



BODHI

International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

An online, Peer reviewed, Refereed and Quarterly Journal

Vol : 2

No : 2

January 2018

ISSN : 2456-5571



**CENTRE FOR RESOURCE, RESEARCH &
PUBLICATION SERVICES (CRRPS)**

www.crrps.in | www.bodhijournals.com

CONFLICTING PARADIGMS OF THE PATRIARCHAL AND LIBERATED SELVES IN THE DEVOTIONAL POEMS OF MIRABAI

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Abstract

Elaine Showalter in her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" writes: "No theory, however suggestive, can be a substitute for the close and extensive knowledge of women's texts which constitutes our essential subject" (350). The present paper attempts to read the text of Mirabai's poems from certain western critical perspectives in order to have 're-visions' of the old text. The secrets that are unfurled by a woman's text to a resisting reader are quite revelatory; especially so in the case of Mira's devotional poems (Padāvali). The idea of analyzing the devotional poems of an Indian female from western perspectives, especially feminist perspectives may seem odd but the fact that the androcentric, phallogocentric, phallogocentric societies – both in the east and the west – have tried to dominate, suppress and marginalize the female nullifies the element of oddity.

Keywords: *hegemonic oppression, psychological repression, literary expression, marginalize, dominate, suppress, sisterhood, liberated female, patriarchal and liberated selves*

Elaine Showalter in her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" writes: "No theory, however suggestive, can be a substitute for the close and extensive knowledge of women's texts which constitutes our essential subject" (350). The present paper attempts to read the text of Mirabai's poems from certain western critical perspectives in order to have 're-visions' of the old text. The secrets that are unfurled by a woman's text to a resisting reader are quite revelatory; especially so in the case of Mira's devotional poems (*Padāvali*). The idea of analyzing the devotional poems of an Indian female from western perspectives, especially feminist perspectives may seem odd but the fact that the androcentric, phallogocentric, phallogocentric societies – both in the east and the west – have tried to dominate, suppress and marginalize the female nullifies the element of oddity.

Prior to discussing Mira's padās a few words about Mirabai's life will be quite in place. Mirabai (ca.1498-1565) in the details obtained from the Archives of Mewar by A. J. Alston was the only daughter of Ratna Singh, a Rajput nobleman of the House of Rathor. Mira stayed in the Palace at Merta first with her grandfather Rau Dudaji and later with her uncle, Viramdev (all known to belong to the Vaishnava cult), following the early death of her mother and on account of Ratna Singh's constant engagement in fights. In 1516, Rana Sanga of the House of Sisodiya, an acknowledged leader of the Rajputs who ruled at Chittaur aspired for unity among the Rajputs to face the challenge offered by the Muslim powers. With the consent of Viramdev, he arranged a match between Mirabai and his own heir apparent, Prince Bhoja Raj. In his introduction to *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*, A. J. Alston writes :

In 1516, Mira was married to Prince Bhoja Raj and from the fact that she was considered a suitable match for the heir apparent at the most important capital of the Rajputs it would be concluded that her

religious devotion had not yet led her to behave in any way that contradicted family customs. (3)

The marriage was a childless one. Mira's husband died even before the death of Rana Sanga in 1528. Mira lost her father too in 1527 and the Rajputs suffered a defeat at the hands of Babur. Mira was cruelly ill-treated by Rana Sanga's successors which made her reject all the conventional standards set for her by her husband's family. As she was already initiated into enjoying the 'sat-sang' of the sadhus and saints she mingled more and more with the holy men conversing spiritually with them and even went to the extent of dancing through the streets on her way to the temple, singing songs and dancing before the image of the Lord.

The Ranas tried to poison Mira on account of her 'abnormal' behaviour and locked her up in the prison. After the attempt at poisoning she joined her uncle Viramdev and her cousin Jaymal in Merta where she is reported to have worshipped in the Chaturbhuj Temple. In 1538 with Viramdev's expulsion from Merta by the King of Jodhpur, Mira became a wandering ascetic and moved to Brindavan on foot. She moved to Dvaraka on the coast of Kathiawar Peninsula worshipping at the Ranachor Temple of Lord Krishna. Legends float that Mira retired to this temple and got dissolved in the image of the Lord despite requests made to her to get back to Merta.

