

## Book Reviews

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ATHEISM AND THE GODDESS: CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACHES WITH A FOCUS ON SOUTH ASIA. By Anway Mukhopadhyay. Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. 141 pp.

“No One Knows from whence this Creation has Come – maybe It made Itself, maybe It did Not – maybe the God who looks down on It from the Highest Heaven Knows, and then again maybe He does not Know” – proclaims the Rig Veda (10.127.7). It is this exceptional, Atheistic premise, and its Unconscious association with the “He” that becomes the central, conscious foundation of Mukhopadhyay’s dense, conceptual book, sourced in both doctrines of Classicism and Popular Culture. In his Introductory chapter, Mukhopadhyay latches on to the etymology of the Hebraic *Elohim*, and the ambiguity surrounding its masculinist assumptions. He argues why terms, such as ‘God’, ‘Godless’, ‘Goddess’ and ‘Goddesslessness’ require different interpretive paradigms. An essential step in that direction would be the pluralization of “an” atheism into “atheisms” (4), where the possibility of actualizing doctrinal Goddess worship and/or its conscious rejection might be entertained. Promptly, an interpretation of atheism is naturalized, where *a-thea-ism* (Gk. Thea: Goddess), now carefully demarcated from atheism (Gk. Theos: God), must be the norm of religious worship, for interpretive dilemma should, ideally, support the Goddess-argument through its traditional, yet flawed characterization of God-denial through its use of the earlier terminology. Equally problematic would be the characterization of *parameshvari* as the “Supreme Female Ruler”, for its presumption of a Gendered, male “Supreme” ought to be abolished in favour of the “Supreme Ruler” (6). It is necessary, that we confront and initiate modifications in order to address primal hierarchies with little, or no basis in linguistic or factual ontologies. Citing systematically, how “mono-Thea-ism” in Shakta Hinduism presents an ideal paradox to the monotheism of Abrahamic religions in particular, Mukhopadhyay wonders, (with positive emphasis on the definitional drawbacks in the dogmatic conclusions of Western Atheism) why an “obstinately” (7) inclusive ap(re)proach is exigent under current circumstances. Drawing differences between Secular Feminism, Goddess Feminists and Religious reform Feminists, Mukhopadhyay insists why the Shakta Goddess, and her contradictory divinity, (or the contradiction in divine discourse) ultimately appeals to the latter two, who argue either in favour of a hybridization of the masculine *macht*, or in favour of an absolute democratization of divine *macht*, leading towards gender neutralization, or bi-gendering religious faith, helping remove restrictive strongholds. In the second chapter, Mukhopadhyay introduces us, more convincingly, to the connotative implication(s) of a word like *a-thea-ism* (22), where the merely “theistic” or “atheistic” could, first and foremost, be substituted for a “Thea-ism” where the Goddess “mediates between the body and the spirit, the material and the metaphysical” (27) – an alternative, viable discourse that democratizes the Divine “ego” between the mediator and the “mediatrix” (28). Deconstructing monotheism in the age of COVID-19 remains indispensable, for the doctrine of “Universal punishment” (31) amongst Abrahamists when interpreting death should naturally read divine, Feminine power as an antidote to the obstructive, male antigen – a non-negotiable necessity. What, one enquires, is the problem in perusing the *theaistic* as pantheism, as some Goddess Feminists have adduced earlier? Mukhopadhyay asserts that pantheism, too, is a watertight compartment that does injustice to the divine paradox, for the dialectic is no category, in the same way that Divinity is more than masculine power. The Readers are confronted with an “epistemic aporia” (34) – the

conceptual impasse between traditional theism, atheism and the *realization* (as opposed to categorization) of the Goddess within theological space – is theological space the only true, divine space? Or is it the perpetration of ideological objectives that the Theologists refuse to address, in terms of the exclusive/the equal/superior right of the un-familiar as divine? Gaia Theory is not an acceptable alternative, Mukhopadhyay reiterates, time and again; the Western Atheist is incapable of a “nuanced understanding” (36) of polytheistic dynamics, despite [H]is sweeping argument, nonetheless. The Atheist is indifferent to the evolution of a theocratic hierarchy – about how the pluralization of male “Gods” in Abrahamic tradition came to signify one masculine, divine entity above all other, and none else. *Thealogy*, in lieu of it, creates a formidable substitute to these conspicuous drawbacks, by promoting an “inclusivist ethics” (39) with regards to divine participation.

