

## Research Article

The Inconceivable God in Lagerkvist's *The Sibyl*Biswarup Das<sup>1</sup>

1. University of North Bengal, India

The essay aims to explore the coexistence of “matter” and “consciousness” within the character of Sibyl's son in Pär Lagerkvist's novel, *The Sibyl*. It draws on the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's theory, which suggests that this fusion lies at the heart of humanity's concept of God. Nevertheless, Sartre also argues that such a combination is fundamentally unattainable. That leads us to the conclusion that Sibyl's son represents the unimaginable God that Sartre imagined.

Correspondence: [papers@team.qeios.com](mailto:papers@team.qeios.com) — Qeios will forward to the authors

## I.

The character of Sibyl's “imbecile son” in Pär Lagerkvist's novel, *The Sibyl* (*Sibyllan*, 1956), has not received adequate attention from scholars despite being an intriguing presence in the narrative. Most studies have only offered surface-level insights into his portrayal. For example, Shattan describes the son as “mute, likely an idiot” who could be “a Goat God” (“The Sibyl – Pär Lagerkvist”). Bloch characterizes him as “imbecilic... whose enigmatic smile reflects the animal side of the archaic matriarchal goddess who had been worshipped at Delphi before being supplanted by the male deity, Apollo” (50). Eric W. Johnson, however, stands out as a notable exception. In his 1966 dissertation, “Pär Lagerkvist, religious atheist,” Johnson dedicates several pages to the son, examining his aloofness and inanity as an “ironic foil” to traditional views of God and exploring the theme of “meaninglessness” in the divine (38, 39).

The present article aims to offer a fresh perspective on the son's character, accentuating the coexistence of two contrary states – “matter” and “consciousness” (Spade 90, 98) – within him. The French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980), a contemporary of Lagerkvist, views this coexistence as emblematic of God. However, since Sartre dismisses the feasibility of the coexistence, Sibyl's son becomes a metaphorical incarnation of the inconceivable Sartrean God. While Sartre's influence on Lagerkvist in crafting the son is only speculative, the parallels between the character and Sartre's God are strikingly evident.

Pär Lagerkvist (1891 – 1974) was a towering figure in 20th-century Swedish literature, renowned for his novels, poetry, plays, short stories, and essays. His contribution to literature was recognized with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1951. *The Sibyl* stands out among Lagerkvist's works, showcasing his ability to intertwine complex ideas into a compelling narrative that enlightens readers.

## II.

In his seminal work *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre delves into the impossibility of God's existence through an exploration of “matter” and “consciousness.” He defines matter as all tangible objects in their innate state, constituting the world. Matters are “self-contained” (Spade 90). They exist in themselves perpetually as inert, “timeless,” and “changeless” entities (Daigle 33). Moreover, matters exist “without [any] reason for being” what they are and as dissociated from the human world (Sartre 20 – 22). All this renders the matters incoherent, something beyond meaning.

Consciousness, alternatively, is what allows individuals to perceive and ascribe meaning to matters, concomitantly facilitating self-awareness and situating oneself within the world. The two roles played by consciousness lead Sartre to make it equivalent to humanity – “To be human is to be conscious” (Sartre 124). Consciousness, by nature, is contrary to matters. Whereas matters are self-situated, consciousness is located in the object it is aware of. Hence, it remains outside itself. In itself, consciousness is empty. Being outside itself, consciousness changes by freely shifting from one object to another. Thus, unlike matters, consciousness is active and temporal.

God, Sartre claims, is “the impossible synthesis” of the two contrary modes of being (Manser 71). God, as humanity conceives Him, is self-contained and timeless. Hence, He is akin to matters. The affinity to matters necessitates His being unconscious and so inert. But God is conscious, traditionally believed to pivot all consciousness. Consciousness entails His being outside Himself, and so His being active and temporal. Again, God's entity is culturally deemed independent of the human world. He is thought of as existing beyond any humanly conceivable reason or meaning<sup>2</sup>. Here, He resembles matters once more. However, because God is conscious, it becomes necessary that His being is also constituted in relation to His awareness of the world of matters like humans. Therefore, God becomes subject to human reasoning. God is, then, both self-contained and externally oriented, both unconscious and conscious, both inert and active, both beyond the human world and belonging to it, both timeless and temporal. His being is a logical contradiction. “Sartre finds Him impossible because [He is] inconceivable” (Manser 71).

