Soul

A Feminist Analysis of the Soul

Minna Salami

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There was a period during my childhood when I would recite a version of the following bedtime prayer in Finnish before falling asleep:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.

At this stage of my life, I was preoccupied with death. I was about five years old, and my mother and I had read the *Little Match Girl,* a story about a poor young girl who wanders the streets to sell matches for a penny to avoid her father's beatings. As the girl huddles in the cold trying to sell her matches, she discovers that whenever she painstakingly sacrifices a match for a brief sensation of warmth, she simultaneously sees a vision. In one vision, there is a warm stove, in another, a merry family, etc. The most satisfying of the visions is that of her grandmother, the kindest person the girl ever knew. To keep her grandmother close, the little girl lights all her matches, one after one, after which she dies, and her grandmother carries her soul to heaven.

The story devastated my developing mind. I wanted to know: What happened to the girl's soul in heaven? Could she have done something differently to save her soul? Why did she have to die so suddenly and brutally?

I don't believe that humans have souls. That is, I don't presume that there is a substance that is a soul, which can be distinguished from the body or the mind in any predesignated way.

In *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, the Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes that a 'brutal episode' in fairy tales 'communicates an imperative psychic truth'. One that she says, 'we are unlikely to heed the alarm if it is stated in lesser terms'.

The 'psychic truth' that the story about the poor, deserted little match girl communicated to me was that life contains suffering, injustice, and loss. But the story conveyed another 'psychic truth' too, one that has continued to shape my life and work, namely, that the *Little Match Girl's* disadvantaged fate was tied to the fate of the female soul.

I don't believe that humans have souls. That is, I don't presume that there is a substance that is a soul, which can be distinguished from the body or the mind in any predesignated way. Nor do I have faith in doctrines that suppose that such a substance as a soul shapes, or is shaped by, our pre-and post-life predicaments. When I say 'female soul' I do not mean that there is such a material thing as a female soul (there most certainly isn't). I don't use the phrase to invoke a spacetime fact but rather a claiming of space within time.

While I don't believe that humans have souls, what I do believe and what motivates this essay, is that humans have a *notion* of having souls. And that notion is, in return, of great significance to the organisation of human life, most specifically when it comes to the organisation of power. (I also believe that the notion of the soul shapes the power dynamics between human and *nonhuman* life, but more on that later).

The question of what the soul *is*, is therefore not as important here as is the question of what the soul *does*. What is the function of the soul in society? In culture, in religion, in politics? Emotionally, what role does the soul play?

Before addressing these questions, a brief reflection on the hypothetical soul is nevertheless worth undertaking. In querying the definition of the soul as we know it, it becomes clear that the idea of the

soul, as we know it, is teleologically entangled in patriarchal causes and thus contradicts many of the virtuous purposes that proponents of the soul suppose themselves to be making.

In everyday communication, people use the term *soul* to describe genuine, beautiful, and meaningful experiences. For example, they describe the meeting of a compatible partner as finding a *soul* mate; they refer to a calm person of good judgement as an old *soul*; they call food that is nourishing and full-flavoured, *soul* food, and, similarly; music that is tied to resilience and resistance, gospel and blues, is known as *soul* music.

In liturgical language, the term *soul* typically implies a nonphysical conduit that provides a connection to the divine. Abrahamic religions see the soul not only as a kind of umbilical cord between the human and God but as the very property of a possessive heavenly Father who says, 'Behold, all souls are mine'. The soul, in religious terms, is a nonphysical essence that nevertheless incarnates physically to embody the hope for eternal salvation.

The soul has a wide span historically and geographically too, going back at least to Ancient Egypt where *ba, ka*, and *akh* were components of the soul[1] that respectively represented the life force, the spirit force, and the unity of the two, which transcended this world and reached into the next. The Old English *sawol* (from which *soul* stems) is believed to derive from the Teutonic *saiwalo* 'coming from the sea' as the Teutons[2] believed that the sea was the dwelling place of souls after death. The Old Chinese word for soul, *kuei*, historically represented a whole and undivided being, but with[3] the emergence of the Yin Yang school[4] around 300 BC, the soul is believed[5] to have split into two elements, the earthly soul related to the Yin, and the ethereal soul related to the Yang.

