

**Decolonizing Reality: *Absent Mother God of the West*
and Dissolution of Mono-theologies of Androcentric Supremacy**

Neela Bhattacharya Saxena

Professor of English and Women and Gender Studies

Nassau Community College, Garden City, NY

Website- neelabhattacharyasaxena.com

Blog- Stand Under the Mother Principle

A bit of history is perhaps helpful before I present my point of view, especially since I am not a theologian, or even a religion scholar in its strict academic sense. I have been an English teacher who is enamored of her black female deity, Mother Kali of India. My own, what John Caputo calls, “desire for God” had led me to interrogate the vast world of what is known as “Hinduism” and discover what I have called a Gynocentric Matrix that presents the supremely non-dual figure of the Great Mother in her many forms. At a point in my journey into Kali consciousness and engagement with India’s Shakta and Buddhist Tantric paths, I found myself wondering about the missing Divine Mother in the religions of my adopted country, especially since in the US I was assailed with the irrelevance of female deities for Indian women as they were all presumed to be under the hegemonic power of their own patriarchy. In the process I began to wonder about the psycho-spiritual impact of having a purely male, single and rather “white” God in one’s mindscape. It did not matter whether one was a woman or man of any color or creed or even an atheist, but I particularly wondered its depth effect on women’s sense of self within a divine economy. I discovered almost a visceral fear of the word goddess especially among women and the association of the word mainly with museum figures from the Greek “myths” or with voluptuous movie stars.

As I wandered in Europe searching for the lost divine feminine of the western world, I did informal questioning regarding the nature and image of the Christian God. I discovered there was no doubt in the mind of my students, colleagues and scholars that the God of monotheism(s) was irrefutably male. Some would protest that this God is not gendered and is a Spirit but when pressed could not ever imagine this deity as female. The transcendental Father God and his only Son occupy the divine space where no woman even the Virgin Mary is given an equal seat. It is strange that this imageless divinity has such a clear male “image.” This God looks down upon his own material creation from his high heaven and promises a postmortem salvation. Despite the prime commandment against graven images, images are formed in the mind as soon as we enter language; in addition, almost always genders are implicated even within

apparently neutral ideas. I figured that even the atheists and secularists were vigorously denying the existence of a biblical Father God. Since there was no trace of the Mother God in their consciousness, they could not deny Her.

As I venture deeper into my interrogation of world's religious articulations, I wonder whether this fear of the Divine Feminine is intricately connected with the fear of dissolution of all andro/egocentric mono-theologies that the figure of a fierce Kali promises. I discovered that many postmodern theologians like Catherine Keller, John Caputo, Richard Kearney or even a Paul Tillich have been deconstructing or dissolving their own omnipotent Father God of, what Tillich called, "theology of theism." Yet, somehow the feminine remains rather a distant call, often relegated to New Age goddess delusions. However, my recent and rather small engagement with non-canonical Nag Hammadi texts reveal powerful voices of the feminine that point toward the balancing role of Mary Magdalene in the life of Jesus, the supreme Guru or the "Great High Priest" of Christianity. In this paper I would like to present my journey into the Absent Mother God of the West under the auspicious of what I call the Mother Principle and my stumbling upon ecstatic and tantalizing mysteries that the suppressed figures like the Black Madonna and Yogini Mary Magdalene represent. This has now become a decolonizing move to unravel a flux metaphysics of planetary proportion that reveals a quixotic reality below the surface of certainty and solidity of dominant theo/ideologies.

Mother Principle and Tantra

It is proper to begin by situating myself within a lineage that is speaking through me since the personal self is meaningless or a mere usable mask.¹ I write a playful blog called Stand Under the Mother Principle. This Mother Principle is the source from whose womb the polarities of Shakti and Shiva, Male and Female, Yin and Yang, Jesus and Mary Magdalene arise to play and teach in the world. She is known as Shunya, Void or Adyashakti. My experience of Kali led me to call her "pregnant nothingness" whose fierce compassion flows from the space element that devours time in one's journey toward absolute freedom of Buddha's Nirvana. While Tantric yogis and yoginis have begun to unveil themselves to help us find inner and outer balance even exoteric Indic religions with a "polytheistic consciousness" allow people to identify with all aspects of reality, gendered or otherwise, human and non-human. Specifically, the presence of innumerable goddesses suffuses the Indic religious world with a numinosity and beauty and could provide women, who are not under the hegemony of the

¹ See my "Iridescent Self in the Womb of the Wholly M(Other): A Vajrayani Meditation" in *Social Theory and Asian Dialogues: Cultivating Planetary Conversations* (2018) edited by Ananta Giri.

modernist ideology, a deep non-dual sense of connection with divine materiality. Buddhist Tantra or Vajrayana is the most sophisticated methodology developed through centuries of deep experiments within one's own psycho-spiritual being. These yogis and yoginis that Robert Thurman calls psychonauts are different from the hatha yogis that one usually encounters in the Yoga market place of today's spiritual bazar.

