

J. KRISHNAMURTI: Crossing cultural borders or ignoring their existence?

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Biographers bring to their subject their own background and entrenched thinking. To write a biography of the influential 20th century philosopher and shaper of modern thinking, Jiddu Krishnamurti, was for me an exploration in discarding the past to recognise the present.

Where does one begin a paper addressed to readers as individuals about the writing of a such a biography?¹ I would suggest the same place as before the writing of the biography itself: in the dark. The dark past. It was fortunate for me that the subject of my biography knew a lot about the dark. His name was Krishna, which means ‘puller of hearts’ (Feuerstein: 158) and also carries various meanings associated with darkness, black or dark blue and the pupil of the eye (Gandhi: 208). According to Feuerstein, the earliest record of the name is to be found in the Rig-Veda (8:74), referring to a sage, and later (8:85) to a monster. I was feeling about there, in the dark, doing my daily meditation, and I came upon an idea, or it came upon my mind. Was it a Western idea or an Eastern idea? Feeling my way in the dark, within a blindness, I touched upon the idea of writing about an Easterner within a Western tradition of enquiry, as research towards a Doctoral degree. I found Krishna - or he found me. This particular Krishna was called a ‘model of Krishna’, Krishna-murti, or the form, the visible manifestation of the deity (Feuerstein: 191), a model of Krishna in the Jiddu family. Jiddu Krishnamurti. There was a lyrical description in his Sanskrit horoscope probably written on a palm leaf in 1895: “the gem of a son ... [born under] the full moon to the ocean of Jiddu family” (*Theosophist* April 1932: 42). When I’d completed the Doctorate, and had created in the form of a biography a model of the life of this model of Krishna, I wondered about the act, or at times seemingly endless series of acts (was there any space between them?) of creation. And about its relation to my past thinking.

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And I wondered about what it was I had created: an image of a sage or a monster. The answer lies as much in the reading as in the writing (“the author enters into his [her] own death ... the Author diminishing” Barthes: 142, 145). Who is this Krishna? Who am I? What parts of myself are reflected in my description of this person’s life; what personal significance is to be found in my choice of parts of the subject’s life to shine the light of Western enquiry upon? And what parts of the life story shine in various readers’ minds? The extreme parameters, ‘sage’ or ‘monster’, are especially relevant to my research since in an earlier biography (of the writer Christina Stead) I felt I’d discovered a ‘sage’, while the biographer who followed me described the subject as a ‘monster’. And here in my second major undertaking I found that many of Krishnamurti’s greatest admirers believed he was a sage, more, a ‘guru’ (*gu* signifying darkness and *ru* a destroyer of darkness, Feuerstein: 112) even while he dismissed guruhood and they rejected the roles of acolytes. Many others believed Krishnamurti was a monstrous imposter, although the question of what tribute or duty he was imposing might be raised. Writer and subject bound together as viewer and viewed. What did we have in common? My belief now is that the bond was to be found in our heart(s) since that’s where the Self, the greatest form/nonform of all Deity, is manifest: smaller than a mustard seed yet greater than the sky, as it is stated in the Chandogya Upanishad (Zaehner: 88).

The thesis for my biography was that the life of J. Krishnamurti could be read in the context of a stream of philosophy, Advaita Vedanta, based on the ancient sacred texts, the Vedas. The Upanishads texts, believed to have been written c200 BCE, offer an exposition of Advaita (or ‘non-duality’) philosophy which was vigorously revived through interpretation by the Hindu scholar and sage, Adi Shankara, about a thousand years later. The philosophy proposes that ‘Reality’, which appears as manifold to the unenlightened mind, is revealed as singular and non-dual in ‘enlightenment’ or ‘self-realisation’.

One might ask why I chose for this biography of Krishnamurti a contextualisation so philosophically-fraught and puzzling to the Western mind. My answer is that since I was to spend several years studying for the biography, it seemed advisable to choose a subject that many thousands of people believed knew a great deal about a lightening of the mind. And Vedanta was a product of Krishnamurti’s home culture. Once I’d begun, I found so much that Krishnamurti wrote resonated with Advaita Vedanta teaching:

The world is us and we are the world, they are not two separate states.

