby embodies the arts and the emotions, together suggesting an equilibrium between reason and emotion in the pursuit of knowledge.

In Hindu culture, knowledge and learning are deified in the form of Goddess Saraswati. As one of the principal goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, Saraswati personifies wisdom, eloquence, and intellectual pursuits. Her very name in Sanskrit can mean “flowing one” or is sometimes interpreted as “she who possesses speech,” linking her to the ancient Vedic River Sarasvati and Vāc, the personified goddess of speech. In early Vedic hymns, the concept of wisdom and divine speech was indeed feminized – a notable example is the Devī Sūkta (Hymn of the Goddess) in the Rig Veda, attributed to a woman seer and voiced by the goddess of speech declaring, “I, the goddess, alone dispense the wealth of wisdom to all.” Over time, Saraswati inherited this mantle of Vāc; by the late Vedic and Puranic period, she is firmly established as the goddess of knowledge, arts and culture, the patron of scholars, poets, and musicians.

Saraswati’s iconography and myths convey an ideal of wisdom that harmonises rationality with intuition. In images and iconography, her white garb and lotus seat denote purity and transcendent knowledge, while each attribute in her hands carries symbolic weight. The book signifies learning and the scriptures; the string of crystals (mālā) signifies concentration and spiritual contemplation; the water pot denotes the creative and purifying aspect of truth; and the vīṇā represents creative art, music and the communication of knowledge. Notably, the swan (hamsa) that accompanies her is fabled to possess the alchemical ability to separate milk from water – a metaphor for discrimination between truth and falsehood or the real and unreal. The presence of a peacock, radiant with plumage, alongside the swan is sometimes interpreted as symbolising the emotional and creative beauty that knowledge can illuminate. Together, they imply that true wisdom requires both intellect and intuition, logic and creative inspiration – a balance of qualities that Saraswati, as a holistic wisdom deity, embodies.

Despite being venerated as the font of all learning, Saraswati’s narratives hint at subtle tensions with patriarchal authority. One striking myth describes how Brahmā (the male creator god, who, according to some traditions, is Saraswati’s consort or father) became infatuated with Saraswati’s beauty and pursued her relentlessly, violating the sacred father-daughter relation. In the tale, Saraswati evades Brahmā’s gaze by changing forms, and ultimately she curses Brahmā for his lust, decreeing that he shall have almost no worship on earth. This curse mythical justification for the fact that Brahmā indeed has very few temples in India, can be read symbolically: the goddess of wisdom rebukes the presumptive authority of the creator when it transgresses moral and cosmic order. Saraswati’s priority is safeguarding cosmic ṛta (order and truth), even if it means defying a powerful male deity. In another story, when demigods (Gandharvas) steal the heavenly elixir Soma, Saraswati recovers it not by force but through the enchanting power of her music and knowledge, effectively outwitting them. Such legends reinforce the theme of wisdom versus brute power – Saraswati’s feminine approach uses art, intellect, and ethical force to restore harmony, implicitly critiquing more aggressive modes of authority.

Beyond divine myth, Hindu tradition also remembers women sages and philosophers, reflecting that the pursuit of higher knowledge (brahma-vidyā) was not strictly a male preserve. In the Upanishads (c. 800–500 BCE), which are foundational philosophical scriptures, we encounter women like Gārgī Vāchaknavī and Maitreyī who are esteemed for their insight. Gārgī appears in the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad as a renowned intellectual who boldly debates the sage Yājñavalkya in King Janaka’s philosophical assembly. Described as a brahmavādinī (knower of Brahman) and natural philosopher, Gārgī fearlessly challenges Yājñavalkya with probing metaphysical questions about the nature of reality and the cosmic substratum of existence. The text relates that she queried him on what pervades the universe, leading Yājñavalkya through a chain of explanations until, at a certain point, he admonished her not to “ask too much” lest her head fall off. This dramatic warning “–your head will shatter” – has been interpreted in various ways: perhaps as a metaphor that Gārgī was pushing the limits of metaphysical knowledge where rational thinking breaks down, or as a

literal patriarchal rebuke to silence a woman who had gone too far in outsmarting male sages. In either case, the episode encapsulates the tension between a woman's quest for ultimate truth and a man's assertion of authority. Gargi is ultimately praised for her intellect; after this debate, she is said to acknowledge Yājñavalkya's superior realisation of Brahman, but the text leaves a vivid impression of a woman who could hold her own in a scholarly arena and unsettle the complacency of male experts.