However, Tantra is a maligned word so I will take refuge into my Vajraguru Kulavadhuta Satpurananda's words who categorically asserts its Gynocentric character in his teachings. Tantra is mainly a methodology, a praxis: "Tantra is not a religion. It is a secular technical practice which shortens the path to moksha, cleansing to Clarity and then Nirvana, Non-Identity. It can be applied to any religion but should not be corrupted by the meanness of fundamentalist religious boundaries. Tantra is essentially a way to Liberation in Life as it is. It is equipoise of the inner and the outer." Both fierce and calm deities, female as well as male, illumine the Tantric pantheon of all Indic religions; these are designed by awakened beings whose connection with the source gave them tremendous creative energy. In the Indian subcontinent, three powerful goddesses, Sri, Kali and Tara preside over three different Tantra families or Kulas.

They represent both stages of one's practice as well as geographical regions where highly personalized methodologies were developed to help people find a joyful way of connecting with their source toward a recognition of non-contradiction between the material and the spiritual, equipoise between Samsara and Nirvana. Goddess is the energy or shakti that operates the cosmos as all-pervading consciousness and is inherent in our existence; Shiva principle is the principle of realization and is represented by figures of Buddha or Shiva or Christ who awaken to this divine play. It is the union of Shakti and Shiva, energy and consciousness within one's own mind, body, speech that leads to the awakened being quite at home in Samsara whose other pole is Nirvana. Tantra shows the path to Samadhi where all identities dissolve into the womb of the Mother (endarkment) and the awake being emerges to reconnect with the earth, grounded and rooted in spontaneous equipoise or *sahaja*.

This is not the place to talk about my continuous journey into Tantra, but a bit more personal history is necessary. My self-examination under questioning of Indian woman identity by the dominant west showed my strange internal immunity from racism and sexism. However, although I was clear about the role Kali played in my own innermost life, I was compelled to examine the Indic traditions thoroughly. I discovered a deep layer in Indic religiosity that I described as a Gynocentric Matrix, just below the surface of Brahminical patriarchy. Thus my 2004 book *In the Beginning IS Desire: Tracing Kali's Footprints in Indian Literature* gave an "academic" shape to my inner convictions. In that book, I tried to speak to my American friends about a deity absolutely alien to them whose non-dual world was philosophically satisfying to my intellect and to my ordinary

life as a woman. Kali, my “pregnant nothingness”, flows in my veins, pulsates in every atom of my body, and encompasses the entire cosmos beyond space-time.

I was not prepared for the reception of my work and my course on the goddess in world religions that speaks to many young American students, women and men. I was astounded by the Mother hunger among many feminist theologians, goddess seekers, young women suffering from body images and spiritualists of every kind. I had taken my Divine Mother and did not know what it was like not to have one available in the culture. That book sent a literature teacher to the world of theology². My journey led me to books like *Longing for Darkness: Tara and the Black Madonna* by China Galland and my second book ended up as a reverse journey to the western world in search of its black Virgins and discovered the hidden mysteries that were only the tip of the iceberg.

Absent Mother God of the West

Traditionally the history of western Christianity has been rife with extraordinary efforts on the part of androcentric and androcratic clerics and theologians to deny, erase, and suppress the name of the woman from the space of the divine. Within the deeply ingrained dualistic metaphysics of the western tradition, the “woman” was marked as flesh, source of temptation and sin, and was effectively relegated to the realm of the Devil. Even more destructive was the later identification of reason with masculinity in philosophy that consigned all things female to the rubbish heap of matter in its radical Cartesian split between mind and body. As ascetic Christianity constructed its institutional codes as early as the First Council of Nicaea, the only female presence venerated, even in her inferior role as mere intercessor, was that of the Virgin Mother.