(Krishnamurti 1989: 158)

How is it possible to have no contradiction between the “observer” and the “observed”, between the “experiencer” and the “experience”, between love and hate? – these dualities, how is it possible to live without them?

(Krishnamurti 1989: 106)

Krishnamurti suggested facing a fact instead of its word. He advised not to look for an ideal we would like to believe in. Rather, face the actuality of the sensation of jealousy, lust, hate, despair, sorrow, fear; and finally the greatest fear: death. All the negativities that we would like to deny are in ourselves.

My work drew on material from a range of previously published biographical sources, both hagiographic and sceptical, many of which are currently out of print or otherwise difficult to access, as well as a large amount of documentation which was the product of original research. While exploring an argument for Jiddu Krishnamurti’s life to be read in the context of Advaita Vedanta philosophy, my biography also offers a more Western narration of his life supported by an historically contextualising approach.

At first there seemed to be seminal conflicts within my methodology in writing the life of a subject who was born into a traditional ‘Indian’ culture - (this ‘Indian nation’ a misnomer in itself (Paz: 75, 76), rather he was born into a Telugu-speaking culture) - and who lived the greater and most famous part of his life in an ‘alternative’ Western culture.

Elements of humanitarianism, compassion for the other, and individual integrity are what a reader steeped in Western critical thinking might at first experience in meeting Krishnamurti, as I had thirty years earlier - a mind-view restricted to and founded in the moralities, literature, philosophy and science of the West.

When Krishnamurti spoke, many Westerners heard a modernist language espousing individualism and revolution, yet many Indians heard the unicity of classic Advaitism, spoken from the mouth of a radical non-traditionalist who rejected the concept of a *guru* outside of oneself, a *guru* in materialised human form. “Truth is a pathless land,” he said (1996: 257).

Here was a subject of diasporic identity who went beyond a crossing of regional and cultural boundaries to a point where he believed it was unproductive to even acknowledge the existence of such borders.

We are asking whether ...minds can be completely free from all conditioning, so that a totally different kind of life can be lived. To find this out, there must be freedom to observe, not as a Christian, a Hindu, a Dutchman, a German, or a Russian, or as anything else. (Krishnamurti 1989: 52)

Elsewhere he writes:

I have been conditioned to look at myself, to look at the world fragmentarily – as a Christian, a Communist, a Hindu. I have been brought up in this culture to look at the world fragmentarily. Being conditioned by this culture I cannot possibly take a total view. My chief concern then is to be free of this culture ... (Krishnamurti 1973: 352).

It might be argued that this fragmentation is comparable to the observation made by Ghassan Hage of what he calls “paranoid nationalism” which he believes has increased since the late 1980s and is now expressed affectively as worrying (Hage 2003: 1). What Jiddu Krishnamurti had to say over at least seventy years of lecturing to thousands of people in many parts of the world, was that the concept of ‘the self’ was open to many interpretations through words (cp Prevos 2002), yet was only understood beyond words. “So now I want to find out non-verbally, because the moment I use a word I am back in the old,” he told his audiences (Krishnamurti 1973: 408). When a person is dying they do not need an intellectual understanding of what death is, he said. A person needs someone who will hold their hand to know the feeling of love. Not someone who is separate and giving love, but with the person facing the fear, dying with them (Jayakar: 485-87).

In India, particularly within the *bhakti* tradition, the hagiography is an accepted form of life story-telling, while Western readers lose respect for an author who goes soft on the subject, overlooking flaws. For me the prudence of what might be included and what excluded from a biography of a respected spiritual figure in India moved into a realm beyond a Western understanding of social convention and respect for privacy to an exploration of the concept of guruhood and the shackles of the mind.

Perhaps the fact that hundreds of thousands of people who read J. Krishnamurti's work found wisdom in what he said without knowing anything of Advaita philosophy might argue for a universality of language and message in his 'teachings' which were adaptable across the ground of cultural and nationalist prejudice, language barriers and religious bigotry.

