Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) never wrote: ‘I dream of helping ... mothers and those who assist them (gynecologists, obstetricians, midwives, psychologists, analysts) and to refine our knowledge of this passion, pregnant with madness and sublimity. Mothers today are in need of such a discourse’ (47). Kristeva being narcissistic, in the Freudian sense, dreams utopias in this book. Freud knew that medical science will make his theories redundant. Kristeva unlike Freud, having no medical training keeps penning her phantasies. Her failure to understand the heart of motherhood has forced her to write such meaningless essays on the Virgin Mother of God, Mary: Stabat Mater (1977). Kristeva has this to say of motherhood: ‘This subliminatory cycle [the mother-child dialectic] is not without subliminatory perversity’ (45). Donald Winnicott (1896–1971), Carl Rogers (1902–87), and later, Virginia Satir (1916–88) have more effective therapeutic solutions to issues of familial attachment than Kristeva has been able to formulate in her entire career. She just keeps reworking the unnecessarily libidinal aspects of Freud’s work.

The problem that faith poses, which Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) understood, eludes Kristeva. Thus she finds it ‘incredible’ that someone can be set aflame by the love of/for God. The vocation to enter into communion with God or Brahman is an anthropomorphic call, by saguna Brahman: Kristeva can never conceive of this call. How can she? She has never felt the passion which moved Swami Vivekananda to toil constantly for humanity or the inner urge which forced El Salvadorian Jesuits to become martyrs for the cause of justice fueled by hesed! In this book and elsewhere, Kristeva’s failure is in understanding the value of the inter-cultural. Cultures come into being not through the praxis of perfection of culture studies mediated by psychoanalysis, but through hesed. There is no hesed informing this book under review.

Kristeva provides clichéd insights about Marcel Proust (35) and Céline (38). The book under review proves that Kristeva is not self-actualised. She is still stuck within the Tel Quel group where she began her writing. Kristeva’s literary style is bad and to her, writing style matters. She is a failed novelist, who churns out bad novels and erudite essays which have little to do with reality. Kristeva and Sudhir Kakar (b. 1938) have jointly spoilt the reputation of both Freud and psychoanalysis. Kakar’s Young Tagore: The Making of a Genius (2014) is an insult to both psychoanalytic studies and to Tagore himself. Only when we are rid of Lacan and books like the one under review, will we be able to offer proper treatment to those in need of medication and what classical psychoanalysis has to offer those traumatised. Father Harada Roshi and Daniel Stern need to be taught rather than Kristeva.

Subhashis Chattopadhyay

Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avila—A Novel
Julia Kristeva
Trans. Lorna Scott Fox

St Teresa of Avila is one of the most studied and emulated Christian mystic. She is an extraordinary role model to be followed by a monastic religious, because she not only gives step-by-step instructions for the ‘interior’ life, but also guides life in a monastic community. She is one of the very few mystics who have recorded in detail their experiences. This record has helped and continues to help numerous mystical aspirants. However, this record has also had an effect that St Teresa could have hardly imagined: it has been made a subject of ‘psychoanalytic investigation’ and worse, turned into an ‘imagined life’ that masquerades as a ‘novel’.

The novel is not seen, because there is none. What Julia Kristeva presents in this book is an
unanswered soliloquy, supposedly in front of St Teresa, made ‘scholarly’ by interspersed passages from the saint herself and also from numerous studies on her and psychoanalysis. The reader gets the jolt of life when Kristeva brands St Teresa as one who was ‘unrepentantly carnal ... moved by an insatiable desire for men and women’ (9). From then on, Kristeva’s stand becomes clear and all her laborious work with a word-by-word analysis of St Teresa’s writings with the Spanish original given alongside, becomes meaningless, as they are bereft of the ‘passion’ for God, which is quite opposite to the ‘passion’ Kristeva portrays here.

Kristeva assumes just too many roles! While her credentials as a philosopher, feminist, author, and psychoanalyst is generally acknowledged by the academia—though her qualifications to be a psychoanalyst, and whether she actually does psychoanalysis is highly doubtful—her being a mystic and interpreter of sacred texts is indeed a new phenomenon! This high-handed attitude has resulted in passages such as this: ‘So, while it’s true that Judaism contains veins of mysticism, that the Upanishads relish sensual joys and annihilation in the sounds of the language, that Muslim Sufism reveals Being and its impossibility together, and that Zen koans are peerless propagators of the Void, it was in Christianity that mystics male and female were to find their royal road. Like Saulon the road to Damascus’ (41).

It is only the omniscient genius that Kristeva is, can authoritatively proclaim the ‘sensual joys and annihilation’ of the Upanishads, though numerous scholars who have devoted their entire lives to the study of Upanishads have never found anything even remotely sensual in these sublime texts! One can only glean the vast ignorance that Kristeva flaunts when she denies any presence of mysticism in Judaism, the Upanishads, Sufism, or Zen Buddhism!

One could write an equally voluminous book if one were to properly critique the book under review. Kristeva ends her volume with a chapter titled ‘Letter to Denis Diderot on the Infinitesimal Subversion of a Nun’. What is ‘subverted’ is the not so subtle subtext that this book is indeed for the ‘faithless and lawless’ (594).

This book has a play, ‘Dialogues from Beyond the Grave’ in four acts, which is at best inconclusive and vague. Psychoanalysts self-appointing themselves to ‘investigate’ saints’ lives forget that there is a sublime ‘desireless’ passion, just as there is an ‘asexual’ orientation. The popularity of this book is alarming as one is concerned with the number of people that are getting a biased perspective.

Kristeva clears her objective:

The point is neither to submit to the intellect, nor to substitute it with restless thought and imagination, but to construct a new expression that constitutes the Teresian discourse: suspension of the intellect, while also eluding that illusory, misleading, mystificatory imagination. A different imagination—let’s call it the imaginary—is ready to “fly about”, to soar free of Teresa, to free her in turn, to deliver her even from God; since God is in “the very deep and intimate part” of her, and it’s this that she seeks to liberate and be liberated from (22).

Really? St Teresa of Avila wants to be ‘liberated from’ God? Obviously, the clinical psychologist Sylvia Leclercq, through whom Kristeva dissects the life of St Teresa, is assuming too much! When Leclercq/Kristeva says that St Teresa added to ‘mystical theology ... her neuropsychic pathology and her feminine sensuality’ (231), she completely misses the point! Wading more than six hundred pages of undecipherable text that presupposes knowledge of Christian mysticism, psychoanalysis—especially Lacan—and the antics of Kristeva, what does the reader get? Frustration at having not understood the cerebral vomit of a scholar, supposedly holding the mecca of academia, and is left with an unnamed angst to ‘regain’ scholarship to really understand this book! As away from the saint’s life as it can get, this tome can be safely kept aside for those who believe in theorising and sexualising spiritual endeavours, who proclaim: “The experience reconstructed by Teresa’s works amounts to a laboratory of masochism and sadism, of which the nun herself became rapidly aware” (179).

Editor
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