Mirabai's poetical works are conventionally referred to as her 'Padāvali' which means a series of padās and are clubbed very often in the discussions on Bhakti Movement along with the works of Kabirdas, Tulsidas, Surdas and Guru Nanak. Mirabai is popularly hailed a devotional poet and is allotted a slot among the poets of the Bhakti

movement by the patriarchal society despite the many differences it perceived in Mira's poems.

Mirabai's hysterical singing and dancing can be traced back to the Freudian repression that she had endured of her wishful impulses of a normal life with Bhoja Raja. The repression, which had strangulated any outlet, had got itself transformed into hysterical behavior under the patriarchal torture in her androcentric family. Bhoja Raja could probably not satisfy Mira's bodily longings which get overtly expressed in many of her poems.

In the second poem of the *Padāvali* as collected by Alston, Mira sings to the "Master of the arts of love"(33). It is the beauty of the physical form of Lord Krishna that enchants her. She cries out,

I am mad with love
And no one understands my plight.(62)

...

Tortured by longing, I cannot sleep,
And the fire of love
Drive me to wander hither and thither

...

Without the Beloved my bed is uninviting
And I pass the nights awake.

My body has been bitten
By the snake of "absence". (64)

Though devotion to the Lord happens to be an aspect in Mira, her poems especially the early ones speak more about matters of the body than anything else. She longs to see the body of the Lord, not just feel his presence. The frame of the figure of the Lord can even cause ecstasy in her. The intense bodily longing is boldly expressed by Mira:

Who can understand the grief
Of a woman parted from her beloved?
Only one who has felt the pangs of absence
Or perhaps a devotee (65)

whereby she distinguishes herself clearly from a devotee.

Gynocentric feminist literary criticism can be seen discussing three phases - hegemonic oppression, psychological repression and literary expression. Mira seems to have passed from the first two phases of oppression and repression in her real life to expression in the form of poetic discourse.

Lust and passion loom large in her poems. In poem 155, she sings - "The fire of longing/ Is burning in my heart/ and my whole body is in torment" (91). The 'bed' is a frequent image that appears in her early poems. The koel's lusty singing and the rainy season fills her with emotions (94).

Today the Beloved will come to my house
I have prepared a bed for Him. (95)

Images of love-making too appear in quite a good number of poems. In poem 170, Mira sings:

Murari gave my sari a twitch
The pot of dye I was carrying
Fell from my head.
My nose-ring slipped off
And got caught in my sari
My hair broke loose
And became entangled in my ear-rings
The tip of my sari was torn
The Charmer of Hearts was in wanton mood,
That delicate exponent of the art of love.
Mira's Lord is the courtly Giridhara,
She places her head at His lotus feet. (104)

There is explicit mention of her virginity too in many of her poems. "I cast myself before Thee, body and mind . . . / For Thy sake she has remained a virgin/ From birth to birth" (55). ". . . / For Thy sake have I preserved virginity/ Birth after birth. Come to my side (66). Here we do find her assuming patriarchal dignity by making 'virginity' her personal choice.

The liberated woman in Mira casts worldly shame to the winds and states - "Worldly shame and family custom/ I have cast to the winds" (39). "My mind is drowned in the beauty of Shyam"(36). His locks, body, waist, eyes and hands capture her attention. "My thirsty eyes do not waver/ They drink in every atom of His body" (37). The expression of the intense longing for the body of a male was deliberately ignored by the patriarchal world. When it was defeated in all its attempts to control Mira, the flouting of conventions too was interpreted as devotion, a ploy employed by the phallogocentric society.

One is reminded of the concept of *écriture féminine* propounded by Helene Cixous where she says, "Write your self. Your body must be heard" (2040). In Mira's case the clever patriarchal society deliberately turned a deaf ear to Mira's singing of her bodily longings. Mira's attempts to give an outlet to all her repressions in this manner probably saved her from madness. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar put it "Women ought to speak and write" for the ones who remain silent risk madness (596).

