

Mirabai and the Poetry of Protest

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Abstract

Literature, since ages, has served as an important means for registering protests at multiple levels be they social, political, religious, cultural or gender. Mirabai, a 16th century Bhakti saint from India used the genre of poetry embedded with social, religious, cultural signs to protest against the patriarchy. A Rajput princess by birth, Mira took to streets and refused to adhere to any of the set norms. By transgressing the orthodox boundaries at the personal, social and the feminist levels back in the medieval age, she emerged as a vanguard of freedom and identity for all. It is this ethos in her poetry which grants her space in the contemporary era also. The paper aims at exploring the different ways in which Mira attacked and protested against the then social, religious and cultural order and looking at the contemporary relevance her poems bear. The forms that the classic tradition of her poetry takes would also be examined in addition to examining the features that invest her story and poems with a generative life extending across time and diverse cultures through translation.

Keywords: bhakti, feminism, protest, patriarchy

Introduction

Mirabai, also known as Mira, is placed among the most famous Bhakti poets of the world. She is considered to be an epitome of devotion, love and dedication towards the Supreme. Her image has continued to develop worldwide in different aspects over time, thereby, accumulating multiple meanings. She is seen as someone who gave up the whole world for the sake of her beloved, Krishna and emerged as a rebel to traditions and other orthodox customs. She raised her voice against the injustice which was executed at various levels. Her poetry carried more weight and force owing to her aristocratic background and a powerful position she held in the society owing to the dynasty that she belonged to. She took refuge in the Mystic world and used this domain both as her personal shield and the shield for the society at large.

The multi-faceted protest in her poetry

Mira, the devotee and Mira, the poet, both are so intricately merged that it becomes mandatory to study her poetry in the context of her religious beliefs. In fact, in order to understand the defiance expressed through her poetry, one needs to first look at the poetry that she wrote in her devotional fervour as a Bhakta because it was the Bhakti Mysticism which granted her the fortitude to raise her voice as a rebel. Rather, Bhakti became a device for her to challenge through her poetry what was dominant and customary. Mira wasn't a reformer. She neither preached any doctrine nor established any particular sect of believers. She, indeed, accepted all the tenets of Bhakti and followed them unquestionably in her life. Like many other devotees, she also sought a final release from the pangs of birth and re-birth and aimed at attaining salvation by uniting herself with the Supreme for whom Krishna was the persona. Mira's form and intensity of devotion and her strength of mind was quite stronger, especially with regard to the rebelliousness in the domain of women. Mira emerged as

an open challenge to patriarchy, customs and the tradition and she was fearless in saying:

*Mira has dedicated herself to Girdhar
 And roams about in ecstatic mood arising out of deep love
 (Behari, 2006, p.43)*

She transgressed all the boundaries and emerged as a powerful woman. In fact, the spirit of defiance in her was executed at multiple levels. Women from different backgrounds even today identify themselves with her. Be it in relation to the oppression which women were subjected to as low castes, be it the suffocation that women had to suffer from owing to a high caste stature or be they simply the women who had to sacrifice themselves at the hands of tradition, Mira had a say for all (Mukta, 1994) ^[9]. She emerged as an epitome of strength that one required to make an individual place in the society.

Starting with the marriage itself, she initially refused to marry the groom chosen for her. However, upon being forced into marriage with him, she refused to adhere to any of the rituals and norms of the dynasty. The first defiant move from her side was the refusal to worship the family deity of Rajputs, *Kuldevi*. Having declared Krishna as her husband, she completely refused to bow down before any other god, thereby, inviting criticism from the community. After refuting the norms within the family, she moved into the public domain violating the laws at a much larger level (Bahadur, 2002) ^[1]. It was strictly prohibited for women to move freely in public but Mira didn't bother about any such laws. She openly mingled with people from other communities especially saints and the low castes and in fact revered them, preferring their low social status to the elite standing in society. Mira was very firm in her stand and established popular moves of resistance to domination. She

categorically did away with all the bondages saying:

*When I am not interested in big lakes
Why should I care for small pools
Even ganga and jamuna are of no use to me*
(Subramanian, 2005, pp. 136-137)

