

The Philosopher of Language and Religion: Remembering Margaret Chatterjee (1925-2019)

MUZAFFAR ALI

Savitribai Phule Pune University, India (younusmalla@gmail.com/mamalla@unipune.ac.in)

This article sketches some of the main ideas that informed the work of the post-colonial Indian philosopher Margaret Chatterjee (1925-2019). A philosopher of language and religion, her work straddles the “frozen” traditions of the east and the west, and astutely philosophizes about Gandhian thought in the realm of religious alterity and coequality.

Key words: Margaret Chatterjee; contemporary Indian Philosophy; Gandhi; religious pluralism; language

Academic philosophy, without doubt, is a male-dominated profession.¹ Nothing could prove it more than the death of Margaret Chatterjee, who without a misgiving was one of the iconic postcolonial Indian philosophers based in India. Born in 1925 in London, Chatterjee passed away at the age of 93 on January 3, 2019. She held the position of professor at the University of Delhi’s Department of Philosophy until her superannuation in 1990. Her death sparked a toxic silence within the Indian philosophical academia, mainly guarded by men, with no one among these “guardians” coming forward to fulfill the academic ritual of writing an obituary for a daily or magazine. The first obituary in her honor is written by Shefali Moitra, a feminist philosopher based at Jadavpur University, Kolkatta. Moitra labels Chatterjee as a “comparativist in the true sense of the term” and underlines that Chatterjee’s “originality in the field of philosophy is yet to be fully assessed and appreciated” (Moitra 2019).² The charge of underestimation and non-assessment is at the heart of the phallogocentric Indian philosophical community that has chosen to remain indifferent to Chatterjee as a postcolonial woman philosopher in her life and in her death. I have never met Chatterjee, except for a brief moment at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, where she came to participate in a seminar on Gandhi some five years ago. It was her eloquent style of questioning during this meeting that provoked me to read her. During my engagement with her writings, I came across a philosopher who offers a glimpse into contemporary India’s philosophical activity, easily straddles the “frozen” traditions of the east and the west, and can astutely philosophize about Gandhian thought in the realm of religious alterity and coequality.

Margaret Chatterjee’s anxiety regarding the present and future of postcolonial Indian philosophy is reflected in her edited volume *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (1974). At the outset, Chatterjee sums up the purpose of the volume as being devoted to discussions of contemporary Indian philosophers on present-day problems of interest. She is keen to add that any contemporary philosophical activity needs to take the philosophical heritage of India into account and make its significance felt.

This volume has been designed to present a selection of discussions of contemporary Indian philosophers on problems of current philosophical concern. It has not aimed at providing accounts of any of the traditional systems of Indian thought. [...] some contributions have been included which reflect this tradition which is eager to vindicate its relevance, indeed its modernity (Chatterjee 1974: 11).³

This volume, I think, is one of the earliest attempts in independent India to consolidate philosophical activity of varied interests, while bringing together the likes of Daya Krishna, N. K. Devaraja, J. N. Mohanty, P. K. Sen, and Ramakant Sinari.⁴ The volume reflects the academic unease of postcolonial philosophers who are compelled to choose between India's tradition and modernity on the one hand and between the "living" east and the dominant west on the other. Chatterjee chooses a path that enables her to do a philosophy where both "history" and "context" are significant for teaching and research. A first glimpse of this path appears in a rather introductory book, *Philosophical Inquiries* (1968/1988), which she wrote for teaching her students. She underlines that the book was written in reaction to the abstract understanding(s) of philosophy and considers the background and context of philosophical problems as an essential vehicle for formulating its contemporary treatment. In the section "Man and Nature," Chatterjee simplifies the definition of metaphysics for beginner students of philosophy by employing the distinction between speculation and experimentation. She writes: "If we answer the question 'What is it which underlines all change' speculatively we are metaphysicians. If we try to answer it, making use of the experimental method we call ourselves scientists" (Chatterjee 1988: 133).⁵

Chatterjee reflects on the concept of language and religion in detail. It would not be wrong to say that "language" and "religion" are the two keywords of her entire philosophical journey. She considers religious experience as a complexity of vital elements where any effort to look for the logical would distort its distinct characteristics (Chatterjee 1975: 124).⁶ The vitality of religious experience is foundational to the existence of multiple religions (religious pluralism), where none is superior to, or truer than others; this theme becomes pivotal to her exploration of Gandhi later. Her interest in the investigation of language follows the analytic storm that overtook philosophy across the world in the early phase of the twentieth century. The analytic approach, with its focus on the logic of sentences, she argues, considers language a mere phenomenon. The analytic perspective is limiting, as it completely bypasses the existential character of language. For Chatterjee, language as "living talk" includes both the phenomenal and existential characteristics. She underscores that a study of analytic philosophy, along with Buber, Marcel, and Husserl, helps us in reaching a proper understanding of language. The trajectory from the analytic turn to Husserlian phenomenology exhaustively "reveals the web of the empirical, the ontological and the transcendental (in language) at its most complex" (Chatterjee 1969: 120-21).⁷ In *The Language of Philosophy* (1981) she investigates the nature of philosophical thinking and language that is traditionally portrayed as a language of "reasoned argument." Chatterjee emphasizes that the language of reasoned argument or discourse (as she labels it) is hostile to the history of (western) philosophy, where figurative language has been pivotal in the articulation of a philosophical argument. She argues that metaphor and meaning are related in a reasoned argument. Metaphors highlight the alliance of the sensible and the intelligible and remain an integral constituent in framing an argument. She writes,

philosophical discourse can be seen as free to employ strategies like the metaphor in the service of an impulse which strives for intelligibility through the very interlocking of domains of which our experience informs us. [...] concepts are not the only feature of its texture (Chatterjee 1981: 54).⁸