Toril Moi had talked of the efficient females in her essay "Feminist, Female, Feminine"- "While it is true that many women have been victimized intellectually, emotionally and physically by men, it is also true that some have managed efficiently to counter male power" (106). Mira seems to be one such culturally active woman who

was consciously or unconsciously trying to establish a more gender equitable society by defying the patriarchal norms and by mingling with the sants and sadhus. The label of a mystic and a blind devotee was thrust on her deliberately by the androcentric society. As Toril Moi remarks, "patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for femininity are natural. Thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labelled both unfeminine and unnatural"(103). As Mira defied all the conventions and deliberately ignored the classical virtues of Indian womanhood like submission, self-effacement, tolerance and self-sacrifice, she was 'unfeminine' to the conventional society and hence a mere 'devotee' and not a strong liberated woman. Probably she gathered courage to dash the dominant cultural image of the woman as she was a childless widow, tortured severely by an androcentric society.

Mira's subjective voice that reverberated through her poems in a world where woman was regarded an object was again a proof of her reaction against the standards of morality set by the patriarchal society. The physiology and bodily instincts which give rise to female subjectivity are put into the text of her poetry by Mira. This seems to be quite in accordance with Helene Cixous' exhortation "woman must put herself into the text – as into the world..." (2039).

That Mira was conscious of her marginalized status in society is evident from the unconscious references in her poems. She invokes not any beautiful bird but the crow to act as her messenger to take a letter to her beloved in the same poem in which she addresses the *papiha*.

I will write the Beloved a letter

Take it for me, Friend crow.

Tell the Beloved

That his abandoned one is not eating.(69)

The concept of sisterhood is also perceived in Mira's poetry which is a powerful feature of second wave feminism. She cries out her woes to the sister figure and seems to seek mental support from this concept of universal sisterhood for survival. The traditionalists feel that Mira is addressing the Gopis of Krishna's age more than anything else. In a patriarchal society she must have unconsciously longed for a community of females who can understand her sorrows. Even when she puts on the garb of the Gopis of Krishna, the longing seems definitely for female unity and the freedom that was enjoyed by the lovers of Krishna as the Gopis of Vrindavan.

The conventional self in Mira comes very often into conflict with her liberated self. It could be her sense of conventional dignity and traditional bindings that had turned her towards the male figure of the Lord instead of turning towards the mortal frames of other men. The traditional concept of motherhood is also totally missing in her poems.

The longing for merging with the powerful male self thereby ending her marginalized status as the other could be another unconscious level of 'power' at work. According to Foucault power is expressed in society neither by a social actor nor by a social structure but by the circulation of discourses in society. As Delanty suggests, to Foucault the body being a political object of power, knowledge about it is inseparable from relations of power. His belief in 'bio-power' than class-power shows the strength of the penetration of bio-power into the very constitution of the self and the regulations of the body (125).

The self of Mira can assess the power of the Lord only by coming into contact with it. The patriarchal power which is symbolized in the genial form of Lord Krishna is the reality with which Mira ought to come in contact.

The transformation to an explicit devotee becomes evident towards the last *padās* of Mira where the significance of the body diminishes with its purgation through words. The company of holy men and thoughts of mind, death, karma, service, spiritual knowledge, and *satsang* take the place of the bodily frame and images. "Take no pride in the body" (195), she says and adds-

Expel lust, anger, pride, greed and infatuation.

Drink the nectar of the Name of God

Keep the company of holy men. (199)

The sight of a liberated woman attaining maturity through the pacification of bodily urges through frank pronouncements is the experience of a reader of Mira's poems. From the yearning to see the Lord's body and image, the shift to the essence or the 'Name of Shyam' also reveals the changes that have come about a young widow with unsatisfied longings of the body to an urge for spiritual salvation.

Mira emerges through her poems as a powerful liberated female boldly singing out her thoughts and feelings and speaking out her body. The traditional patriarchal self in her saves her from the folly of stooping to vulgarity and obscenity. The blending of the patriarchal and the liberated selves in Mira's poetry probably accounts for the submissive as well as the bold notes in her text.

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