Another prominent figure, Maitreyi, features in the same Upanishad as Yājñavalkya's wife, who hungers for spiritual knowledge. When Yājñavalkya is about to renounce worldly life and offers to divide his property between his two wives, Maitreyi asks a profound question: "If I were to obtain all the wealth in the world, would I become immortal by it?" When Yājñavalkya admits that worldly wealth cannot grant immortality, Maitreyi responds that wealth is of no use to her; instead, she wishes to learn the secret of immortality. This prompts Yājñavalkya to impart to her his highest teaching on the Ātman (the Supreme Self) – a discourse on spiritual unity and self-realisation. Maitreyi's rejection of material gain in favour of spiritual wisdom broke the mould of what was expected of a "wife" in ancient society. In the patriarchal context of the time, women were generally confined to domestic roles, yet here is a woman asserting the primacy of knowledge over property, the eternal over the ephemeral. The text explicitly contrasts Maitreyi with Yājñavalkya's other wife, Katyāyanī, who "was of more conventional mind" and about whom nothing more is said. Maitreyi, identified as a brahmavādinī like Gargi, thus represents the feminine sage archetype willing to pursue truth at the expense of societal expectations – an intuitive understanding that true fulfillment lies in wisdom, not wealth.

A further example from later Hindu epic literature is Sulabhā, a philosopher and yoginī mentioned in the Mahābhārata. Sulabha debates King Janaka of Videha on the nature of the Self and liberation, while experimentally entering his mind by yogic power. The interesting dimension here is gender: Janaka questions Sulabha's behaviour, implying that as a young woman, she should not engage in such discourse or wander as a renunciant. Sulabha counters with rigorous arguments that the Self is not conditioned by gender, and proceeds to demonstrate that a woman can attain the highest spiritual knowledge just as a man can. According to the text, she "logically established that no essential difference distinguished man and woman" in terms of the soul's capacity for enlightenment. Her very presence and intellectual victory serve to defy gender norms in ancient philosophy: Janaka, a king representing worldly and patriarchal authority, is humbled by the wisdom of a female ascetic. The Sulabha-Janaka dialogue explicitly addresses women's equality in spiritual matters, making it a remarkable passage in a generally patriarchal epic. The inclusion of such episodes in revered texts suggests that the ideal of feminine wisdom had a place in the Indian imagination, even if real social structures often limited women's education. It is telling that these women – Gargi, Maitreyi, Sulabha, and others like Lopāmudrā or Apāla (female Vedic hymn-composers) – are remembered as exceptions, almost archetypal figures of "female sage," shining against a background where most teachers and philosophers were male. They became inspirations for later generations; indeed, as modern scholars note, the philosophical ambitions of figures like Maitreyi prefigured the women-led religious orders that emerged in Buddhism and Jainism, where historical nuns and women's monastic communities carried the torch of feminine wisdom.

In the Hindu framework, then, we observe a complex picture: on one hand, wisdom is venerated as female – Saraswati is worshipped in every school and by every student at her annual festival (Vasant Panchami) to this day – and ancient lore celebrates a few extraordinary women who accessed the highest knowledge. On the other hand, these women had to assert themselves within, or against, a predominantly male-run intellectual tradition. The archetype of the feminine sage in India is often connected to the idea of śakti, the feminine divine energy. Saraswati as a goddess is sometimes understood as the śakti (power) of Brahma's creativity, or more broadly as a facet of the Supreme Goddess in Shakta theology. The feminine, in these conceptions, is the power of consciousness and insight. Yet paradoxically, historical convention put learned women on the margins. This paradox of revering "Mother Wisdom" but restricting real women's agency underscores the central theme of our study: the friction between intuitive, transcendent knowledge, often symbolised by the feminine and institutional authority, often coded masculine. In the next sections, we will see similar dynamics play out in Western mystical traditions, where female personifications of wisdom and outsider goddess figures likewise challenge the status quo.