The omnipotent God of Christianity is all good who stands outside his creation and harshly judges his own creation. Patriarchal theologies imagine a fallen and sinful nature of human beings which is especially housed in the female body that deserved to be punished by eternal hell fire, according to some theologies. However, human histories are always more complex than what appears on the surface and the Feminine can never be truly eliminated despite the history of matricide that I chronicle in my book. Ten years of wandering into the world of books and hallowed spaces in Europe brought me close to the suppressed feminine divinity of an ostensibly spiritually patriarchal western world. I found myself drenched in the most enchanting energy of the Virgin, aptly called the Mother of God, in a cave in a Greek Island that I describe in my book as an initiation. I knew then that the mystery of monotheism(s) was barely beginning to speak to me.

² See my "Gynocentric Theology of Tantric Hinduism: A Meditation upon the Devi" in *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* (2012).

The reception of this book which has just been released in paperback has encouraged me to go deeper into Christianity and Judaism. But then I began to wonder about the psycho spiritual effect of such mono-theologies of androcentric supremacy on western conceptions of reality. My foray into the Western world's own suppressed traditions led me to recognize how widespread the impact of what James Hillman calls "Cartesian Christianity" has been on people who identify themselves as modern westernized people regardless of their religious affiliation. This brings me to my current preoccupation with decolonizing reality because it became increasingly clear to me that until and unless one's spiritual endeavor of de-conditioning our minds lead to what the Buddha calls the "right view" which is no view or no mind of the Zen tradition, we remain bound by our perspectives and these have desperate consequences in the objective world as much as the inner one.

As has been pointed out by numerous scholars, activists and theologians that our current planetary crisis is at least partially related to these theologies of androcentric power. If scientists like Iain McGilchrist³ are correct, modern western world that has invaded most of the world's cultures is heavily left brained and has lost its balance, the fate of human beings on this planet is rather dismal. Extreme scientism has an escapist solution which is just the other side of the coin of creating a transcendental heaven. AI driven technologies will strip human beings of their fleshy existence in supreme act of spirit/body dualism.⁴ Extremist versions of every religion are in cahoots with these technologies and are competing in a self-destructive race toward collective extinction. There must be other ways beyond these binary oppositions that do not leave us in an aporetic paralysis. Problematic though religions have been, they also house a deeper layer that could help us in our possible evolutionary journey into Christ consciousness and Buddhahood, perhaps our real human birthright.

Decolonizing Reality, Non-Canonical Texts and Modern Physics

However, to develop a truly planetary consciousness and break out of what D Latifa calls a "psycho-theological ruptures in the modern self"⁵ that may foster responsible action at the global stage, scholars of religion need to expand the lens through which we see religiosity. Religious perspectives affect how we see reality, nature, animals, vegetation, life and death. At this crucial juncture in our collective history, when we have begun to see our interdependent universe, it is helpful to see how

³ See *Master and His Emissary: Divided Brain and Making of the Western World*

⁴ See my "AI as Awakened Intelligence: Buddha, Kurzweil and the Film *Her*" forthcoming in *Religious Transhumanism and Its Critics* by Lexington Books.

⁵ See *Penetrations and (s)Permutations: A Psychological Exploration of Modernity, Islam and Fundamentalisms* by Dr. D Latifa.

depth dimensions of religions speak to each other. In that effort, I am reading heterodox traditions of Christianity from a broadly eastern perspective.

Perception of an objective reality replete with separate different “things” that stand alone and get randomly impacted like the billiard balls on a pool table has been a staple of scientific thinking that arose out of European Enlightenment. It is not very different from a reality created by an external and exoteric Biblical God who stands outside his “created” universe, observes it with delight or distaste, sometimes destroys and starts again. Only this time it is the scientist who takes on this godlike stance rejecting the all-seeing eye of a judging Father God. He desacralizes the cosmos and makes it his playground, dissects animals who according to Cartesian postulates have no *Res Cogitans* and hence do not suffer. Even an Einstein has difficulty with the entangled nature of reality. I draw attention here to a 1930 dialogue on the nature of reality between Einstein and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore that speaks clearly how cultural unconscious affects even our greatest minds. In this dialogue Einstein declares that he is more religious than the Indian poet who does not accept an objective reality.

I would like to suggest that it is the “the Old Man” in the sky image of divinity/reality with a shining beard of certainty that stands behind Einstein’s resistance to the “Tehomic” nature of reality that is profoundly feminine. Now a hundred years after those epoch-making discoveries quantum science is proposing a completely different perspective on reality. Brian Greene suggests: “Can it really be that the solid world of existence and perception, in which a single, definite reality appears to unfold with dependable certainty, rests on the shifting sands of quantum probabilities? Well, Yes. Probably. The evidence is compelling and tangible.”