The whole of Asia believes in reincarnation ... Those who believe in this idea of reincarnation, believe only in the word, but not in the depth of the meaning of that word. What you do now matters infinitely for tomorrow – because tomorrow, which is the next life, you are going to pay for it. So the idea of gradually attaining different forms is essentially the same in the East and in the West. ... There must be a different way altogether of tackling this problem. (Krishnamurti 1989: 146)

Whether J. Krishnamurti's 'teachings' were contrived to satisfy different depths or levels of understanding or were the unadulterated product of a mystical capacity which arose spontaneously and he utilised, or by which he was utilised, is a major subject of the debates explored in my life story of a Telugu-speaking boy who was propelled into the role of an English-speaking world philosopher.

And so to the practice of my research on this light and shade character, with tones created from my own mind. 2002 saw the completion of my 170-thousand word biography of Krishnamurti comprising material I had gleaned from many sources, the original documentation the result of goodwill and candour by many people, from librarians and archivists to about 50 formal interviewees. After I'd visited India and England several times, and following repeated requests for access to the Krishnamurti Foundation of America archives over a period of several years, I was told by an executive officer on a Monday morning in November 2000, after having spent most of the previous week in the archives, that the organisation was not ready to open these archives for access as it still had no policy on the matter. It had a fancy new air conditioned building, it had the papers, but it had no policy. So I promptly went to the Huntington Library in San Marino, Los Angeles, and found almost more original documentation than I could read, deposited there by Krishnamurti's former close friend and editor, Rajagopal. Fortunately, after a couple of years of independent research, I'd had access to many of Krishnamurti's private letters from unidentifiable sources, and access to other archives, so I believed that I was in a strong position to complete my research and writing, hopeful that I could find and write about a private person behind the legend which had been formed out of projections of image-making laid on

Krishnamurti all his life. Yet I acknowledge that I was not without my own mental projections: the ‘Who Am I?’ of myself laid over the ‘Who Is He?’, from onetime handsome boy with regal bearing to the manytime old man of wisdom.

What I found in Krishnamurti’s personal correspondence, particularly in his sexually-active middle years (incidentally, while many followers believed he was celibate) was a person tossed about by staggering passion and attachment to the wife of his editor in what might be called a ‘ménage à trois’, since Rajagopal and Rosalind lived next door to Krishna on a Californian orange grove (although Rajagopal claimed no knowledge of his wife and Krishnamurti’s relationship, being so engrossed in his study, editing Krishna’s talks for publication).

There follow some excerpts from my Doctorate based on original, previously-unpublished love correspondence:

Krishna may have been in another realm of love but it certainly included Rosalind. Judging by his correspondence to her, they had to deal with the small daily incompatibilities that any couple faces, quite apart from the added complication of their love for Rajagopal. In a letter which was meant to be destroyed, written by Krishna in Ojai to Rosalind in Hollywood in August 1934, he showed how much their petty disputes upset him and damaged their love. He’d telephoned her the night before, he said, just to hear her voice. He didn’t know why but he almost jumped in the car to go to Hollywood - a drive of about two hours - to see her that morning. He supposed Rajagopal and she were the two people he loved most but he, Krishna, and Rosalind were always “wrangling”, misunderstanding and being sensitive about each other. His heart was “bursting”, he said, and when he’d got back home the day before, he’d cried. Not that he was miserable, but something she’d said had “stirred” him so. But with no quiet time available in Hollywood, they couldn’t really talk. Let’s be friends, he implored her. She knew how much he loved her, he said. It seemed absurd to say it, and she would probably laugh, and then he’d feel better. When he’d thought about her recently something occurred in him that had transformed him – it was so “tremendous” that there was now nothing to regret or get over with. It was all very hard to put into words.¹ He’d slept out under the stars the night before and wished she could have shared it with him. Life was a throbbing, pulsating ecstasy, he said. When there was love, missing someone didn’t occur. The only way he could explain this inward happening was through the image of stars seen through dark leaves, the hooting of an owl or the dark

stillness of the night. ... Krishna appeared very excited in a letter to Rosalind written five days later in which he said he'd see her within twelve hours. The letter seems to be a call to the real world from the depths of an ecstatic reverie, and as usual, labours to find the words to express the extent of his feeling. ... He was intoxicated, transfigured, overwhelmed and astonished, his heart was utterly open and defenceless, he said. (C Williams p 228 ff, 252 ff)