III. SOPHIA: THE DIVINE WISDOM AND FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

In the Western classical and mystical tradition, Sophia (Greek for "Wisdom") emerges as a profoundly important feminine symbol of wisdom, particularly in Hellenistic philosophy, Jewish wisdom literature, and early Christian mystical traditions. In the Biblical Book of Proverbs, for example, Wisdom (Ḥokhmah in Hebrew, translated as Sophia in Greek) is personified as a woman who was with God at the beginning of creation, "rejoicing in His inhabited world" – a kind of co-creator and teacher to humanity. This feminine

Wisdom in Jewish and early Christian thought became identified with divine attributes: in some texts, Sophia is like a bride of God or an aspect of God's mind. Nowhere is the concept more developed than in Gnostic Christianity of the 1st–3rd centuries CE, where Sophia plays a central cosmological role. Gnosticism – whose very name means “knowledge” – posited a mythic drama in which Sophia is an aeon (emanation of the supreme God) who falls from the pleroma (the divine fullness) due to her desire to intimately know or create without the permission of the ultimate God. One version of the myth recounts that Sophia, yearning to apprehend the unknowable Supreme Being, or to create on her own, transgressed the boundary of divine order, and as a result generated a flawed emanation: the Demiurge, a lesser god who becomes the creator of the material world. In essence, Sophia's bold pursuit of knowledge “beyond limits” leads to chaos – the material cosmos separated from its divine source. She becomes trapped in the lower realms, anguished and seeking restoration.

This Gnostic myth can be read as a nuanced reflection on the dangers and necessity of wisdom. Sophia is at once the cause of cosmic disorder (through her unsanctioned wisdom-seeking) and the potential saviour figure: it is through Sophia's experience and eventual redemption that the spark of divine insight can return to humanity. Gnostic texts often portray Sophia as suffering, exiled in the world of matter, yet aiding humankind by imparting a piece of her divine spirit into us, the pneuma or soul that yearns for enlightenment. Indeed, some Gnostic sects identified Sophia with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. In their radical reinterpretation of Genesis, the serpent that offered the forbidden fruit of knowledge to Eve was not Satanic but a messenger of Sophia or even Sophia herself in disguise. One text describes that the creator god, the Demiurge, identified with the Old Testament's jealous Yahweh wanted to keep Adam and Eve in ignorance, but “his mother” Sophia/Achamoth sent the serpent (called Ophiōn or Ophis) to teach mankind to disobey the jealous god and acquire the knowledge (gnosis) necessary for spiritual liberation. This daring version of the Eden story flips the script: Eve's choice to eat the fruit and the serpent's guidance represent a positive act of awakening – the feminine divine principle urging humanity toward enlightenment against a false authority. Little wonder that such ideas were anathema to the emerging orthodox Church.

The tension between intuitive knowledge and institutional authority is stark in the saga of Sophia. The Church Fathers condemned Gnostic groups as heretical, partly because of their Sophia-centric theology and their inclusion of women in teaching roles. Church polemicist Tertullian, around 200 CE, sneered that in Gnostic gatherings “men and women alike” preached, debated, exorcised, and even baptised – activities mainstream Christianity reserved for men. This horror at women's religious authority went hand-in-hand with the demotion of Sophia. Once, the concept of Holy Wisdom had nearly made it into the Christian Godhead (some early Christians saw Sophia as the Holy Spirit or as a divine companion of Christ), but as orthodoxy crystallised, the feminine aspect of God was suppressed. In later centuries, Sophia was half-forgotten in official theology, appearing only in veiled forms (for instance, in the veneration of Saint Sophia as a symbolic figure, or allegorically in Marian devotions). The magnificent Byzantine church Hagia Sophia “–Holy Wisdom” – in Constantinople testifies to an acknowledgement of Sophia in some form, yet even there, Sophia was interpreted as an attribute of Christ. The direct worship or doctrinal acknowledgement of a feminine Wisdom figure was largely excised from orthodox Christian practice. One could say the “Serpent” was cast out of Eden: institutional religion could not tolerate what the symbol of Sophia represented – a challenge to the monopoly on defining truth, and the inclusion of the feminine in the highest truth.

Yet Sophia's legacy did not disappear. Through medieval and Renaissance mysticism, the idea of divine Wisdom resurfaces in hidden corners – in alchemical texts, in Kabbalistic Jewish writings (the Shekhinah concept parallels Sophia), and in the work of Christian mystics like Jakob Boehme or Jane Leade who wrote rhapsodically of Sophia as God's feminine side. In Russian Orthodox thought of the 19th–20th century (e.g. Vladimir Solovyov), Sophia was envisioned as an eternal feminine wisdom principle, inspiring poets and theologians. These undercurrents show that the archetype persisted outside the strict gaze of authority. In modern feminist theology, Sophia has been powerfully reclaimed as well. Feminist theologians note that identifying Wisdom as female in scripture provides a biblical precedent for speaking of God in feminine terms. Some have gone further to propose “Christ-Sophia” as a symbol uniting the masculine and feminine in the divine, or to celebrate Sophia as the suppressed Goddess of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, the figure of Sophia – the feminine Sage – lives on as both an inspiring and disruptive force. Her story exemplifies how feminine intuition and desire for knowledge can be cast as transgressive by those in power, even as that knowledge may be the key to humanity's spiritual progress.