The Third Chapter, in numerous ways, mirrors those Theo-spiritual doctrines/incidents where systemic repression of *Thealogy* normalizes male, spiritual objectives, and how doctrinal reciprocity functions as a salvific, eye-opener to monotheistic methodologies. For instance, exercising restraint, and permanent estrangement from *prakriti* as the spiritual goal of *Purusha* offers covert acknowledgment to feminine power; for Adi Shankara (and subsequently for the Advaita Vedantin as well), *maya* walks the ideological line between “illusion or delusion” (51), and is ridiculously difficult to compartmentalize, although he does not go so far as Samkhya Darshana does, in dualizing divinity. Shankaracharya, however, might have been a Shakta devotee himself, as Paul David Devanandan emphasizes, in the same way that Madhusudana Saraswati might have visualized Vishnu when hymning the Absolute (51, 58). Shankaracharya’s (initial) dismissive attitude towards female asceticism is resolved when Mukhopadhyay encounters the paradox anecdotally and concludes that the Goddess Herself exposes Shankara’s theological deficit by fictionalizing the fictional – by re-theorizing *maya*, carefully rupturing the Creator/Creatrix discourse on the Absolute, as an atheist like Arindam Chakrabarti did, or a *thea-ist* should.<sup>1</sup> The construction of the Sarada Matha in accordance with the regulatory principles of the *dashanami sampradaya* of the Vedantic, monastic order exhibits the dynamism of reformist Hinduism, in the same way that Ramakrishna Paramahansa is drawn into the Advaitic headstream, upon receiving divine instructions from the Goddess Kali, exacerbating the empirical absolutism of divine experience which can both withstand and subserve intellectual and spiritual assault from mono-disciplinary approaches – a “pan-*thea-ism*” rather than *thea-cide*” (63).

This theme is further investigated in the Fourth chapter when Mukhopadhyay, *a la* Adriano Cavarero, reflects on obsessive, transcendental masculinity with an undertone of “symbolic matricide” (77) – a philosophical “fact” authenticated by none other than the Poststructuralist Philosopher, Jacques Derrida, in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Swami Vivekananda had prioritized the masculinity of “Shiva” (82) over Ramakrishna’s deification of the Mother Goddess, and his piercing interest in the restoration of divine hierarchy – Shiva over Shakti. While Mukhopadhyay does not berate Vivekananda’s assertive, masculine stance *per se*, he defiantly argues, through carefully chosen anecdotes, how He was unconsciously coerced into the naturalization, and divinization of feminine power without identifying it as delusive, or as an inferior force in comparison with the Manlier, Brahmanical power. While the author, furthermore, states that it was “not masculine in nature” (85), I am inclined to disagree; Certainly, it is a paradigm of slanted masculinity, in the same way that the *Ardhanarishwara* avatara of Lord Shiva could be critiqued as, at once, a theist, *thea-ist* and atheistic position, but not *a-thea-istic* in any sense. But, more importantly, it is a conscious attestation to the elevatory possibilities of divine, feminine force – *almost*, at an identical altitude with Vivekananda’s sublime hierarchy, restored and normalized – an *ersatz sublime*, as I had formulated in a previous book.<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath Tagore’s tryst with Brahmoism and its association with “Renascent Hinduism” (86), although similar in objective with Vivekananda’s spiritual mission, had slanted, rational depictions, literalized in books like *Rajarshi* and *Bisarjan*. Truth, in Tagore’s words, had been rightfully “established [in] the image of the World Mother” (98).