Her work displayed a collective practice of resistance and it related not only to women but to the subaltern also. She refused to be part of a particular clan and brought into practice a new trend which incorporated every section of the society ranging from women of upper class to the ones who belonged to the lower sections of society. "Mira's refusal to be a part of a sect-she wants to belong to the world and to leave her work to the world rather than to her Rajput lineage-opens up the possibility of co-authorship by diverse sections of subaltern classes" (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, p. 10) [4]. All the ways in which Mira has so far been viewed or studied reveal that she has remained a live tradition of protest and resistance. Starting with the domestic domain, she, after refusing to adhere to the norms of tradition, disavowed the preference for a son. She claimed the name to live by the works and by her sayings and not by giving birth to any son and thereby, refused to continue the Rajputana lineage. This was a major blow which she struck at the patriarchy because in the Rajput society, women were valued as mothers of sons and not as women in themselves (Jain & Sharma, 2002). Mira categorically refused to adhere to any such practice and emerged as a violator of the established norms. In a poem, she says:

*Yes! I will give up my life for Him
Because of you, I have given up
Worldly modesty and family restrictions*
(Subramaniam, 2005, pp. 126-127)

She adamantly denied any earthly marriage or bond, thereby, disavowing her husband and her family including her in-laws. She ignored the claims of *suhaag* (husband) declaring the marriage with a mortal as complete *mithya* (illusive) and herself already wedded to Krishna. "As an errant, disobedient wife, Mira acquires not only an active freedom from an expected role, but also the preconditions for access to wisdom, authority, self-sufficiency, spiritual growth, and most of all, marriage to Krishna" (Sangari, 1990, p. 1467) [11]. In the following pada, she says:

*I know only Girdhar
He is my father, husband, kin and none besides*
(Behari, 1971, p. 106)

Mira's womanly spirit to rebel operated at multiple levels. It encompassed nearly all domains ranging from personal to social:

The rejection of earthly marriage, alongside the honour of the family, of kul, and the bonds of kinship, is in effect a rejection not only of their educative and organizing functions but of the whole social order within which they are enmeshed. Further, the break with domesticity is a rejection of the primary domain where sexuality is customarily regulated.
(Sangari, 1990, p. 1467) [11]

It was Mira's poetry which facilitated the revolution that she set in whether thematically or linguistically. Mira deployed the *Brajbhasha* (vernacular language of Rajasthan) as the means to communicate and to articulate the distinctively female enunciation of anti-patriarchy and anti-Rajput opposition. In addition to *Brajbhasha*, Mira composed her poems in the western Rajasthani dialect as well as in the regional languages like Gujarathi and Marathi. Her language had multi-dialectic features. "The multidialectic feature of Mira's verse functions as a survival strategy for the women-centered popular movements in the name of Mira" (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, p. 14) [4]. Speaking in a multi-lingual mode facilitated a voluminous spread of themes and it was passed from region to region voicing the concerns of women. Mira became a leader granting her poetic construct a generalized dictum. The use of 'I' and other innovative codes were symbolic of a female dissent.

An important aspect in relation to Mira's critique of patriarchy that has been highlighted by the feminist scholars is recognized as the *bidaai* genre (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004) [4]. *Bidaai* refers to the leave taking of a woman on the eve of marriage. Mira critiqued the ideology of the genre of *bidaai* and relocated the effect of the poetry or the songs which were sung at that time. The ideology of this genre reinforced the tradition of "child marriage, exogamy, treating daughters as temporary residents in the natal home, and disinheriting them after marriage... these songs sentimentalized the cruelty and detachment with which a woman was made stranger in her only home that she had known" (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, pp. 18-19) [4]. Mira subverted the ideological and semiotic content of this genre and disintegrated the effect from patriarchal ideology. She channelized it towards a modern secular vocabulary which is now called a women's work identity outside the patriarchal domain. However, in the religious domain of Mira, it is named as women's desire for dedication to a self-chosen ideal. Whenever Mira produced a leave-taking poem, it was addressed to a childhood female friend. She enjoyed being a renouncer, detaching herself from the cords.

