

# Section 11 – Turning the Tide

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## Goddess and Spirituality Re-united

The earliest Goddess gave birth completely on her own, without the need for a consort. In matriarchal cultures, women decided if and when they would reproduce. When the patriarchy emerged, it took control over the sexuality and fertility of women. The most fundamental statement of a woman's rejection of patriarchal authority is for her to regain control over her sexual pleasure and reproduction, and that is the patriarchy's most visceral fear.

In 1960, the combined oral contraceptive pill, often referred to as the birth control pill or simply 'the Pill', was approved for use in the US. Suddenly women, the collective Goddess, regained control over their ability to create life. They could participate in sexual activities without the fear of a lifelong commitment to a child, or of cultural opprobrium if they became unwed mothers. They regained a type of freedom and empowerment they had not known in thousands of years – and they embraced it wholeheartedly.

In 1971, Erica Jong published *Fear of Flying* in which she celebrated the 'zipless fuck'.<sup>1</sup> This she defined as sex without strings or commitment, carried out for the pleasure of it. She wanted to experience sex exactly as a man might, as a physical event with no baggage of emotion or commitment. Needless to say, the book was met with condemnation from the patriarchal establishment. Irrespective of the reaction, Jong articulated a concept that terrifies men – women can be sexually free. Worse, women can have all the pleasure of sex and never have to share the product, their children, with a man, even the fathers of those children. All they have to do is not tell who got them pregnant. This caused a furore within the patriarchal mainstream.

The Goddess and women's rights are closely intertwined, and it should come as no surprise that during the 1970s the women's spirituality movement appeared. Realising the link between the patriarchal organised religions and their own suppression, many women turned to secularism, but others sought out alternative cults and religious ideas that could provide spiritual sustenance on their terms.

Books with titles like *When God was a Woman*, *The Once and Future Goddess*, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, *Goddesses in Everywoman*, and *The Women's Encyclopaedia of Myths and Secrets*, began appearing on bookstore shelves. Alongside these were 'How To' books, designed to help women

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<sup>1</sup> Jong, Erica. *Fear of Flying*. Signet. 1971.

create groups for the purpose of celebrating Women's Spirituality as an alternative to patriarchal religions. Other books led readers to investigate feminist, neo-pagan and Wiccan interpretations of deity. Women who had grown up not knowing there could ever have been a Goddess were soon able to name dozens of them.

A new cultural paradigm appeared alongside this. Until the 1960s, with few exceptions, women were rarely icons of popular culture, and where they were, they usually represented a controlled female sexuality which reinforced the notions that women were not only available to but also to be governed by men.<sup>2</sup> The classic 1958 Western *Big Country*, starring Jean Simmons and Gregory Peck, is a stereotype in which the largely passive heroine's fertility (in the form of her availability for marriage) and that of the land she owns are identified with each other and then fought for and won by the hero. Many films made the connection between land and women, and the theme was so commonplace in film scripts of the era as to be almost unremarkable.<sup>3</sup> However, during the 1970s a sea-change in women's cultural status, partly predicated on their spending power, took place. Women in film became much more assertive and in control both of their destinies and their sexuality, as in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991).

In music, from pioneers like Janis Joplin, Grace Slick and Joni Mitchell, a new breed of female musical artists arose. Far from being the puppets of patriarchal corporate business, these women were increasingly in control of their careers. From 1997 to 1999, Lilith Fair drew crowds of women who came to see all-female bands and artists, raising over ten million dollars for women's charities. Amongst its other achievements, Lilith Fair highlighted the prejudice in the booking practices of male-dominated concert tours and provided a platform that saw women move to the centre of the stage.<sup>4</sup> Cher and Tina Turner stepped out from behind their husbands and overshadowed them, and Madonna proved once and for all that female artists could control their own careers and become hugely successful business women in the music industry, paving the way for others to follow.

Documentary films, such as *The Goddess Trilogy* (*Goddess Remembered*; *Burning Times*; *Full Circle*) by Donna Reid and the (Canadian) National Film Board, provided an understanding of the rise of the patriarchy and its deleterious effect on women. The concepts had become mainstream.

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<sup>2</sup> Remember June Cleaver from the popular TV programme *Leave it to Beaver*, or Margaret Anderson from *Father Knows Best*?

<sup>3</sup> There are so many variants on this theme that we could not list them here, but the reader is directed towards *Gone With The Wind* (1939) and *Forbidden Planet* (1956) for two more excellent examples.

<sup>4</sup> Colombian Shakira Isobel Mebarak Ripoll is a striking example of today's women artists; highly intelligent, creative and multilingual, under her stage name Shakira she has become the centre of a huge entertainment business that spans the globe and which she personally directs. A passionate supporter of education for all, she established the *Fundacio Pies Descalzos* (Bare Feet Foundation). The charity builds and maintains schools in poor parts of Colombia.