Chapter Five begins mapping, in that usual, meticulous manner, the influence of Goddess Tara on the Tibetan Buddhist philosopher and globe trotter, Atisha Dipankara Shrijnana and the deification of Goddess Mazu, a folk Goddess, in Communist China (105, 107), consolidating the function of the Divine Feminine in Atheistic/monotheistic religions, as well as in political regimes. Drawing examples from Armin Navabi's derogatory cognizance of Kālī as the "sexy goddess" (110), Mukhopadhyay is rightfully disgusted by the insouciant, "gendered desecration" of the Goddess and the Goddess traditions across the civilized world. Contemporizing Atheism, as I began by demonstrating, is the backbone of the book, as the author draws further examples from Shakib Al Hasan's submission before Islamic fundamentalism when inaugurating Kali Pujas in Kolkata, and Taslima Nasreen's denunciation of suicidal belief systems that prefer coercion over co-existence. Humayun Ahmed's *Devi* remains symbolic of the Goddess's immanent presence across religious faiths, especially amongst Muslim women, or in *Nishithini* where the divine "She" inverts the divine paradigm by transforming the atheistic Misir Ali into an "agnostic" (120). Why? Because the Goddess, with one blow, signals Her distinction from, and dialectic complexity against neophytic, God-devotion (124). Mukhopadhyay concludes, with his remarkable reversion to the original debate, between a "Godless", and a "Goddessless" world: are we headed towards a technocratic apocalypse, or an ecological technocracy? Mukhopadhyay, I believe, *believes* in the latter, where what we live in, resembles an intersubjective, "being-like" (130) environment – an ontology: articulative, not artificial; human, not manly.

There are a few misprints, and minor errors that appear intermittently in Mukhopadhyay's book (see pp. 54, 80, 89, 104 etc.). Otherwise, the Book is a Herculean attempt at conceptual integrity and sovereignty towards a theme which has been over-exploited along cultural lines in recent years. We are very thankful to the author for forcing out/away a conceptual entity out of the Shakta, cultural womb, and we leave the author with one final question – is it possible, for a Shakta theoretician, to envision a triad amongst *Theology*, *Atheism* and *Thearchy/Theocracy*, where the Queendom of the Goddess can be structured hierarchically – the Goddess and the (god)esses, the Greater Goddesses and the lesser Goddesses, the goddesses elevated, democratically, to the status of the Goddess without Theo-political violence, and without negation? Would the Goddess's power be, surreptitiously, imagined like the Man's, or the replacement to the Man's? If it does, would the Goddess open herself to the investigative probing of Analytical Psychologists/Psychoanalysts for the manifestation of *Her* animus?<sup>4</sup> We do not know, but we believe that the author is certainly competent with educating us further, in this regard.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "If the whole of the cosmos requires a *maker* because it undergoes change, even God undergoes change in so far as he sometimes creates, sometimes destroys, sometimes just sustains this or that cycle of the universe. Should not he, by the same token, require a further maker?" (25, emphasis in original). See Chakrabarti, Arindam. "From the Fabric to the Weaver?" *Indian Philosophy of Religion*. Edited by Roy W. Perrett, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, pp. 21-34.

<sup>2</sup> "Derrida: The Documentary." *Philosophy Matters*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pn1PwtcJfwE>.

<sup>3</sup> Hore, Shouvik Narayan. "In Pursuit of Bhakti: A Study of Three Goddess Films." *Thematizations of the Goddess in South Asian Cinema*. Edited by Anway Mukhopadhyay and Shouvik Narayan Hore, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023, pp. 245-254.

<sup>4</sup> See Jung, Emma. "On the Nature of the Animus." *Animus and Anima: Two Essays*. Translated by Cary F. Baynes. Spring Publications, 2004, pp. 1-44, and Kast, Verena. "Anima/Animus." *The Handbook of Jungian Psychology*. Edited by Renos K. Papadopoulos, Routledge, 2006, pp. 113-129.