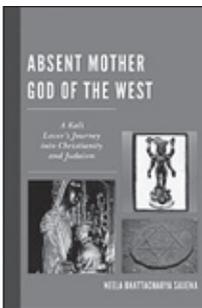




Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, *Absent Mother God of the West: A Kali lover's journey into Christianity and Judaism*

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Neela Bhattacharya Saxena's *Absent Mother God of the West: A Kali lover's journey into Christianity and Judaism* is a rare gem of a book. Part scholarly discourse, part memoir, part psycho-spiritual meditation, her work meanders “into texts and places, philosophies, and stories, theologies, and iconographies” (p. xvii). The treatise takes us with her on an incredible, unplanned quest throughout lands and epochs for the Divine Mother's manifestation in the west.

The impetus of the book was born of a genuine scholastic curiosity regarding the absence of a divine female deity in Judeo-Christian culture. As a devotee of Kali in her native India, Saxena observes that the absence of the feminine divine within Western culture seems to have left a cultural void. Lamenting the idea that “Gaia and biblical God were not on speaking terms”. Saxena set forth on a global Odyssey to determine if any vestiges of the Goddess were extant in Western consciousness.

Partly inspired by China Galland's quest in *Longing for darkness: Tara and the Black Madonna* (1990), Saxena made a concerted effort to determine what has happened to female deities, or the element of feminine divine consciousness that she calls “Mother God”. Her whirlwind pilgrimage brings her from sites such as the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus in Turkey to shrines of the Black Madonna in Switzerland. By the end, she returns east to the Ijen Volcanic Crater in Java, Indonesia and then back to India, bringing her quest full circle. In this journey, Saxena synthesizes ruminations upon the phenomenological impact of liminal experience with a deft overview of Continental philosophy and Western thought. As at ease with Deleuzian analysis as with

Buddhist dharma exposition, her spontaneous pilgrimage to find vestiges of the Sacred Feminine ultimately transmutes into a philosophic coup against male dominated theological patriarchy.

Interwoven between the wandering narrative and scholarly musings are meditations upon Postcolonial anguish. In one of the most poignant elements of her memoir, she describes how her mother fled Bangladesh because of the British partitioning of India in 1947. As a woman of color, fully immersed in both Eastern and Western systems of conceptualization, Saxena is in a unique position to become an important player in de-colonizing ventures and the resistance against androcentrism. This concomitant intersectional analysis of race and gender, coupled with meditations upon the Mother God's absence in the west, illuminate issues of patriarchy's problematics.

This call for the emergence of Gaia consciousness and gynocentric philosophy is echoed within Saxena's language. Her text is circular as she rafts us down the stream of her consciousness and she is at her best when she allows her poetic musings full reign. Passages such as, "The fiery energy of the body reveals itself in all our life works and our sufferings" (p. 10) border upon the sublime. However, a dizzying array of undefined terms and foreign references can also leave the uninitiated bewildered. As she notes herself, the book is not intended to be a linear argument, but rather dedicated to "seeking, intuiting, theorizing, dismissing, constructing, designing, and heralding the return of the Great Goddess" (p. xiii). Although this multi-genre work is not intended to be scholarly *per se*, ample endnotes and an extensive bibliography mark this text as a useful handbook for those seeking further references to the divine feminine.

All in all, Dr. Saxena's vast, encyclopedic knowledge seems as cosmological as the Mother Goddess's domain, and her ability to fuse genres together is impressive. *Absent Mother God of the West* attests to Saxena's supreme virtues as thinker, writer, teacher, and scholar. It is a pleasure to watch this impressive author discover underground regions where the Goddess, in her incarnations such as Theotokos and Our Lady of Czestochowa, thrive in Europe and still reign as "Shakti-Shekinah" energy in India. By delving into the mysteries herself, she gives her readers permission to take their own chthonic impulses seriously and provides them with a template to follow in their own quest for the sacred feminine.

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