Things have been shifting in the Biblical universe too. In her ground-breaking work, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, Catherine Keller takes us through a rereading of the Biblical narrative and has us meet her “Tehomic” world of a shape shifting reality. She argues for a ‘chaosmos’ and presents a profoundly feminine and “entangled” divinity who does not stand outside “his” creation and observes in detached calm. Taking her cue from the Hebrew word Tehom for the abyss and submerging herself in a different understanding of Genesis 1:1-2, she poetically creates a “theology” that challenges the orthodoxies of her own tradition. She brings us to the dark depths of our maternal being where everyday reality and creativity can dance together.

Such a reading of the origin myths of the Bible takes us to the Nag Hammadi Library of the Gnostic Gospels. Elaine Pagels has been discovering an entirely different mythos in these erstwhile “forbidden” gospels. Here the dark goddesses are present in their full glory along with their male counterparts. In the *Great Announcement* that Pagels

cites via Hippolytus, we hear an intriguing voice: “From the power of Silence appeared ‘a great power, the Mind of the Universe, which manages all things, and is male...the other...a great Intelligence...is a female which produces all things.” As the explanation continues, I see a more Hindu/Buddhist male/female polarity in union when the author explains that “these powers, joined in union, ‘are discovered to be duality...This is Mind in Intelligence, and these are separable from one another, and yet are one, found in a state of duality” and Pagels too notices that this “dynamic relationship of opposites—a concept that may be akin to the Eastern view of yin and yang, but remains alien to Judaism and Christianity.”

In another article Pagels asks: “What Became of God the Mother” and proceeds to discuss conflicting images of God in early Christianity. Pagels also envisions a different conception of Eve in *Adam Eve and the Serpent*, as she takes us to a text called *Reality of the Rulers* and cites this striking address of Adam to Eve: “It is you who have given me life: you shall be called Mother of the Living [Eve]; for it is she who is my Mother. It is she who is the Physician, and the Woman, and She Who Has Given Birth.” With this we plunge into the world of what I have called the Mother Principle which gives birth to both yin and yang. Here light itself is a beautiful but fragile child born out of a profound creative nothingness.

Indic Paths’ Dialogue with Emerging non/weak/ana/theisms

As I look more closely at the Gnostic Gospels and other non-canonical texts, I see that these heterodox traditions are closer to Indic “Gynocentric” milieu and feel at home in the quixotic nature of reality. Such interdisciplinary and inter-spiritual dialogues need to be presented to the wider public so that we develop a deeper sense of our shared religiosity than the conventional confrontational ones provide. Perhaps in such a dialogue we will find greater strength and hope to deal with our most pressing ecological issues. It is not an easy task since theologies are deeply entrenched in power structures whether they are Hindu, Christian, Jewish, or Islamic. I see my journey and its expression in my writing as an example of a global resurgence of the Mother energy. While there are myriad books written on Yoga and Tantra by westerners, I am discovering Indic Tantric paths’ affinities with many suppressed mystical traditions of the west. In this section I would like to briefly connect with a couple of post-theist theologians and scholars who have been shaking up their own traditions and trying to dethrone the traditional Father God from his omnipotent position.

It is fascinating to see what deconstructive thought and a corporeal turn in philosophy have done to traditional theology. I have browsed through Caputo’s *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* and find it quite exhilarating and deeply moving. His theology is a theology of love and what we call bhakti or devotion in India; it is

confessional, prayerful and deconstructive at once. He acknowledges his debt to Catherine Keller and mentions the feminine once when he refers to her work. He proceeds to see Biblical *tehom* and *tohu wa-bohu* as the stuff Elohim fashions, “not from nothing to something, the dream of metaphysical theology, but from the barrenness of being to the ebullience of life” (62). However, this God is still outside his creation as an artist and a potter. Feminized Chaos is just the stuff for him to give shape to: “That is why Elohim does not make war on them but regards them rather the way a potter regards the clay” (63). He introduces “the element of irreducible indeterminacy and instability” into creation and fosters his weak deity. He calls for a new Enlightenment that appreciates darkness acknowledging “the dangers of overexposure to the sun” (291); however, he is not venturing into non-canonical texts at least in this book and is rather critical of apparent dualism of Gnosticism. But I do see in his weak theology a hint of Daoist Yin principle whose weakness and water element makes her strong.

