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# The Mist of Misogyny©

*By Rita J. Andrews*

**A**ncient and usually unspoken, the mist of misogyny permeates through individuals, societies and cultures and the world. Misogyny is everywhere and is one of the secrets in many cultures—the U.S. included. Because misogyny is often hidden and silent, there is denial about the existence of this phenomenon. And, amazingly, many don't even know what the word means.

Misogyny takes numerous forms—at times overt and blatant, at other times covert and hard to concretize. And, misogyny is not only the purview of men. Many women exhibit misogynist behaviors and have internalized misogyny.

## **What is Misogyny?**

According to Webster's Dictionary, misogyny is having or showing a hatred or distrust of women. Misogyny has been endemic from biblical times to modern. There are bodies of evidence that demonstrate the misogyny in U.S. culture and in the world. In the U.S. we do not often talk about the ways that misogyny plays out and shapes our perspectives on reality. In her book **Misogynies** Joan Smith shares her sense that while most folks are willing to acknowledge unfair treatment of women and discrimination on the basis of gender, they are usually reluctant to admit that hatred of women is encouraged because it helps maintain the structure of male dominance.

Smith suggests: "Misogyny wears many guises and reveals itself in different forms which are dictated by class, wealth, education, race, religion and other factors, but its chief characteristic is its pervasiveness." <sup>1</sup>

## **Misogyny in the Past**

The historical mist of misogyny provides myriad examples in literature, religion, philosophical thought and other venues. Here are a few:

Aristotle posited that "women were imperfectly human, a failure in the process of conception and this view influenced Roman thought which in turn influenced the early apostolic church."<sup>2</sup>

Augustine followed Aristotle in his belief that women were morally and mentally inferior to men, their bodies being an obstacle to exercise of reason, and Aquinas followed Augustine and these men depicted women as temptation—easily tempted into evil. Some of the church fathers, including St. Jerome could not agree on whether or not women were completely human.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, woman hating was not a new phenomenon. It was rooted deep in the male psyche. “The hatred was rooted in fear of the life-bearing and menstruating capacities of women, which to men indicated strange and mysterious powers.”<sup>3</sup> In pre-literate societies, these fears were institutionalized in cultural taboos and religious sanctions, which prohibited women from participating in many human activities for a great portion of their lives.

The eighteenth century saw the birth of the concept of literature as business. Literature critiqued and promoted capitalism, and books themselves became highly marketable objects. During this period, misogynous representations of women often served to advance capitalist desires and to redirect feelings of antagonism toward the emerging capitalist order. Laura Mandell, in her book **Misogynous Economies**, shows how misogyny was put to use in public discourse by a culture confronting modernization and resisting alienation. She argues “passionate feelings about the alienating socioeconomic changes brought on by capitalism were projected onto representations that inspired hatred of women and disgust with the female body.”<sup>4</sup>

In the best selling book, **The Alphabet Versus the Goddess**, Leonard Shlain proposes that the invention of writing, particularly alphabetic writing changed the brains of people who learned how to communicate using this culture changing tool. “Great benefits to society followed. However, a precipitous decline in feminine values manifested by women’s status, goddess veneration, nature and representative art occurred in tandem. For example the European witch hunts followed closely on the heels of the printing press.”<sup>5</sup>

It’s impossible to talk about historical misogyny without mentioning the burning, drowning, pressing, hanging, stoning or otherwise killing of women labeled as witches. Basically, any woman who stepped out of the limiting, strictly-regulated, role the patriarchal society assigned her could be accused of witchcraft. Once labeled witch, a woman had no real defense; and, the patriarchy then had the right to protect itself from her “evil.”

### **Current Day Misogyny**

Although being labeled a witch, no longer portends violent physical harm. The misogynistic fear, repression and oppression of women are still a powerful presence and the mist engulfs societies around the world.

“It’s a national shame” says a current website, citing recent statistics which show that rape is still all too prevalent in the U.S. According to the U.S. Department of Justice:

·Somewhere in the U.S. a woman is sexually assaulted every two minutes.

- Approximately 28% of victims are raped by husbands or boyfriends, 35% by acquaintances, and 5% by other relatives.
- 9 out of 10 rape victims are women.
- 75% of female victims require medical care after the attack.
- One of the most startling aspects of rape is how many go unreported.
- One of the most common reasons given by women for not reporting these crimes is the belief that it is a private or personal matter and they fear reprisal from the assailant.

These statistics point out that in many ways male violence against women is acceptable in our society. They also highlight the need to start making the connection between maintaining patriarchy and condoning male violence against women.

Television and print advertising, movies and music provide many examples of misogyny. And, although some media have not felt free to express misogyny directly they have learned to conceal it. The misogyny usually appears in some disguised form.

As bell hooks writes about movies, “Whether it’s **The Bridges of Madison County** or **The Horse Whisperer**, the message sent to women is that it’s fine for women to stray from sexist roles and play around with life on the other side, as long as we come back to our senses and stay happily-ever-after in **our place**...No matter the interventions of feminist thinking, the truth remains—patriarchy rules. All these images of benevolent patriarchy are dangerous because they cover up and mask unequal power dynamics that actually keep men and women apart...”<sup>6</sup>

And some of the misogyny is not covert or disguised. It is quite overt and blatant. Consider much of the rap music created by both black men and white men, music in which all women are bitches and whores. Where is this anger and rage at women coming from?

And, the ultimate women hating and distrust is female circumcision. According to Raising Daughters Aware ([www.fgm.org](http://www.fgm.org)), “female circumcision is no longer limited to Africa, Malaysia and Middle Eastern Nations and is now not uncommon to in the U.S., Canada and Europe.”<sup>7</sup> They maintain that the main reason young girls are sexually mutilated is to ensure their virginity and chastity by severely damaging or entirely inhibiting their ability to enjoy sexual relations. This is to prepare them to become “proper wives.” It is done because men insist on virginal, “circumcised” brides. If a girl’s parents object to this practice, it is not unusual for a girl to be kidnapped and forcibly “circumcised” by relatives or members of the community. Women who speak out about this issue are often ostracized or punished.

## **Internalized Misogyny**

Because women continue to live in a society of male dominance and continue to live in a world view that holds the feminine as less than, many have come to believe their socialization is reality. Women don't need men to put them down, violate them, denigrate them. Women can do these things quite well themselves.

How often have you heard or said, I can't stand to work for a woman? They are so difficult. They are such bitches. This is internalized misogyny. How often have you questioned yourself, doubted yourself and negated yourself? This is internalized misogyny. How often have you undermined or not supported another woman? This is internalized misogyny.

In the most diverse moments in a women's group when there is ripping, snapping, clawing and other destructive behaviors the mist of misogyny coagulates into a gremlin like form and relishes the divisiveness. The gremlin smiles and elates itself...it has done its job. The gremlin has shored up the mist into a blanket of misogyny that lays heavily over the group.

We must start attending to and speaking of this mist or blanket of misogyny that permeates our existence, impacts our lives and stifles all that we could be.

- 1 Smith, Joan. **Misogynies: Reflections on Myths and Malice.** Fawcett Columbine, 1989.
- 2 duBarry, Stephanie. **Witches! An Extra-Ordinary Expression of Misogyny in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries.** 1994
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Mandrell, Laura C. **Misogynous Economies.** University Press. 1999.
- 5 Shlain, Leonard. **The Alphabet Versus The Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image.** Arkana. 1999.
- 6 hooks, bell. **When Men Were Men.** Shambhala Sun Online. 1998.
- 7 <http://www.fgn.org>. **Raising Daughters Aware.**