### III.

The contradiction in God's notion that leads Sartre to deny His existence is the very attribute epitomizing Sibyl's son in Lagerkvist's novel. Being begotten by God<sup>3</sup> in the dark pit of Delphi (41), the son is naturally "God's child" (136). Though Sibyl and the "Wandering Jew"<sup>4</sup> (1), who comes to her to know his "destiny" (10), become certain of this fact at the end, the son's divinity is revealed through the concurrence of matter and consciousness in him right from the outset. The concurrence is first evinced by his "inexplicable" appearance (28). Having entered Sibyl's shack, the Jew discovers in the son "a grey-haired man" with a "face that was like a child's" (28). He is uncertain whether to call the son "a man or a child" (28). His uncertainty is the outcome of his encounter with two radically opposite attributes in the son's appearance. The son's grey hair suggests his old age. Looking at the hair, the Jew can assume the son was born long ago. The assumption appears true as we realize that Sibyl conceived her son when the "very old" blind beggar dwelling "in the poorest quarter" of Delphi was only a child (8 – 10, 105 – 12). Now, the son's growing old with time bespeaks his temporality. This aspect of the son's appearance the Jew finds pretty natural. He can easily relate the son to other humans who, like their consciousness, are subject to ceaseless change<sup>5</sup>. What, however, he finds beyond comprehension is how, despite his advanced age, the son's face has stayed unaltered, "like a child's." The same remains a mystery even to Sibyl. "I reflect," she says, "that his face is unstirred by all that people call life – that it has remained the face of a child" (138 – 39). That the son's "face," which can well be claimed as referring both to his physical face and the seemingly childlike innocence reflected on it, is untarnished by "life," that is, by time and experience, clearly points to a trait in him that is immutable and beyond any reason humanity can grasp. The face, then, symptomatizes proximity to matters. Overall, the son's being a "grey-haired child" (139) pinpoints the inconceivable amalgamation of changelessness and temporality that typifies God for Sartre.

The concurrence finds an even more subtle expression in the smile on the son's lips. By nature, the smile parallels matters in almost every way. Like matters, it is incoherent. The Jew fails to deduce whether the smile is "good" or "wicked" (28). Failing to grasp its property, he calls it "enigmatic" (28). The smile is incoherent also because, like matters, it seems to exist "without reason" – "He [the Jew] could see no reason for it" (28). Later on, when Sibyl calls the smile "vacant" (139), she alludes both to the smile's lack of property and its ostensible lack of cause. Of course, Sibyl is once seen to speculate her son to be "a god" and his smile as evoked by "his temple, his Delphi and the whole world of men" (139). However, she is pretty uncertain about the validity of her speculation. "I don't know," she says, "I know nothing" (139). The smile is like matters moreover because, despite lacking property and reason, it persists without varying in nature or degree. Both Sibyl and the Jew find it "unchanging" (28, 139). Having such matter-like attributes, the smile is far from the usual human smile. Instead, it seems to be something unworldly. The Jew rightly sums up the smile as something "remote, at once meaningless and inscrutable" (146).

Nevertheless, the smile also exhibits the son as a conscious being. Smile, it may be claimed, can be the behavioral manifestation of an innate delight or a tender emotion evoked by someone or something, the sign of approval of a proposal, the exhibition of ridicule at some issue, or even at a person, and so on. Whatever a smile is, it always articulates one's thoughts or feelings about the object that engenders it. Hence, a smile is a conscious act. Obviously, then, the son's smile also reveals a particular mode of consciousness about some object, which probably, as Sibyl surmises, is "Delphi and the whole world of men" or even something else. Therefore, the son's smile, like his face, is constituted by the "synthesis" of matter and consciousness. It conveys his godly attributes. That the son's smile is God's becomes manifest when the Jew realizes it as being indistinguishable from the one he had witnessed the day before on the face of "an ancient image [of] god... down in the temple at Delphi (146).