In 1605, Francis Bacon, instigator of the scientific method, proclaimed[6] in *The Advancement of Learning* that to speak of a sacred spirit would mean to, 'Step out of the bark of human reason, and enter into the ship of the church; which is only able by the Divine compass to rightly direct its course'. He continued to say, 'Neither will the stars of philosophy, which have hitherto so nobly shone upon us, any longer supply their light. So that on this subject also it will be as

well to keep silence'. In science, it seemed that the soul had met its nemesis.

Insofar that religion cannot provide scientific evidence of the soul, scientists have of course since proven Bacon right. The causal roles that were previously assigned to the soul, such as behavioural patterns and mental processing, are in fact rooted in the brain. Yet while people are decreasingly likely to believe that the soul has a direct connection to evidence-based thinking, the soul continues to have a significant influence on language, society and culture.

In 2020, Disney's Pixar released a film titled *Soul*, about a jazz pianist, Joe, who right after securing a gig he's waited his whole life for, falls down a manhole and enters a coma. Consequently, his soul departs his body and Joe finds himself in a limbo between the Great Before and the Great Beyond. In this liminal space between 'pre-life' and 'post-life', Joe goes through trials and tribulations which all, arguably, eventually teach him this: The soul is an aggrandising entity.

Like a magnifying glass, the soul amplifies the state of its incubator. It jazzes up that which resides within, be it negative or positive. The soul illuminates love (soulmates), food (soul food), music (soul music) as mentioned earlier. However, in the interest of virtuous reconfiguration, the soul also exposes ingratitude, egocentricity and unkindness like a spotlight above a painting. Thus, when Joe has flawed and impure thoughts, such as when he is self-centred and fame-seeking, everything seems to go wrong. On the other hand, when Joe's thoughts are virtuous, when he notices the little things and is present-minded, then life has beauty and meaning.[7] The soul is like a river carried forth both by the sediment of corruption and the resplendence of virtue.

Pixar's *Soul* also illuminates how today's soul is entangled with a potpourri of dominant contemporary ideologies such as capitalism, neoliberalism, New Age spirituality and depth psychology.[8] In the film's Great Before, unborn souls wander around looking for their 'spark' - their purpose. To help find their spark, the unborn souls attend 'You Seminars' which, amusingly, are guested by the souls of largehearted minds of the past - Carl Jung, George Orwell, Mother Teresa, to name a few. At these dazzling events, the unborn souls ponder which

character traits might help them lead fulfilling, purposeful lives on earth. The seminars are a mix between a TED talk, a virtual reality arcade and a neo-Buddhist retreat. The soul might be struggling to find its place in contemporary society, but if Pixar's film is to go by, it is still very much sought after.

What joins people, metaphysically and spiritually, idiomatically and contemplatively, historically and today, in the language of the soul, is a desire to affirm that apart from the material and physical dimension to life, life is also characterised by something ineffable. There is some quality of great depth and mystery that lies beyond reason that tugs at human contemplation. Even for the secular, the soul connotes a nonphysical and intangible quality that warrants pause.

Yet while the soul certainly connotes something wondrous about existence, the soul far more insidiously, also, implies something specific and institutionalised about existence—, which in this case is a specificity that that has to do with power. In the shared language of the soul, women and men do not, and cannot, harness the same conjecture.

Throughout history, the notion of the soul has been infused with presumed gender neutrality even while it has predominantly been defined by men: Aristotle, Confucius, Descartes, Averroes, Immanuel Kant, Tomas Aquinas, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Nagel, Roger Scruton, and so forth.

Aristotle divided the soul into three parts[9]: the nourishing or plant soul (anima vegetativa), the sensing or animal soul (anima sensitiva), and the reasonable thinking soul (anima rationalis). He argued that all three souls were united during life but that while the first two die with the body; the third is immortal. Kant argued that the soul was the thing that made practical reason possible while Emerson described[10] the soul as 'the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related'. The 12th century Islamic philosopher, Averroes,[11] believed that the soul was a corporeal form essentially tied up to the body and unable to survive death. To Scruton, the relation of the soul to the body is like that of a house to its bricks. 'The soul' he said in *The Soul of the World*,[12] 'is a principle of organisation, which governs the flesh and endows it with

meaning. It is no more separable from the flesh than is the house from its bricks, even if the soul may survive the gradual replacement of every bodily part'.