Reading this correspondence in the middle of the night, all alone in a strange place, just myself and Krishna, writer and reader alone since my informant was sleeping, I couldn't stop the tears from welling up and pouring down my cheeks, which you could imagine, was very annoying since I had hundreds of letters to read. I would not be distracted from my task by the tearing away at my heart of this extraordinary display of a man's innermost experiences of love and the denial of that love.

And I came to some understanding about a possibility that no-one in the world knew for certain, since the many thousands of people who idolised him had not read these letters, nor perhaps had anyone read them in full (Krishna had such intense, scrawled handwriting over reams and reams of notepaper). Most people would not have considered it a possibility that Krishna had a child, now grown to maturity, who perhaps also did not know that she was his blood child.

If it were true it would mean that Krishnamurti had lived his whole life with this secret, known by Rosalind his lover, a woman married to his editor, and possibly also known, or guessed, by that editor. Krishna could have held that secret and never told the child. A related secret about his sexual relationship with Rosalind was disclosed in 1991 by her daughter, Radha Rajagopal Sloss, after Krishna's death and before her mother's death. The sexual "affair" (an affair lasting over twenty years – perhaps "relationship" is a more apt descriptive) was said to have begun some time after Radha's birth. It might be argued that in her book Radha acted as a messenger of her mother's bitterness over separation and estrangement from Krishna. Radha possibly accepted unquestioningly what her mother told her. It's my understanding, indicated in the following text, that she seems not to have gone to Krishna's correspondence written around the time of her own conception.

It's interesting to consider where Rajagopal and Krishna were in early October because that is the date that Rosalind would have conceived her daughter, forty weeks before Radha's birth date on 12 July 1931, if the birth occurred at full term.

Rosalind's daughter, Radha, explains in her book that Rosalind had gone to Paris to attend the "summer" fashion shows. ... Krishna was in France at this time and Rosalind wrote to her mother on 23 October from Paris to say that he had given a marvellous lecture in Strasbourg to good reviews. He read it in French and with his ability to attract "thousands" he was compared with the actor Maurice Chevalier in popularity. Radha describes how Rosalind, rather than feeling delighted when she found she was pregnant, as she and Rajagopal had hoped for a child for some years, was in despair. Radha says that it was curious that her mother could not discuss her situation with "the person who should be most concerned – her husband" and puts the explanation down to Krishna's antipathy to those close to him having children instead of devoting themselves to 'the Work'. Radha believes that a physical incompatibility between Rosalind and Rajagopal accounts for Krishnamurti taking the greater interest in her from the moment she became pregnant despite an initial "displeasure".ⁱⁱ (C Williams 184 ff.)

Krishna came in for moral criticism from Radha over his treatment of her mother, particularly that he lied and he wanted her to have several abortions. (Rajagopal Sloss: 166). He is portrayed as deceitful. But what was his motive? My view is that he did not care for the image of *guru*, particularly *celibate guru*, which was projected onto him. Was his motive simply to protect his image? Or was it perhaps to protect that of the woman he loved, whose respectable position in society would have been shattered by exposure. 1930s society was vicious about sex outside of marriage, and shame was a corollary of illegitimacy for mother and child. My knowledge of this comes from personal experience even as late as the 1970s when I defiantly broke the taboo of pregnancy outside of wedlock.

That night studying Krishna's 1930s letters, as I sat in the study wiping my eyes, peering through my foggy reading glasses, I felt the loneliness and despair, the sadness of someone who loves but does not attempt to emotionally own his lover. Here was someone who nurtured a child, changing her nappies, taking her to the beach, to the school bus stop, writing her long letters when she went to college, but never dispelling a legend that Radha's mother wove about her whole life. The man Rosalind had married was said to be Radha's father; the man Rosalind took as her lover was not proffered as a blood father. From what I had learnt about Krishnamurti I felt that he had made a gentle, compassionate choice in self-denial. What would he have had to fear from exposure? He did not abide by social mores – he railed against cultural prejudices. Yet on

his deathbed fifty years later, in 1986, he recognised an old sensation, sorrow, which he thought he'd left behind long before. He was fortunate that 'as he lay dying', facing the fact of death, his close companion, Mary Zimbalist, held his hand.