Lastly, the concurrence is conveyed by the antithetical features in the son's comportment. The way the son presents himself renders him both inert and active, unconscious and conscious. First, he is found squatting listlessly in Sibyl's shack for almost the entire novel, never altering his posture. He also remains utterly non-responsive to the activities and conversations of Sibyl and the Jew. Such non-responsive torpor lends to the son the inertness of matters. Secondly, the son neither speaks nor seems to comprehend human language. "He's," Sibyl says to the Jew, "never shown any sign of understanding human speech and has never been able to say anything in it" (140). She also assures the Jew, "You can speak quite freely before him; he understands nothing" (28). For Sartre, language characterizes humans (consciousness), whereas matters are devoid of this quality (Manser 55). Therefore, the son's inability to speak and apparently even comprehend human language typifies him as matter.

The son's matter-like inertness and ostensible distance from human language are, however, contradicted by the ceaseless movement of his eyes. The Jew is bemused by spying the son's eyes attentive to his and Sibyl's "every move" (28). This eye movement indicates conscious activity on the son's part, likely making the Jew suspect that contrary to Sibyl's assumption of the son being "an ever-leering idiot" (136), the son is aware of what he and Sibyl do or say. The suspicion proves to be true when, in the end, the son ascends to heaven, leaving Sibyl behind. Sibyl realizes that he has done so because he was "hurt" by the "bad things she said about him" (140). He "understood" everything (140). The act of ascending to heaven and, before that, climbing up the "steep" mountain following an obscure "animal track" in the "misty moonlight" (141) demonstrate the son's physical agility and mental alertness. These acts, therefore, stand in stark contrast to the son's initial listless detachment, accentuating his conscious existence.

## IV.

The discussion above elucidates how Sibyl's son embodies the "impossible" amalgamation of matter and consciousness. Therefore, he becomes the paradoxical God of Sartre. The coexistence of opposite traits renders him simultaneously "meaningless and full of.. meaning" (148). Lagerkvist uses him to demonstrate that God is a puzzle that is not meant "to be solved, but to exist [and] trouble us all" (148).

### Appendix: The story of *The Sibyl*

The narrative is divided into two interconnected stories, one following a man named Ahasuerus and the other following Sibyl, a prophetess from the ancient oracle of Delphi.

Ahasuerus, a Jew who wanders around, according to medieval legend, visits Sibyl in order to learn about his fate. The man tussles with guilt and a sense of sin, recalling his past life. Sibyl, endowed with the gift of prophecy by the gods, is cursed as her gift brings her no joy or peace. Her prophecies are often devastating since she is compelled to speak the truth, which usually brings despair to those who seek her wisdom.

Sibyl narrates her story to Ahasuerus about how she became a prophetess against her own will. As a young girl, she tried to escape her fate but was taken to Delphi and forced to become a mouthpiece for the god Apollo. She spoke prophecies that she could not comprehend or flee from. Her life is lonely and sad, as she is revered but not loved, feared but not understood. Her only companion is her witless son, whom she realizes was conceived by God in the depths of the earth beneath Apollo's temple only after he ascends to heaven at the novel's conclusion.