The soul may be supernatural and metaphysical, but it still manages to nest itself in a patriarchal culture of thinking that is very much of the corporeal world.

You might be thinking that there's nothing wrong with the above definitions of the soul. Indeed, snapshots into how male thinkers *have* defined the soul across the ages can be fascinating. Alas, the problem lies not so much with male definitions of the *soul*, but rather with male definitions of *women*. For if the soul is tied to the body as a 'house to its bricks', then the views of those who have shaped how society approaches the soul, about the bodies of women, matters. And so, to stick with the examples, Aristotle suggested that a female was a deformed male, Kant argued that women were morally deficient, and Scruton's traditional values often collude with patriarchal norms.

Furthermore, there is no absence of cases where men have defined the soul in explicitly sexist ways. In the archive of male supremacist depictions of the soul, Thomas Aquinas's theory deserves special mention. According to Aquinas, the source of the human soul was what he called *spiritus seminis*, in essence,[13] the gassy substance that gives sperm its foamy texture. In the same way that God impregnated Mary with an embodiment of his soul, men, Aquinas believed, infer a soul upon an embryo through the spiritus seminis in their ejaculation. The soul may be supernatural and metaphysical, but it still manages to nest itself in a patriarchal culture of thinking that is very much of the corporeal world. As Marina Benjamin writes in her stunning essay[14] *More Primitive, More Sensual, More Obscene,* 'maleness is always and everywhere universalized, not least when encoding creative achievement. It is the seed, not the egg, that implants ideas in our heads and suggests vistas pregnant with possibility. It is the seed (or inspiration) that counts, even when the most promising ideas need to gestate before they can bloom, or incubate, or marinate'.

Mind you, on rare occasion, definitions of the soul by men are favourable to women. For example, it has been argued[15] that in the Ghanaian Ashanti kingdom, the word for the soul, *kla*, if used as a masculine, stands for the voice that tempts man to evil. If used in the feminine, it is the voice that persuades us to do good. Also, a number of European words for the soul such as *seele* (German), *sawol* (An-

glo-Saxon), *själ* (Swedish), *sielu* (Finnish), *anima* (Latin/Italian), *dusha* (Russian) and *amé* (French) are all feminine gender.

Still, men are gatekeepers of the soul. From authoritative books to holy sites to articles of faith, the authorities on the soul have always been male. Men are the Messiahs, Popes, Buddhas and Sheikhs. They are the aristocracy that govern the culture of the soul. The mosques, churches and temples are headed by men – and they are the gurus, sages and prophets that propel worship. If the soul reflects our deepest desires for meaning, then it is a dangerous game of power that women must rely on male figures and symbols of male entitlement to access the soul, often at great risk.

'Entitlement', philosopher Kate Manne writes in her phenomenal book,[16] *Entitled*, 'is not a dirty word: entitlements can be genuine, valid, justified'. The problem, she says, is that entitlement has 'most often referred to some people's undue sense of what they deserve or are owed by others'. Hardly anywhere is this more concentrated than in the variegated domains of the soul, where, throughout time and place, institutions which shape and define the soul—religion, culture, philosophy, psychology and language—have denied women what we could refer to as 'masculine goods'.

'Masculine goods' are, according to Manne, 'power, authority, and claims to knowledge'. In short, they are goods that women are to refrain from taking. Instead, 'Women are expected to give traditionally feminine goods (such as sex, nurturing, and reproductive labour)'. It is not whether the woman has a soul that is in question: Rather, as Manne writes, it is that 'She is positioned not as a human *being* but, rather, as a human *giver*'. As human givers, women lack the authority to define the role of the soul in political, emotional and psychosocial contexts.

Which leads me to the most insidious consequence of the male dominant gendering of the soul. While the soul is conceptualised as neutral, and sometimes even as the 'feminine' side of God, women's thoughts and experiences have hardly shaped the notion. In a world where women occupy only 0.5 per cent of about 3,500 years of recorded history (as the NY Times reports),[17] little importance is given to how women themselves define the soul. What analyses do women

make about the soul? If the understandings that women held about the soul had the same historical significance and public presence that those of men do, in what ways would the soul be encoded into spiritual, cultural, social and political life? We cannot know because it is men's ideas, thoughts, arguments, values, beliefs, attitudes, and preoccupations with the soul that dominate our aesthetic, political and cultural thoughts.

