

***Absent Mother God of the West: A Kali Lover's Journey into Christianity and Judaism.* By Neela Bhattacharya Saxena. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015. xii+171 pp. ISBN: 1498508057. \$95.80, hardcover; \$41.99 paperback; \$39.50 e-book.**

In beautiful prose, Neela Bhattacharya Saxena explores the presence of the Goddess in feminine representations of world religions from the lens of a Kali *bhakti* (devotee). While her first book, *In the Beginning IS Desire: Tracing Kali's Footprints in Indian Literature*, was an effort to describe Kali through a Western academic lens, this book looks to describe the Western lack of the Goddess through the Eastern lens. The result is a decolonizing bridge of (re)connection to the Mother God lost to the West, a rare gift by an author who has been free from internalized oppression. This book much like this year's new release by Christena Cleveland, *God is a Black Woman*, countering the psycho-spiritual oppression that is perpetuated in the exclusive upholding of God as an old white man in the sky who controls his created universe from afar. Although a difficult task, Saxena masterfully brings the goddess, and more importantly the black goddess, to consciousness from a tradition that recognizes that there is never a "one size fits all" solution to human religiosity. According to the dharmic worldview, we are each on our own unique spiritual journey.

While published six years ago, this book is still an important read for anyone who believes the world needs "Mother" to set things right in our unbalanced world. Ten years before Saxena's publication, Jean Shinoda Bolen wrote *Urgent message from Mother* about the dearth of this archetypal wisdom needed to save the world. While not relegated exclusively to a gender, the mother energy is that found in caring for children and elders, maintaining safe spaces, being frugal with resources, putting food on the table, staying on good terms with neighbors, living life sensually and cultivating peace. At the intersection of many disciplines, such as religion, women's and gender studies, history, anthropology, and environmental science, following the author's journey might require some stops and starts to keep up. Yet, this book is recommended reading in efforts to delight in difference, however deep, of diverse religions or the distinctive set of rituals, beliefs, doctrines, institutions, and practices that enable members of that tradition to establish, maintain, and celebrate a meaningful world.

In chapter one, *Carving Kali*, Saxena revisits her lens: "declaring one's position has been a postmodern move to dismantle the delusion of objectivity; it also serves to alert us to our own possible blind spots." As is described in understanding the "pregnant nothingness" of Kali, Indic dharmas have been mainly about praxis rather than belief in any dogma, and that understanding Her is becoming comfortable with the paradox of polarities. In chapter two, *Triple Goddesses of Greece*, we travel with the author's eyes, seeing reflections of the goddess energies and evidence of women performing rituals—communing with Athenian Athena, Cypriot Aphrodite, and Ephesian Artemis. In chapter three, *Matricide*, Saxena unravels the slow but defining process of destruction of the Mother God. As she writes: "How can fish kill water? But a fish can very well be completely unaware of water until it is thrown out of it. It then desperately needs to return to the sea or die." Like the demon in Indic sacred stories that is a highly spiritually developed ascetic who think he knows it all, the Goddess shows time and again that an inflated ego does not prevail over forces of cosmic creation. In chapter four, *Theotokos*, Saxena describes the

reduction of the goddess in the very act of elevating her in such a way that she becomes a symbol of oppression: impossibly good, inhumanly pure, she cannot be reached. In chapter five, *Yogini Magdalene*, we encounter Eve's craving for knowledge as a gnostic hunger which is different from belief and obedience and in turn embrace Mary Magdalene as Jesus' Shakti. In chapter six, *Shakti Shekinah*, we further explore the Feminine Divine in the Tree of Life, bringing philosophy down to earth. As Saxena writes: "A search for the Feminine Divine has taken on many forms-philosophical, religious, psychological, and environment, to name a few."

In conclusion, Western scholarship has changed with the inclusion of practicing women's voices in academic publications. Saxena's deep contribution is to restore balance that is missing when women in a culture lose their divine counterparts, which in turn leads to the culture losing the capacity to bring them to the forefront of consciousness. As her student remarks: taking mater/Mother out of material has left us with materialism. Yet through this wide and deep journey of experience and scholarship, at the end of the book, I hope you will feel as I do and as Saxena writes: "Absent Mother God of the West is no longer absent for me."

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