Her address to a female interlocutor is another characteristic feature of the feminine *écriture*. Helene Cixous (1976) [7], a French feminist, believed that a "woman must write woman" (p. 877). In many of her poems, Mira addresses to her female friend as *sakhi* and at times to a group of friends calling them *sahiliyan* bringing in a contemporary feminist feature as back as the 15th century. She calls upon her female friends to serve as listeners to her padas or at times to join her in activities. She says:

Come my friends! Let's play here and not go to others' houses
(Subramaniam, 2005, pp. 168-169)

At another instance, Mira says, "Friend from my childhood, I long to be a renunciator" (quoted in Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, p. 20) [4]. It was both entreaty and challenge. Her desire for renunciation was directly in opposition to the patriarchal religion. Mira turned the *bidaai* genre upside down. The exile of a woman from her natal home forced upon her by her parents and the society becomes in Mira's poems, the renunciation of the natal and marital family brought about by the daughter. Instead of suffering passively, as the trend was, Mira turned things upside down by emerging as the radical denouncer who shuns off her shoulders everything that

confined women to patriarchal premises. She says in a poem:

*Family, honour, word of scorn
I care not for these one jot*
(Bahadur, 2002, pp. 56-57)

She transformed the phenomenon of bidaai into renunciation. "In reconfiguring bidaai as renunciation, Mira validates those very experiences in women's lives that, in folk traditions, are proof of women's weakness and emotional insecurity. She remakes these experiences of weakness and emotionalism into transformatory experiences that give women privileged access to renunciation" (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, p. 23)^[4]. She dared to speak and claim on behalf of all women the right to dedicate themselves to ideals of their own choosing and to seek their own transcendence. She says:

*The veil is broken
And I am liberated from the cycle of birth and death*
(Subramaniam, 2005, pp. 80-81)

Hindu religious injunctions defined women as part of the illusory world, stating that they lack a soul and that their *mayavi* (deceptive) nature was a hindrance to the achievement of renunciation by men and therefore, women were prohibited from this (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004)^[4]. According to the religious doctrines, the only way for women to attain salvation was to worship their husbands and be at their service. Mira subverted it all. Instead, what she did was to worship God and accept Him as husband. She liberated herself altogether from the earthly bondages and invested the state of marriage with spirituality that had no place in the socio-patriarchal marriage relation but was a large part of women's narratives, autobiographies and folk songs. The way Mira described herself allowed her to move freely in public, among men, to converse with them and travel from place to place. Mira not only spoke of a rebellion but acted the same way. She threw away the traditional signs of the feminine self like that of wearing jewels, decorating the self with material things and in turn, sought empowerment through the love of Krishna (Jain & Sharma, 2002). She says in a poem:

*I have given up pearl, diamond and gold ornaments
Now I wear the garland of tulsi beads and apply
Sandal paste on my forehead
The pride of royal family is gone*
(Subramaniam, 2005, p.80-81)

Mira aimed at making the world understand that choosing a life time ideal was an effective way to counter medieval Rajput patriarchal ideology. She highlighted the gender specific self-alienation of the Rajput women. According to her, a woman is disconnected because she is alienated from her family, children and the right to property. Her role and ability as producer, her creativity and productivity, her power to shape and influence the world around her and connect to the social world as the agent is always hindered by the pre-constructed norms. The voice which Mira symbolized represents a particular configuration, expresses a particular social relation and accounts for a humble yet powerful subalternity. It facilitated a transcendence which cut across genders and gradually, femaleness became something which men resorted to in Bhakti. Saints like Kabir, Narsi and Surdas

often resorted in their devotion to a feminine self and for women it was unnecessary to make any such transformation. Their feminity became their strength (Sangari, 1990)^[11]. Kumkum sangari opines:

A fifteenth or sixteenth century rebellious woman poet-saint, who pursued her devotion to Krishna with complete dedication, composed exceptionally beautiful songs of love and longing for God and endured severe persecution because she did not behave as a member of the royal household should or because she crossed caste boundaries, seems a likely candidate for those who would look to the past for exemplary women of power and independence. (quoted in Bose, 2000, p. 162)

Conclusion

Mira did away with all the forces which promoted and symbolized tyranny, injustice and bias. Mira, as a feminist, tore apart all the constructs ranging from physical to psychological more powerfully. Her poems, therefore, are emblematic of a more powerful spirit of womanhood and contain effective resonances related to the spirit of Feminism. She taught the world the way to love God. She rowed her boat dexterously in the stormy sea of troubles and reached the other shore of love, peace and absolute fearlessness-the kingdom of Supreme love. She resorted to a poetic defiance and liberated women of the stereotypical roles ascribed to them.

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