But if the soul is a notion that continues to convey questions about selfhood and society that convey depth and meaning, then we must ask: What are the consequences that definitions of the soul are shaped by patriarchal thought? How does the presumed neutrality of male-normative perspectives impact not only women but knowledge production at large? Although men have typically agreed that soul is a difficult word to define, they have nevertheless not only 'defined' the soul through the ages, knowingly or not they have done so in ways that compromise women's minds, bodies and contributions to society. *These* are the reasons why a feminist analysis of the soul is necessary.

I grew up in an interfaith household with a Finnish protestant mother and a Nigerian Muslim father—both faiths where the Holy Trinity consisted of masculine hypostases (underlying substances): the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—and like any child raised around the divine masculine, which is most children, I wondered why there was no Holy Mother, or Holy Daughter? Why were there no women in this redeeming place that the *Little Match Girl's* soul went to?

According to Pinkola Estés, the tattered *Little Match Girl* represents womanhood in a 'frozen condition' where outer circumstances force a woman to undervalue her 'light'. 'When a woman is frozen of feeling', Pinkola Estés says, 'then a fantasy life is far more pleasurable than anything else she can set her sights upon'.

Unlike men, for whom suffering in fairy tales is 'often understood as initiatory dismemberment, something carrying great meaning', the *Little Match Girl's* fate is a warning of 'the injured instinct in women, the giving of light for little price'. In this psychic predicament even the grandmother, who here represents the manna from heaven, cannot reignite the 'soul that has left its husk behind'.

To revivify 'soul-esteem', Pinkola Estés argues, that the story of the Little Match Girl teaches women that 'we have to move, not just sit there. We have to do something that makes our situation different. Without a move, we are back on the streets selling matches again'.

As a child, the Little Match Girl stirred two conflicting instincts in me: it touched an up-and-coming feminist sensibility, but it also taught me that *soul* was a terminology with superpowers of sorts. The notion of the soul offered a balm that the child could apply to the harsh truth of death. With one simple word, it comforted me with the proposition that the dead are not completely dead, their physical being may be gone but their souls still exist in a harmonising realm. As writer and storyteller Marina Warner says,[18] fairy tales are 'a literature of consolation'.

I may no longer believe that the curtains of life close quite so poetically, but when it comes to implications of language, I concede that no word can quite replace *soul* in this way. Not the Greek *psyche*, or the popular—to Jungian analysts—*anima*, or the Buddhist *karma*. The word *soul* continues to wield a significant narrative currency because it instantly conjures a domain of beauty, rootedness and consolation, of humanness and personhood.

The moment when a human is first recognised as a person with the basic right to life is known as *ensoulment*. Although the term's origins are religious, implicating the precise time that God gives a human their soul, ensoulment remains one of the most controversial topics in modern bioethics, science, and philosophy not least because of its implications in abortion rights.

In many faiths, it is believed that ensoulment occurs at a specific moment, which varies from religion to religion. Some faiths argue that the embryo is automatically ensouled at conception. Others, especially those doctrines that believe in reincarnation, purport that ensoulment happens when a pre-existing soul is added to the physical being. As mentioned, the point of ensoulment can be very specific. For instance, Aristotle believed that it took forty days for the male child to be ensouled and eighty days for the female child. Recent debates[19] around what is called the 14-day-line[20] have triggered renewed conversations about the timeframe of ensoulment.

Concisely put, ensoulment is a postulation that seeks to pinpoint the beginning of personhood. And personhood is, in return, the standpoint that confers someone with basic rights and that makes them worthy of moral consideration. What has no personhood, is typically not granted rights or status. This is also the reason why—addressing the point raised earlier in this essay about human and nonhuman life—that the granting of environmental personhood to the nonhuman natural world implicates the soul. Ecuador and Bolivia led the way of earth jurisprudence (an approach to the law based on the belief that nature has rights) that has since become a global discussion, by integrating *Pachamama*[21] (nature in Quichia and Aimara indigenous languages) into their constitutions as a legal entity, thus 'ensouling' *Pachamama*.