It is Catherine Keller’s work that fascinates me the most. I already mentioned her *Face of the Deep* that I read with great admiration while I was working on my *Absent Mother God of the West* book. Her *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* I am reading now. It begins as she says, “in the Sinaitic wilderness, where we also spot a rabbinic rendering of the opaque cloud as Presence, Shekhinah, Herself” (9). I had described her as Shakti Shekhinah in my book following Gershom Scholem’s comparison of Jewish Shekhinah with Hindu Shakti. I love the figure of the cloud as it invokes the liquidity of the feminine as well as impermanence of the Buddha. Keller resurrects *The Cloud of Unknowing* and other mystical works and invokes Buddha’s *anatta* (not-self) when she speaks of the “Brilliant Darkness of a Hidden Silence” via Dionysus the Areopagite’s mystical theology (67). Her entanglement with apophatic quantum is quite gorgeous. Like many other who show up on conferences like Science and Non-Duality, she is seeing the connection between cutting edge science and deep esoteric knowledge of our inner world inherent in ancient knowledge systems. Richard Kearney too hungers for transcendence and returns to God after God, but I am only vaguely familiar with his work so do not feel competent to comment.

Conclusion

It is not possible to say more in this brief paper especially since my journey into non-canonical texts of Christianity have just begun, but I am encouraged by the efforts of feminist and non-theist theologians to decolonize theology. Also, philosophy’s return to immanence has begun to expose the transcendental imbalance. Westar’s rejection of supernatural theism is exciting, and all these post-theisms may help us reach a truly planetary consensus regarding our collective engagement with whatever we name as divinity and come to terms with our collective responsibility toward our blue planet.

However, without resurrecting the Divine Feminine, this will remain only a truncated effort.

Nag Hammadi texts must be read via deep meditative mode and concrete experience of returning to the deep senses. As I contemplate a text like the Gospel of Mary, I hope to contribute toward restoring Mary Magdalene to her rightful place besides Jesus. Shiva and Shakti principles must be united as the play of darkness and light that is also known as the Guru principle. Decolonizing reality is to enter into spacetime to deconstruct the binary, but first we must undo the hierarchy imposed by patriarchy and see their Yin/Yang polarity. It is not an accident that so many yogi scientists are beginning to connect all kinds of dots across disciplinary as well the science/ religion divides.

Christ consciousness is Indic Chaitanya but if we remove the feminine from this, it is nothing but a theory, a mental construction. Theos and theology after all have the same root as theory. If the history of ontotheologies have been an obsession with Being/being, I must say it has been a reduced entity. We cannot have an articulation of Being without Non-Being. We must understand how recognition of polarity is not the same as metaphysical dualism that has plagued western ways. Here Gnostic practitioners may play a role, not necessarily the Gnostic theory which can be just another dogma that cannot be realized without praxis. My research has revealed a direct female Gnostic lineage that traces itself back to Mary Magdalene. I also discovered what is known as the Brazen Cross, symbol of the Order of Holy Wisdom which is like Kundalini/Serpent power of Indic Tantric Ways. However, all these are conceptual and until a practitioner begins to real-ize them in her or his own being, they remain in the external world of things or objects.

In its deepest sense Mother God is an encounter with dissolution, a communion with that creative and paradoxical energy that flows before any imagination can conceive creation. She is truly the Mother of God, prior to any conception of divinity in the mind of man. She represents the organic unfolding of life and its evolutionary journey without any external creator. She is the fragrant fluidity of life. She brings us into a liquid and liquifying endarkment from whose womb the concepts of theos arises and vanishes. Her compassion flows like tears or mother's milk but her Tantric incarnations are not gentle but fierce. They bring one face to face with figures of Nairtmya or Kali of the cremation grounds or Tibet's Palden Lhamo. These glorious goddesses effortlessly inhabit both the terror and beauty of life and in their presence fragile construction of the ego self comes unstuck. Space devours time and one is freed from its veil.

In the twenty-first century, Hermetic principle of as above so below seem to be coming together in a fascinating planetary conjunction of practices. To add Indic

Mother God's luminous materiality to this sumptuous feast of ideas, I would like to end by invoking Paul Tillich's tombstone. It speaks loudly to me: "And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit for his season, his leaf also shall not wither." Let me add a flower with its touchable being to this imagery that reminds me of the Goddess Tara and her touching emptiness.