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Book Review: *Absent Mother God of the West: A Kali Lover's Journey into Christianity and Judaism*

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## BOOK REVIEWS

***Absent Mother God of the West: A Kali Lover's Journey into Christianity and Judaism.* By Neela Bhattacharya Saxena. London: Lexington Books, 2016. ix + 208 pages.**

IN *Absent Mother God of the West: A Kali Lover's Journey into Christianity and Judaism*, Neela Bhattacharya Saxena traces her travels across the globe, as she searches for the divine feminine. This is an ambitious book, woven through with diverse currents from literature, philosophy and interreligious theology. A self-identified Hindu-Buddhist and a professor of English and women's studies, Saxena takes readers on a far-ranging pilgrimage, a communal search party for the goddess. Deeply poetic and philosophical, her interdisciplinarity opens up new vistas, as it makes surprising connections amongst continental thought, esoteric religion, ecofeminist religion, and postcolonial thought, to name just a few of Saxena's scholarly interests. This book reads as a collage of her own and collected ideas on the divine feminine, as understood across multiple religious traditions. Not only a cross-cultural description of the Mother God, this book also espouses the ethical importance of the Mother God. For instance, she argues that the forgetting of the Mother God is implicated in the world's current state of environmental degradation.

Toward the goal of a better world suffused by the Mother God, Saxena searches for Her presence. She claims early in the book that her viewpoint is one of a "woman who has been miraculously free from internalized [psycho-spiritual] oppression" (xiv). Because of this

sense of herself, she can freely trace the complicated themes of the Mother God, ones that speak to the racism and sexism that have inhibited the Mother God's presence. Further speaking to the aims of the book, she claims that the voices of Indian women are often left out of the burgeoning conversation about goddesses in religious studies. As a woman of Bengali heritage, she wants to help bridge that gap. She longs to help herself and readers enter into the feminine blackness of Kali, as a kind of spirituality without borders that is accessible to all. Even as she upholds Kali as her goddess, she also embraces the model of Indic spirituality that allows one to find an *ishta devata*, a personal god. Concurrently, she warns of the dangers of a Western consumeristic mentality that might reduce such theological polydoxy to a cosmic shopping trip.

While chapter one details the author's own spiritual journey unto Vajrayana Buddhism and Tantra, chapter two describes her "Deleuzian wandering," a kind of pilgrimage through Europe to find three ancient Greek Mother goddesses. From these two chapters, each of which deals with divergent subjects and themes, the reader begins to glimpse Saxena's diverse sources and wide interests. After detailing Eastern and Western mother gods, the next chapter examines the concept of matricide across the world. Claiming that the Mother God

was almost killed by “reason,” she argues that She went underground and now lives deep in our psyches.

The second half of the book focuses more intensely on the Mother God of the West and the possibilities for her re-emergence. Beginning with Mary the mother of God’s role of “theotokos,” she explores the burial of Christianity’s divine feminine, unveiling the white supremacy and misogyny at the heart of this move. As a further unearthing of Christianity’s resources, she also works with the gynocentric figures of the Black Madonna and also Mary Magdalene, whom she deems “Yogi Magdalene.” Finally, she takes a sojourn into Jewish-Hindu thought, as she explores the “Shakti-Shekhinah” of Spinoza. Here, she argues that the absence of the Mother God of the Bible is only an illusion; She has been with us all along. Ultimately, Saxena claims that a multi-religious mythos will be the force that resuscitates the Mother God in all her facets and powers.

This book resists categorization by design, but one might say that it is a literary, spiritual, intellectual autobiography with feminist and decolonizing themes. In the book’s preface, she first calls herself a “literature teacher who plays with philosophy, ” a description that gives context to her unorthodox, genre-busting methodology (xxvii). The word “play” reappears throughout the text, as she places disparate ideas in juxtaposition. She also calls the book “semi-scholarly,” an astute move that anticipates any objections to her memoir-like spiritual reflections and the disparate thematic threads that do not always get seamlessly rewoven into the fabric of her multiple arguments. (71)

Throughout her explorations of the divine feminine, Saxena chooses the term “Mother God” over the word “Goddess.” In doing so, she attempts to sidestep the sexualized and orientalist connotations of “goddess.” But in doing so, I wonder if she too highly reveres the maternal, at the expense of other traits of the divine feminine. As someone with an absent mother who is not a mother myself, I wonder about the apotheosis of mother as a guiding theme of the book. I do attest that her employment of the Mother God denotes multiplicity and deconstructs binary gender oppositions. For example, one can be generative and creative, as many stories about the Mother God attest, without physically birthing offspring. Through her nuanced vision of the Mother God, Saxena avoids a simple essentialism.

She says she is not articulating theology, yet she also names herself as a Hindu-Buddhist and writes a confessional, personal text about the Mother God. Her sources, too, are theological, as well as philosophical and literary. Notably, her god is black and female: a theological claim. I want to name Saxena’s work as theology, even as it stretches its boundaries.

Because Saxena maintains that she herself has found the Mother God, the title *Absent Mother God of the West* does not proclaim her eternal absence, but instead describes how Her presence has been obscured historically and currently. Saxena invokes this presence and its blessing on an world that needs the Mother God.

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