What has no personhood, is typically not granted rights or status. This is also the reason why– addressing the point raised earlier in this essay about human and nonhuman life – that the granting of environmental personhood to the nonhuman natural world implicates the soul.

Women have always paid a price for their desire for personhood. There have always been, and there continue to be, times and places when to express personhood was a dangerous and oftentimes lethal deed for women. The control of women's reproductive systems, the imposition of male lineage, the denial of rights and education, the objectification of women's bodies, violence, rape and sexual harassment, the denial of positions of power, of erotic agency, of goddesses, have all served the same agenda to deny women personhood subtly and overtly. This is true when women have refused to worship an empyrean patriarchal God and it is the case when they expose sexual violators in a campaign such as Me Too. It is still absolutely the case in the modern world and even in the most progressive of societies.

So, taking women's understandings and experiences into account when it comes to the soul is necessary for feminism, first of all, because there is a way of thinking about the soul that predicates personhood, and the area of personhood is one that is unconscionably gendered.

Secondly, a feminist focus on the soul matters because, as mentioned throughout this essay, while men have tended to view their perspective of the soul as neutral, they have in fact shaped the notion from the thresholds of male experience. To cite Marina Benjamin again, '[E]very feminist knows that male cultures and male hegemonies are not in the habit of announcing themselves as male. They just are. They are what we have; what we are asked to accept is the way the world is'.

To give an example, men have tended to define the soul in abstract and theoretical terms, as an immaterial and transcendental force that exists in another—usually, better—plane than ours. While we should not imbue the soul with a material actuality that it does not have, neither should the immaterial but sensuous impact that the soul does have be denied. It is my contention that when you adopt a woman-centred perspective, the role that the soul plays may be more about subconscious, psychosocial and non-spatiotemporal existence.

Dominant shapers of the soul have tended to follow the Platonic school of thought, of idea-worship and devaluation of the physical world. They have planted hegemonic universals and epistemic certainties into the institutionalisation of the soul. Consequently, they have depreciated–if not shown contempt–for inclusivity, pluralism, bodies, nature and matter, while over-valuing spirit and transcendence. They have divided knowledge into the aesthetic and the political, and denigrated lived experience while over-worshipping abstract analysis.

In contrast to the patriarchal view, a woman-centred definition of the soul is rapturous but nontranscendentalist. That is to say, the soul may not be something that can be measured *in* the world, but it is something *about* the world. Where conventional interpretations typically imply that formulations about the soul should be propagated into the general culture, a feminist standpoint reverses the process and suggests, conversely, that the general culture should shape the soul. From a feminist view, lived experience is the parent of the soul rather than its child. Our actions and interactions shape the soul's ecology, rather than vice versa.

This is also why women's invocations and theorisations of the *soul* typically are rooted in what feminist philosopher Sandra Harding in her ground-breaking essay *Women's Standpoints on Nature* refers to as socially situated knowledge (ways of looking at the world that are impacted by our lives and experiences) rather than esoteric and putative knowing. They engage the poetic, earth, body, ritual, nature, community, consciousness-raising and holisticism rather than invoking lofty sets of rules and autarchic father figures. If the soul exists in feminist discourse, it is an embodied soul at the intersection between power and discourse, beauty and revolution, logical analysis and

lived experience, between social justice as well as the otherworldly and numinous. Rather than a site of constriction, the soul becomes a tool for setting free. As playwright, Ntozake Shange, said, 'I found god in myself and I loved her, I loved her deeply'. In a few words, Shange conveys that finding soul for women is embodied, transformative and defiant of old ways of thinking.

Despite the contentious baggage carried by historical and contemporary meanings of the soul, it remains a notion with generative and explorative potential. Challenging the patriarchal ways that the soul has been engendered is both politically and epistemically important. The sense of wonder that the soul conveys helps us discover what it means to be human in an ecosystem with other humans and nonhumans. That discovery can in return assist to develop better relationships between women and men, the environment, the cosmos as well as with ideas, science and concepts. But it must first be a soul that includes both women's and men's experiences, one that resists the abuse of power. A living, loving soul.

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Endnotes

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