Krishnamurti believed that people owe a guru nothing. He said one might point out the way to dispel darkness but not expect devotion for the advice. In saying this he neither acknowledged nor denied that he was the subject of mental projection as guru, or wisdom master. In writing a biography of a major public figure, a researcher must move through research material *in extremis* in order to bridge differing views of idolisation and castigation, heart and mind, the personal and the public. In this excerpt from my biography of Krishnamurti, I now offer a brief taste of the universal quality of Krishnamurti's extra-ordinary mind in assisting his audiences to understand the heart:

Over the last few years of Krishna's life he would describe to close friends the strange qualities of his mind which had been manifesting all his life. He told Pupul Jayakar that Leadbeater and Mrs Besant used to talk about the face of the Maitreya Boddhisatva. It meant nothing to him at the time but many years later he suddenly saw the beautiful face. ... He said he thought there was a "force" which the Theosophists had touched and which they lost when they tried to translate it into something material through symbols and vocabulary. Krishna described it as the universe pouring in, as though his head was stuck in the universe. ... Krishna remained a mystery to Mary Lutyens, the biographer who must have studied him most closely, an Englishwoman with a great deal of cultural baggage of rationality, which ran counter to the "Indian" sensibility which was grounded in a great veneration of spiritual philosophy. Mary might have tried to cast Krishna in a role as the bridge between East and West, an acceptable concept to internationalists. But he would not have it. He demanded recognition of the fact that what he spoke about was shared by human beings of all cultures, pointing out that the "concept" of East and West was one of division and therefore faulty. ... Krishna's sense of timing, whether his own or that provided by a hidden "power", was certainly acute, as he channelled whatever knowledge he could through the forums arranged for him in the early 1980s. He gave a number of exceptional talks over those last few years of his life – in March 1982 he gave two talks to audiences of almost 3,000 people at Carnegie Hall in New York and in April 1983 he spoke to an even larger audience at the Felt Forum in Madison Square Garden. ... Krishna kept up his schedule of taxing public addresses as he approached the age of ninety. In 1982 and 1983 he took part in conferences with psychotherapists, arranged by

Dr David Shainberg. In 1984 he was invited to take part in a symposium on ‘Creativity in Science’ at Los Alamos in New Mexico, and the following day spoke to a smaller audience of Fellows. He spoke to the Felt Forum in New York in April and gave a talk to the *Pacem in Terris Society* in the United Nations buildingⁱⁱⁱ...he was invited by Milton Friedman to give two talks at the Kennedy Centre in Washington and the hall was full. His performance was “radiant” and Lutyens chose to quote from a stand-out passage on sorrow from the talk:

Can we look at sorrow as it actually is in us, and remain with it, hold it, and not move away from it? Sorrow is not different from the one who suffers. ... you will see for yourself, if you really look deeply, that there is an end to sorrow.^{iv}

Finally may I end this paper expressing a hope that beyond Krishnamurti’s death in 1986, some acknowledgement is made of his rare understanding of the mind, which is constructed within the limits of cultural borders, of the power of fear and its antidote, love, and of the self, which, in us all, is “smaller than a mustard seed”.

“This my self within the heart is Brahman. When I depart ... hence I shall merge into it. He who believes this will never doubt”. (Zaehner: 88).

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ⁱ Krishna to Rosalind 24 August 1934, private source.

ⁱⁱ R Rajagopal Sloss (1991) pp 108-109.

ⁱⁱⁱ M Lutyens (1990) pp 173-74, 179, 181-2, 185. Mary Cadogan (1999) also wrote of some protection surrounding Krishnamurti. KFA List of Archives.

^{iv} M Lutyens (1990) p 185-86.