Chatterjee fuses the investigation of language and religion in her study of religious language. Religious language is a "language of addressal," and not a language of statement. It flourishes in a faithful's worship, prayer, and religious celebration. She laments the analyst's identification of "religious language" with "theological discourse." Such an identification limits the sphere of religious expression and language to the Judaeo-Semitic group of religions, especially Christianity. In her study of religious language in the Indian context, she offers examples from Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Kashmir Saivism to counter the western (analytic) perspective of religious language. She argues that Indian religious languages

are mainly languages of devotion which cannot be merely dubbed as “‘God-talk’ at all” as the western analytic tradition requires us to do.

Western analytical scholars have for the most part turned their guns on theology and on scripture, singling out both concepts and forms of reasoning for their close scrutiny. There are few (if any) who have looked, say, at Charles Wesley’s hymns (surely examples of religious language) in terms of their philosophical and/or religious content. If they had, Wittgenstein or (in a different way) Bultmann, I suggest, might have been poor guides (Chatterjee 1978: 478).⁹

The Indian religious arena necessitates a re-examination of the framework of religious language, which essentially entails a break from the analytical tradition. True to her style of doing philosophy, Chatterjee arrives at a refined understanding of philosophical and religious language by going beyond the analytical tradition, which otherwise remains her point of departure.

Chatterjee’s project of reassessing religion and language in multiple forms provides a stable compass for her lifelong project of studying Gandhi. In his foreword to *Gandhi’s Religious Thought* (1983), John Hick, a renowned philosopher of religion, introduces Chatterjee’s book as a balanced presentation of Gandhi’s religious message to the west in conformity with “the Indian culture and the world history of which he was a part” (Hick 1983: ix).¹⁰ Chatterjee emphasizes the ability of Gandhi to connect religion and the concepts associated with it (truth, *abimsā*, *mokṣa*, God, etc.) with the social, economic, and political life of Indian society. While several thinkers were looking at the development and re-reading the Hindu tradition, only Gandhi (in his special way) taught the “utilisation of recognised pathways to individual liberation for the wider purpose of the transformation of society” (Chatterjee 1983: 68). From 1983 onwards, Chatterjee wrote six books on various aspects of Gandhian philosophy, all in consonance with her philosophical foundations on language and religion. Chatterjee revisits Gandhi in order to understand the challenges posed by the contested concept of religious pluralism in her book *Gandhi and the Challenge of Religious Diversity* (2005), written after religion affirmed its presence across societies with the deadly 9/11 attacks in the United States. Gandhi took on the challenge to unite Hindus and Muslims even though the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League were ideologically opposed to each other.¹¹ He presumed that a gulf between Hindus and Muslims at the political level had no bearing at the social level. Gandhi failed, and for Chatterjee, the failure was because of his “errors of judgement” regarding Indian Muslims and the Indian Muslim’s “misunderstandings” about Gandhi (Chatterjee 2005: 175-76).¹² For Chatterjee, Gandhi’s failure is an essential resource to comprehend the challenges of forging or understanding religious pluralism. Apart from forging religious pluralism at political level, Gandhi delves into the epistemic aspect of religious plurality by espousing the view that different religions can illuminate each other. The debate on religious pluralism in the Indian context gets more relevant as religious affirmation makes way into every aspect of human life. Chatterjee’s contribution awaits recognition in the debate on religious pluralism in Indian context, especially from the perspective of Gandhian studies.

While *Gandhi and His Jewish Friends* (1992), *Gandhi’s Diagnostic Approach Rethought* (2007), and *Interreligious Communication: A Gandhian Perspective* (2009) continue Chatterjee’s academic foray into Gandhian thought, her two-volume *Sketches from Memory* (2009) details the personal journey that enabled her to straddle traditions and how meeting people associated with Gandhi facilitated her lifelong study on Gandhian thought. Chatterjee’s philosophical wisdom demands that we do not forget her being a pianist and a poet with more than five modest collections of poetry published at regular intervals. The contemporary philosophical activity in India demands that we engage with Margaret Chatterjee’s work for the sake of its enrichment

and further evolution. In order to give a gender-neutral direction to Indian philosophy, it becomes imperative for us, as researchers in contemporary Indian philosophy, to include Margaret Chatterjee and other postcolonial women philosophers in the ongoing debates where their credit and recognition is a long overdue.