IV. HEKATE: WITCHCRAFT AND THE WISE WOMAN AT THE MARGINS

If Sophia represents a cosmic, transcendental Wisdom, the Greek goddess Hekate (Hecate) represents wisdom of a chthonic and liminal kind – the knowledge of herbs, magic, and the spirits of night. In classical Greek religion, Hekate occupied an ambiguous place: Hesiod's Theogony lauds her as a titaness honoured by Zeus, holding sway in heaven, earth, and sea, a benevolent goddess who grants victory and wisdom to mortals. But in later eras, Hekate was increasingly associated with the underworld, with sorcery and ghosts, and depicted as a torch-bearing, snake-wielding triple goddess at crossroads. She became the patroness of witchcraft and arcane lore, often visualised in triple form – maiden, mother, crone – or simply three identical figures back-to-back symbolising her all-encompassing presence in liminal spaces. In Greek art and statuary (and later Roman copies), Hekate's triple form is shown carrying various symbols – torches to illuminate the darkness, keys to unlock mysteries or gates, and often snakes entwined around her or in her hands. The snake, with its nocturnal, chthonic connotations and its ancient link to oracular goddesses (like the Python of Delphi), underlines Hekate's role as a channel of hidden knowledge and transformative power.

Crucially, Hekate was “more at home on the fringes than in the centre of Greek polytheism,” as one scholar observes. She straddled boundaries – between Olympian and Titan, light and dark, life and death – and thereby eluded neat definition. This liminality meant that, unlike Athena, the Olympian goddess of wisdom, strategy, and crafts, who was integrated into the civic patriarchal religion of Athens, Hekate's wisdom was of a different stripe. It was mystical, intuitive, and often feared. She presided over the knowledge of the hedge-witch, the midwife, the herbal healer – domains traditionally and in folk practice associated with women's expertise, but looked upon with suspicion by male-dominated officialdom. In Hellenistic and Roman times, many ordinary households did make offerings to Hekate for protection. She was invoked to avert evil from homes, especially at crossroads or thresholds at the dark of the moon. However, her darker aspect, as reported in literature, accompanied by howling dogs in graveyards, conjuring phantoms, fed into an enduring image of the “wicked witch.” The tension is palpable: Hekate could be “Tender-hearted” as a guardian, yet her independence and underworld connections kept her on the margins of respectable worship.

When Christianity took hold in the later Roman Empire, deities like Hekate were demonised. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (the infamous 15th-century witch-hunting manual) explicitly named Hecate as a demon spirit, the so-called Queen of Witches. In medieval and early modern Europe, any remnants of Hekate's veneration went underground, surviving perhaps in folk herbalism or syncretised as fairy tales of fairy godmothers and crones. The knowledge of midwives and wise women became suspect; as is well documented, tens of thousands of women healers were persecuted as witches in Europe, a process that some scholars interpret as the Church and state uprooting an alternative (feminine, grassroots, experiential) knowledge system in favor of male medical and religious authority. Hekate's archetype thus virtually defines the tension between intuitive, nature-based wisdom and institutional authority: she represents all the marginalised insight that official culture tries to stamp out.

However, just as Sophia has been revived by modern spiritual feminists, so has Hekate. In contemporary neo-paganism and Wicca, Hekate enjoys great reverence as an embodiment of the “Crone” aspect of the Goddess and as a source of deep magic and empowerment for women. Modern witches interpret Hekate positively as a guide through transformations and a protector of the vulnerable. As one modern scholar notes, Hekate has re-emerged “as a figure of female empowerment” – the very image of the witch reclaimed as a wise woman who “possesses superior wisdom thanks to her connection with the natural world,” no longer relegated to the shadows by patriarchy. In these new interpretations, the very symbols once deemed fearsome – her dark mantle, her snakes and howling dogs – are seen as emblems of a profound, holistic understanding that life and death, light and dark, are part of a continuum. Hekate's keys unlock inner and outer mysteries; her torches light the unconscious depths; her snakes signify renewal and healing. Snakes have been symbols of healing since Asclepius, and in Hekate's context, they also tie back to that primordial serpent wisdom.