*The Sibyl* encourages readers to contemplate their personal beliefs and the degree to which life is controlled by fate and free will. The book's somber atmosphere and Sibyl's heart-rending apprehension of human nature make it a thought-provoking examination of the predicaments that humanity has to deal with.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Only page numbers are mentioned while referring to *The Sibyl*.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Theism claims God's being is objective and independent of human thought ("The Free"). In Hinduism, God is believed to exist as the Supreme Reality or "Brahman," who, though manifested in various deities, is actually unfathomable by human intelligence. He "is unthinkable, because unconditioned" (*Kena-Upanishad* 99). *The Quran* (Islam) delineates God as "a single and absolute truth that transcends the world; a unique and invisible being who is independent of the entire creation" ("Transcendence"). According to Christianity, God's existence is transcendental of all creation. The 13<sup>th</sup>-century Italian philosopher and Christian priest St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 74) stated, "the mode of super eminence [in God] cannot be signified by the names imposed by us... we cannot take in of God what He is" (Aquinas 58).

<sup>3</sup> The God in question is linked to the Dionysian aspects of revelry, euphoria, and disorder. He is sometimes referred to as the "Goat God" (91) in the novel, and was originally created by Lagerkvist to summon up the primordial and mystical, encouraging readers to engage with the intricacies of the divine.

<sup>4</sup> His name is Ahasuerus. According to Christian mythology he is known for mocking Jesus *en route* to the Crucifixion and was subsequently doomed to roam the earth "until the Second Coming" ("Wandering Jew"). This very narrative is recounted by Ahasuerus himself to Sibyl within the current book.

Nonetheless, the proper name Ahasuerus is not mentioned in *The Sibyl*. It is in the sequel, *The Death of Ahasuerus* (1960), that the name is found. For the purposes of our conversation on *The Sibyl*, his anonymity is preserved.

<sup>5</sup> Sartre, as we have discussed earlier, equates consciousness with humans. In that respect, the ever-changeable facet of consciousness has been paralleled with human somatic temporality.

### References

- Aquinas, St. Thomas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Translated by Joseph Rickaby, The Catholic Primer, 2005, <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://basilica.ca/documents/2016/10/St.%2520Thomas%2520Aquinas-The%2520Summa%2520Contra%2520Gentiles.pdf&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwItw4DilKL-AhVYT2wGHSCcAYgQFnoECAkOAg&usg=AOvVaw1rTxICIDYkpu2kzgGeTtuF>.
- Bloch, Adèle. "The Mythical Female in the Fictional Works of Pär Lagerkvist." *International Fiction Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, January 1974, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/13051>.
- Johnson, Eric W. "Pär Lagerkvist, religious atheist," *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers* 3172, vol. 9, December 2013, <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3172>.

- Kena-Upanishad. *The Upanishads*, Translated by Swami Paramananda. New Delhi: Fingerprint, 2020, pp. 91 – 111.
- Lagerkvist, Pär. *The Death of Ahasuerus*, Translated by Naomi Walford. New York: Vintage Books, 1982.
- Lagerkvist, Pär. *The Sibyl*, Translated by Naomi Walford. London: Chatto & Windus, [1958] 2008.
- Manser, Antony. *Sartre: A Philosophic Study*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Shattan, Mylinh. “The Sibyl – Pär Lagerkvist,” 18 April 2014, <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://treehouseletter.com/2014/04/18/the-sybil-par-lagerkvist-summary-review/&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwjPi8uxm9CEAxUnUGwGHQYGCj8QFnoECAEQAg&usg=AOvVaw2dcLDEucUi17vfln7wQqUt>.
- The Free Dictionary. “Theism – definition of Theism by the free online dictionary,” *Thesaurus and Encyclopaedia*, n. d., <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/theism>.
- “Transcendence,” *Wikipedia*, August 2009, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendence\\_\(religion\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendence_(religion)).
- “Wandering Jew,” *New World Encyclopaedia*, n. d., [https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Wandering\\_Jew&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwiUob296ruEAXUUamwGHeJLCW8QFnoECAsOAg&usg=AOvVaw2kto4gHf](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Wandering_Jew&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwiUob296ruEAXUUamwGHeJLCW8QFnoECAsOAg&usg=AOvVaw2kto4gHf).

## Declarations

**Funding:** No specific funding was received for this work.

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.