Muzaffar Ali is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Savitribai Phule Pune University, India. He has been a DAAD fellow at University of Würzburg, Germany (2014-15) and specializes in the area of contemporary Indian philosophy and social and political philosophy. His publications have appeared in prominent journals such as *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, *Culture and Dialogue*, and *Sophia*.

Selected Works by Margaret Chatterjee

Margaret Chatterjee wrote copiously for around five decades. The following list cannot be exhaustive.

Books

- Margaret Chatterjee, *Our Knowledge of Other Selves* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *The Existentialist Outlook* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1973).
 ed. Margaret Chatterjee, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Religious Thoughts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1983).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *The Religious Spectrum Studies in an Indian Context* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1984).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Philosophical Inquiries* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 1988).
 ed. Margaret Chatterjee, *The Philosophy of Nikunja Vihari Banerjee* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1990).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Studies in Modern Jewish and Hindu Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1997).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Hinterlands and Horizons: Excursions in Search of Amity* (Lexington Books, 2002).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Lifeworlds, Philosophy, and India Today* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2005).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and the Challenge of Religious Diversity: Religious Pluralism Revisited* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 2005).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Diagnostic Approach Rethought: Exploring a Perspective on His Life and Work* (New Delhi: Bibliophile South Asia, 2007).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Lifeworlds and Ethics: Studies in Several Keys* (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2007).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Inter-Religious Communication: A Gandhian Perspective* (New Delhi: Bibliophile South Asia, 2009).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Sketches and Memories (2 Volumes)* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co. Publishers, 2009).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Modalities of Otherness: A Serpentine Tale of Enemies, Strangers, Neighbors, Mortality, Hospitality, and Cognate Matters* (New Delhi: Promilla and Co., 2010).
 Margaret Chatterjee, *Circumstances and Dharma* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2010).

Books on Margaret Chatterjee

R. Balasubramanian and V. C. Thomas. *Perspectives in Philosophy, Religion, and Art: Essays in Honour of Margaret Chatterjee* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1993).

- ¹ For details, see A. E. Kings, "Philosophy's Diversity Problem: Understanding the Underrepresentation of Women and Minorities in Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy* 50, no. 3, (April 2019): 121, 212–230, doi: 10.1111/meta.12358.
- ² Shefali Moitra, "Margaret Chatterjee, an Interdisciplinary Philosopher With a Novel Approach," *The Wire*, 12 January 2019 (<https://thewire.in/education/margaret-chatterjee-obituary>).
- ³ Margaret Chatterjee, "Preface," in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, ed. Margaret Chatterjee (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 1974), 9–11.
- ⁴ Daya Krishna, N. K. Devaraja, J. N. Mohanty, P.K. Sen, and Ramakant Sinari are postcolonial Indian philosophers and contemporaries of Margaret Chatterjee. Daya Krishna's main interest lies in the rejuvenation of Indian philosophy after British colonization. His works include *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective* (1991) and *Indian Philosophy: A New Approach* (1997). N. K. Devaraja is known for his work on Indian epistemology, especially *Advaita Vedānta*. His works include *An Introduction to Sankara's Theory of Knowledge* (1962) and *Hinduism and the Modern Age* (1975). J. N. Mohanty specializes in Indian epistemology and phenomenology. His principal works include *Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought* (1992) and *Phenomenology: Between Essentialism and Transcendental Philosophy* (1997). P. K. Sen is widely known for his work in the analytic tradition. His works include *Logic, Induction and Ontology* (1980) and *Reference and Truth* (1991). Ramakant Sinari's work focuses on comparative philosophy, and his works include *Reason in Existentialism* (1968) and *The Structure of Indian Thought* (1970).
- ⁵ Margaret Chatterjee, *Philosophical Inquiries* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 1988).
- ⁶ Margaret Chatterjee, "Towards an Anthropological View of Philosophy," in *Indian Philosophy Today*, ed. N. K. Devaraja (New Delhi: The Macmillan Company of India Limited, 1975), 116–26.
- ⁷ Margaret Chatterjee, "Language as Phenomenon," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 30, no. 1, (Sep. 1969): 116–21, doi: 10.2307/2105926.
- ⁸ Margaret Chatterjee, *The Language of Philosophy* (India: Allied Publishers, 1981).
- ⁹ Margaret Chatterjee, "Does the Analysis of Religious Language Rest on a Mistake?" *Religious Studies* 10, No. 4 (Dec. 1974): 469–78.
- ¹⁰ John Hick, "Foreword," in Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), ix–xii.
- ¹¹ The Indian National Congress (formed in 1885) and the Muslim League (formed in 1906) were major political parties seeking independence from the British occupation. While both parties agreed that India needed freedom from the British, the disagreement lay in their opposite and contrasting philosophies of freedom. The Congress favored a united India after independence while the Muslim League favoured a divided India along the Hindu-Muslim religious divide, commonly known as the "two-nation theory." Ultimately it was the Muslim League's philosophy of freedom that won its day when British India was divided into Pakistan and India on August 15, 1947.
- ¹² Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and the Challenge of Religious Diversity* (New Delhi: Promilla and Co. Publishers, 2005).