In mythic terms, Hekate did not have to directly clash with Zeus or Apollo – she simply dwelt in her domains, wielding power that male gods did not interfere with much, perhaps because they did not fully comprehend it. Yet the societal echo of Hekate's relegation is the historical silencing of women's autonomy in spiritual and scientific knowledge. Today's witches and scholars, by invoking Hekate, are in a sense redressing that historical imbalance. They often cite that Hekate's devotees in antiquity were not only sorceresses but also ordinary people seeking wisdom at the crossroads of life. Through ritual and mythic imagination, modern practitioners connect to Hekate when seeking intuitive guidance outside the realm of conventional religion. The resurgence of interest in Hekate – books, online forums, academic studies – indicates a cultural process of reclaiming the Wise Woman archetype from negative caricature. No longer is the serpent-entwined witch only a Halloween caricature; she is honoured as a mentor and guardian in the journey to self-knowledge.

V. INTUITIVE WISDOM VERSUS INSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY: A RECURRING TENSION

Looking across these examples – Saraswati and the Vedic women, Sophia in Gnostic myth, Hekate in classical and witchcraft traditions – a clear pattern emerges. Intuitive or revelatory wisdom, often personified as female, is frequently set at odds with the established authority or orthodoxy of the time. This tension manifests in narrative and social reality.

In India, Gargi's probing questions to a famed male sage threatened to upset the hierarchy of knowledge, eliciting an intimidation response (Yājñavalkya's warning of a shattered head) that illustrates how authoritative figures may react defensively when their monopoly on truth is challenged. The tale symbolically suggests that patriarchal authority tries to limit how far a woman, or any seeker, can go in uncovering truth, imposing boundaries on inquiry. Yet the scripture, by including Gargi's voice implicitly validates her intellectual agency, if not her complete freedom. Similarly, Sulabha's debate confronting a king's prejudices shows intuitive wisdom dismantling the rationalisations of patriarchy. Janaka initially argues from scriptural authority that women are unfit for liberation, but Sulabha uses reason and spiritual experience to defeat his stance. The institutional voice is thus overturned by a higher experiential truth realisation of the Self's freedom.

In the story of Sophia, the feminine pursuit of knowledge upsets the cosmic order set by a patriarchal figure, the High God or his demiurgic agent. The "fall" of Sophia can be seen allegorically as what happens when wisdom seeks beyond the confines set by authority – it becomes branded as a transgression. The subsequent portrayal of the serpent (Sophia's emissary) as hero or villain sharply splits along the lines of whether one values authority or gnosis. Orthodox Christianity cast the serpent and Eve as villains for disobeying God's commandment, whereas Gnostics praised the serpent, Sophia, for opening humanity's eyes. The Church's violent suppression of Gnosticism – with its egalitarian and feminine elements – is a historic enactment of this conflict. It underscores how religious institutions may enforce doctrinal conformity by demonising alternative sources of wisdom, especially those associated with women or the feminine. The label of "heresy" often fell upon movements that gave more prominence to inner divine insight, the domain of mystics, which had many women participants, as opposed to external hierarchy.

With Hekate and the witch-hunts, the dynamic is perhaps the most concrete: women who were keepers of traditional lore, midwifery, folk medicine, and spiritual rituals outside the Church came under attack by both ecclesiastical and state authorities. Their knowledge – empirical, intuitive, passed down maternally – was illegitimate to authorities not because it was ineffective, but because it lay outside control and often empowered women independently. The fearful image of the witch in early modern Europe condensed misogyny and fear of losing control: the witch was imagined as consorting with the Devil, the ultimate rebellion against the Church and causing social chaos. In reality, many accused witches were elderly women or outsiders who served their communities with healing skills. This persecution can be seen as institutional authority attempting to eradicate intuitive, local knowledge systems that competed with sanctioned doctrine and emerging "official" sciences. In mythology, Hekate, as the archetypal witch goddess, stands for that repressed knowledge; that Christianity explicitly connected her name to witchcraft indicates they recognised the lineage of the idea.

