

Nina Paley, Censorship and 'Seder-Masochism'

by Phyllis Chesler



Last week, out-of-the-blue, a very decent, committed, and radical feminist scholar asked me what I thought about [Nina Paley](#). Apparently, Paley has been de-platformed, harassed, and death threatened for her view of the transgender cult. And so I checked Paley out. There is no doubt: Paley is a brilliant and creative feminist animator but her work makes me uneasy, unhappy, and afraid.

Here's why.

Paley's "[Seder-Masochism](#)" depicts the prophet Moses as well as all Jewish men as directly responsible for murdering "the" Goddess. In Paley's view, the Golden Calf was not about the longing of former slaves to return to slavery but was really about the longing of former Goddess-worshippers to return to "the" Goddess."

This misses the point entirely. Slaves cling to slavery, coming to terms with the demands of freedom is a long process. Pharaoh's Hebrew slaves did not worship Goddesses. They were Jews, not pagans.

She presents Jesus at the Last Supper, which we all believe was a Seder. Paley slightly Arabizes the Aramaic of the Haggadah turning "Ha Lachma Anya" into "Al Ahbar Anya." One must wonder why. Is this in line with the propaganda that Jesus was a Palestinian Arab-Muslim? Or is this merely playful, comical?

Whimsically, significantly, Pharaoh's voice is that of an African-American man singing the blues. We are not meant to fear, despite, hate Pharaoh. But why?

The Hebrew women are wrongly depicted as burqa wearers—who are then liberated into Goddess-like nudity. The formerly Hebrew male slaves sing a catchy popular tune to the naked Goddess-Ladies: "I love you now and forever...Woman, I never meant to cause you sorrow or pain." Oddly, despite the legendary Prophet Miriam having led the newly freed female slaves in both song and dance, no Hebrew women join in this song.

Moses then descends from Mt Sinai, destroys the Ten Commandments—which is followed by Paley's personal father-God singing: "I used to love her but I had to kill her." "The" Goddess is then visually split in two before our eyes by a large animated male figure who quickly and literally dons her skin.

Paley then uses the theme song from the movie "Exodus" ("This land is mine"), about the creation of the modern state of Israel, to depict the non-stop murder of each and every tribe by each and every other tribe over the millennia until a black, winged Angel of Death rises slowly and ominously to sing, exultantly, "This land is mine."

If Paley did not feel the need to blame and desecrate only

Judaism, she might have had some other theme songs to accompany the massacres by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, early Christians, Turkish Ottomans, medieval Christian Crusaders, and Europeans, especially the British, all of whom occupied and devastated the Holy Land.

She closes her "Seder-Masochism" with an African American Gospel song about returning to that Old Time Religion—but Paley fails to criticize Christianity as a murderous monotheism. Perhaps she sincerely believes that Baptists worship "the" Goddess.

Her animated story is sarcastic, simplistic, reductionist, illiterate, and perhaps, a bit blasphemous—but perhaps not. Clearly, Paley is trying to work out her own anger and anguish about the patriarchal nature of *her* religion-of-origin which was Judaism. She is entitled to her clever little revenge—but given her enormous talent, I would have welcomed a more sophisticated and more religiously literate critique of Jewish patriarchy, perhaps one that creatively and utterly reinterpreted the stories, laws, commentaries, in short, the treasure that Talmudic and Rabbinic Judaism represents. Others have done so. But it requires enormous Jewish religious literacy.

I have known many feminist Goddess worshippers of whom I am truly fond. I believe in religious freedom. As a psychologist, I support the desire to explore and proclaim God's also-female nature. Religious scholars of all persuasions are doing so.

But I am also aware of the work of those feminist anthropologists and historians who have documented the lives of ordinary women in eras where multiple Goddesses were worshipped. Despite such worship, at the time, female lives were cheap. Most women barely survived as slaves and concubines; they were forcibly married as children, often into polygamous marriages and, like most men, lived lives of unbearable poverty.

Paley herself, in another very creative retelling of the Hindu *Ramayana*, depicts many Hindu Goddesses—but they, too, exist in a culture where honor based violence, honor killing, caste-based cruelty, and dowry burnings also exist. Formerly, Hindu girls and women, even the young and newly married, were expected to throw themselves on their aged husband's funeral pyre to fulfill the practice known as Suttee. The very Christian Brits ended all that.

It grieves me to criticize Paley, who is a very creative artist and whose views on other feminist issues align with my own. But what else can I do? I would welcome a conversation with her.