What lies at the heart of this recurring tension? One aspect is control over truth. Institutional authorities – whether brahminic priests, church bishops, or secular patriarchs – claim the role of gatekeepers of knowledge. Intuitive wisdom, by contrast, often comes with a personal, direct, and unmediated character: the mystic who hears the voice of the goddess, the philosopher who reasons in her capacity, the healer who learns from communion with nature, all bypass the need for an external authority to validate knowledge. In patriarchal cultures, these avenues were especially suspect when accessed by women, who were not "authorised" by the institutions to teach or lead. Thus, feminine wisdom figures frequently had to either operate in liminal spaces, crossroads, forests, secret circles, or adapt themselves within male-led frameworks to be heard.

Another aspect is the nature of the knowledge itself. Intuitive or mystical knowledge is holistic; it often blurs distinctions between subject and object, rational and irrational, physical and spiritual. For example, the Kundalini concept in Hindu Tantra envisions spiritual enlightenment as a serpent power (Śakti) rising through the body – a profoundly intuitive, experiential process rather than a doctrinal formula. Kundalini, notably feminine, was viewed with wariness by more orthodox circles, yet has always been part of India's esoteric traditions. The institutional knowledge, on the other hand, tends to be codified, categorised, and allied with social power structures. The former welcomes mystery and liminality, whereas the latter seeks clarity and often upholds whatever maintains the social order.

Mythically, the archetype of the Serpent often mediates between these two realms. We see serpents with Saraswati and Hekate, we see a serpent in Eden, and even in Indic myth, the cosmic serpent Ananta lies

beneath Vishnu as a repository of primordial knowledge. The serpent is an ambivalent symbol: it can represent esoteric wisdom, healing, cyclical renewal, but also danger and chaos. Institutions often emphasised the latter aspect – the serpent as tempter or destroyer – whereas mystical traditions emphasised the former – the serpent as teacher or healer. In our context, the “serpent” aligns with the feminine intuitive side, while the “sage” aligns with the institutional side. The drama of their interaction plays out repeatedly.

Ultimately, these myths and histories suggest that a balance is needed. When intuitive, feminine wisdom is entirely suppressed, cultures lose a vital, organic connection to creativity and inner meaning. Conversely, when it operates without any dialogue with structure, it risks being ostracised or misunderstood. The ideal embodied by goddesses like Saraswati is perhaps an integration: she sits on a lotus (symbol of divine truth) but also gives humans language and arts, bridging transcendence and social expression. The peacock and swan at her side signify that emotion and reason must cooperate. Likewise, Sophia’s story, though tragic, concludes (in Gnostic accounts) with her reunion with the Divine, suggesting that the higher synthesis of authority (the Logos/Christ) and intuition (Sophia) is the salvation of the world. Hekate’s modern resurgence also points toward integration: the witch is reimagined not as a home-wrecking hag, but as a wise guide who can midwife one’s personal growth alongside, not necessarily in opposition to, established paths.

VI. MODERN REINTERPRETATIONS AND RECLAIMING THE ARCHETYPE

Contemporary culture – especially in the late 20th and early 21st centuries – has seen a flowering of interest in the very feminine wisdom figures and archetypes that older institutions either sidelined or demonised. This revival takes many forms: literature and art retelling myth from women’s perspectives, scholarly research unearthing the contributions of historical women, spiritual movements centring goddesses and “divine feminine” energy, and feminist theory reframing old narratives. By revisiting the myths of Saraswati, Sophia, Hekate and their like, modern storytellers and thinkers are often critiquing the patriarchal lens and celebrating the power of women’s insight.

In Indian literature and popular media, there has been a conscious effort to celebrate figures like Gargi and Maitreyi as proto-feminists and icons of India’s indigenous tradition of women’s empowerment. Their dialogues are cited in textbooks and discussions about gender in ancient India, to illustrate that strong intellectual women existed in Vedic times. For instance, the scholar Patrick Olivelle highlights Maitreyi’s choice of wisdom over wealth as revealing “the roots of women-led institutions” in Indian spirituality. Indeed, the fact that Buddhism and Jainism later had monastic orders for women is often traced back to ideals visible in these Upanishadic stories. Modern works of historical fiction have also begun to imagine the lives of these women: one can find novels, plays or poems giving voice to Gargi’s inner thoughts or Maitreyi’s feelings as she learns from Yājñavalkya. This creative engagement not only humanises these archetypes but also links them to current conversations on gender and knowledge. In 2022, for example, a Tamil-language film titled “Gargi” (though not about the sage directly) deliberately invokes the name to symbolise a courageous, truth-seeking female protagonist – a sign that Gargi’s legacy now stands for female intellectual courage in the public imagination. Saraswati, for her part, remains a living symbol in everyday life – every year, millions of students in India still participate in Saraswati Puja, keeping the association of femininity and learning alive in practice. Additionally, India’s modern institutions have tried to harness that symbolism: women’s universities, education schemes for girls, and awards are sometimes named after Saraswati or Gargi, projecting an aura of venerable feminine wisdom onto contemporary initiatives.

In Western contexts, one of the landmark trends has been the feminist reclamation of the witch and the goddess in the 20th century. During the feminist movements of the 1970s, works like Merlin Stone’s “When God Was a Woman” and the emergence of Wicca and Goddess spirituality sought to invert the negative connotations of words like “witch.” They argued that the witch persecutions were a suppression of women’s power and that ancient goddess-worshipping cultures valued a more balanced, nature-connected wisdom. Hekate naturally became an object of fascination in this milieu. Today, one can find numerous covens or spiritual groups devoted to Hekate, and she figures in fantasy literature and games as a complex character rather than a one-dimensional villain. For instance, in contemporary fantasy novels, a “witch” protagonist often draws explicitly on Hekate’s mythology as a source of legitimacy. The figure of Hekate in art has also been re-visioned: modern visual artists depict her not as a frightening hag but as a strong, enigmatic guide, sometimes emphasising her threefold form to symbolise the wholeness of a woman’s life-cycle wisdom – maiden, mother, crone unified. The museum exhibit discussed earlier notes how even the ancient symbols like Hekate’s wheel are finding new meaning as representations of cycles and holistic knowledge in feminist spirituality. This has filtered into popular culture – even commercial media portrayals of witches in films and TV shows have shifted toward sympathetic depictions: the witch as misunderstood healer or protector rather than an embodiment of evil.

Sophia has found new life, particularly in academic and theological circles. Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, in her influential book *She Who Is* (1992), suggested that the Christian understanding of God could be enriched by returning to the Sophia imagery in scripture – effectively to see Jesus as embodying Sophia (Wisdom) and the Holy Spirit as Sophia, thereby acknowledging the feminine in God. This proposal created considerable dialogue and some controversy in the Church, but it opened space for people to pray to “Holy Wisdom-Sophia” without seeing it as unorthodox. In the Orthodox Christian world, the hymnography and iconography of Holy Wisdom have also seen renewed interest, with some theologians interpreting Mary as a manifestation of Sophia, or the Church itself as Sophia. Meanwhile, esoteric and New Age writers have explicitly personified Sophia as a guide for the current era, speaking of a “Sophianic return” where the repressed feminine wisdom returns to balance an overly rationalistic, materialistic civilisation. This almost echoes the Gnostic myth in a modern key: Sophia, cast down into the world, is arising again, stirring human consciousness toward ecological awareness, holistic thinking, and partnership models of society (as opposed to domination models). Depth psychologists like Carl Jung and his successors have also written about the Sophia archetype as the *anima mundi* (world-soul) that needs to be integrated for wholeness. In Jungian analysis, the neglect of Sophia corresponds to a spiritual malaise in Western culture that only recognition of the feminine can heal.

In literature and film, we see numerous retellings of myths from the female point of view, which inherently bring out the wisdom of those female characters. A salient example is Madeline Miller’s acclaimed novel *Circe* (2018), which reimagines the story of the sorceress Circe from Homer’s *Odyssey*. In Miller’s hands, Circe – often considered a disciple or type of Hekate – is a deeply wise, empathetic figure who hones her craft of witchcraft (*pharmakeia*) not out of wickedness but out of love and the desire for freedom. The novel invites readers to sympathise with a “witch” as protagonist, effectively rehabilitating the archetype of the powerful, wise woman. Similarly, novels like “*The Mists of Avalon*” (Marion Zimmer Bradley, 1983) recast the Arthurian legend to centre the priestess Morgan le Fay and the goddess religion she serves, portraying them in a heroic light struggling against an encroaching patriarchal Christianity. Such works were foundational in bringing goddess lore and the notion of a suppressed matriarchal wisdom into pop culture. In the realm of film, portrayals of witches and oracles have also shifted: where once a witch like Disney’s animated Maleficent was purely evil, recent films give witches and crones depth, wisdom, and sometimes redemption as seen in the revisionist film *Maleficent* (2014) itself, which turns the “evil fairy” into a protector figure.

On the scholarly front, historians and mythologists are actively revisiting ancient sources to highlight the roles of women and feminine divine symbols. The field of women’s history of religion, for example, has produced works on the female disciples in early Christianity, on priestesses in antiquity, and the midwives persecuted in early modern Europe. By placing figures like Sophia, Hekate, and the Upanishadic women in historical context, scholars help demystify them, showing they were integral to the spiritual landscapes of their times, not marginal aberrations. This academic validation bolsters the cultural reclamation; for instance, university courses on mythology now routinely include modules on “The Goddess in World Myth” or “Women mystics,” normalising these topics for new generations.

Finally, it is worth noting a modern interpretation that bridges East and West: the idea of the “serpent power” in yoga (Kundalini) has gained global popularity, and with it an appreciation of feminine imagery in spirituality. Kundalini yoga, which became widely known through figures like Carl Jung and contemporary yoga schools, teaches that inside every human lies a coiled serpent, often conceptualised as the divine feminine energy, which, when awakened, brings about spiritual illumination. This is essentially a metaphor that unites the serpent and the sage within the individual: the latent intuitive wisdom (serpent) rises to meet the awareness of the higher self (sage). The fact that this concept has been embraced far beyond India – one finds reference to it in New Age circles, holistic health, and psychology – suggests a collective movement toward valuing internal, experiential wisdom that had long been overshadowed by external authority or purely intellectual approaches. It’s as if the culture is catching up to what these ancient myths have been hinting: that the “serpent” of intuitive insight must not be denied but integrated, and that doing so leads to a more complete understanding of wisdom itself.

VII. CONCLUSION

The figure of the feminine sage – whether appearing as a goddess, a mythic heroine, or a historical learned woman – serves as a potent reminder of the multidimensional nature of wisdom. From our exploration of Hindu, Greek, and early Christian traditions, we have seen that Wisdom (with a capital W) was often conceptualised as feminine: Saraswati guiding the flow of consciousness and art, Sophia emanating divine insight and catalysing human awakening, Hekate guarding the liminal secrets of life and death. These figures embodied a type of knowing that is holistic and frequently intuitive, embracing morality, creativity, and

mystery. Yet, consistently, their stories also reveal a friction with the forces of order and orthodoxy. The “serpent” of knowledge that gifts humanity can be branded a devil by those who fear unregulated wisdom. The “sage” who holds institutional authority may dismiss or co-opt the contributions of the feminine, even as he unknowingly benefits from them. Yājñavalkya’s teachings to Maitreyi are among the profoundest passages of the Upanishads – wisdom elicited by a woman’s question.

Despite periods of suppression, the archetype of feminine wisdom has proven resilient. It survives in hymn and story, ready to be rediscovered by each age. In our present time, as the world grapples with imbalances – rationality versus intuition, science versus spirituality, hierarchy versus equality – these archetypes provide valuable lessons and inspiration. They urge a reconciliation between the analytic and the intuitive, between institutional knowledge and personal gnosis. Indeed, many modern thinkers argue that addressing global challenges (from ecological crises to social injustices) requires integrating traditionally “feminine” approaches like holistic thinking, empathy, and respect for the interconnectedness of life – all hallmarks of the wisdom figures we discussed. It is fitting that the serpent, once seen as a symbol of dangerous knowledge, is now often used in logos of medical and healing organisations (the Rod of Asclepius) and New Age iconography for enlightenment. The symbol has come full circle from taboo to a tool of healing and insight.

In conclusion, the Mystic/Sage archetype in feminine form – the sage and the serpent entwined – remains a powerful metaphor and reality. Her presence in myth encourages cultures to question who is allowed to be wise and how wisdom is defined. By studying Saraswati, Gargi, Sophia, Hekate, and their kin, we not only uncover the oft-overlooked contributions of feminine figures to humanity’s intellectual and spiritual heritage, but we also recognise the enduring need for a wisdom that transcends the confines of authority while still guiding and uplifting society. It is a call to honour both head and heart, both tradition and innovation. Perhaps it is humility that the institutional side must learn from the intuitive side: the humility to listen to the serpent’s whisper, to allow the feminine sage her place at the table, and to realise that wisdom flourishes best in partnership, not in domination. In myths and the modern world, when intuitive feminine wisdom and structured masculine authority find equilibrium, the result is a more balanced and enlightened human endeavour – precisely the harmony that our ancestors hinted at through symbol and story, and which we are still striving to achieve.

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