

The Culture and Politics of Representation in Mirabai's Poetry

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The politics of representation revolves around issues of power and control over self and its representations. The act of conscious representation of 'other' in writings/creations of bhakti poets is associated with the practices of caste domination within the context of bhakti poetry in medieval ages. The oppressed or marginalised acquire some of the strategies of the oppressor while speaking about or against their marginality or while exploiting the ambiguity of their status within or without the power centres. The issue of the politics of representation in Mirabai's poetry is part of a much larger debate on relations of power to the Bhakti movement. This movement was revolutionary in its nature. This was an era of forming a personal relationship with God, which sprang from the yearning for compassion that everyone experienced after the Vedic period was over. The Bhakti movement first began in South India and later reached North India and other parts of the country. The movement redefined India socially, culturally and religiously, and was also seen as the reaction of masses towards the excesses of Sanskrit traditions and the asceticism of Buddhism and Jainism. For women embracing this change was easier as they could easily consider god as their son, friend, or husband. Prior to this, women were never independent and they did not have access to anything beyond their homes.

The emerging bhakti poets, like Mirabai, destabilised the deep rooted and prejudiced social practices like *sati pratha*. She conformed to the oral narrative form in her poetry but explicitly situated her creations as the poetry of resistance against biased social practices, and also, as the poetry of devotion. The main focus of this paper shall be on understanding how Mirabai represented herself in her verses. Mirabai's poetry is largely subjective. Mirabai had already defied the societal norms, so she did not have to imagine Krishna's relationship with *Gopis*. Her poetry is an expression of her own love relationship with Krishna. Mirabai was born in 1498 A.D. (1555 *Vikram Samwat*) at Kudaki (Chokadi) near Merta. Mirabai is one of the most popular legendary figures of early Hindi and Gujarati literature. One cannot undermine the significance of her songs when they are alive after half a millennium amongst millions of people of all castes and classes in Northern and Western India. Her poetry was heart-felt. Mirabai's work has been translated in English several times most notably by A.J. Alston (1980), Hawley and Juergensmeyer (1988), Shama Futehally (1994), Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield (2004), and Andrew Schelling (1993).

Bhakti and Culture

It is important to understand the concept of bhakti in those times. Most of the theories on bhakti associate it with a particular religion or cult and also a specific doctrine. Bhakti is understood as monotheism, based on the devotion to a personal God, where there was a consciousness of the difference between God and humans. It is based on the idea that bhakti is different from the path of *jnana* and that they are opposites of each other. Krishna Sharma in her book *Bhakti and the Bhakti movement: A New Perspective* refers to the academic work of H.C Raychadhuri's *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect* and emphasises that bhakti is largely identified with Vaishnavism. Many academicians described bhakti from the perspective of Vaishnavas and they had substantial material on the same. Referring to Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* Krishna Sharma observes that:

The word bhakti is derived from *Bhaj* by adding the suffix *ktin(ti)*. *Bhaj* can be used in any of the following meanings: to partake, to engage in, to turn and resort to, to pursue, to declare for, to practice or cultivate, to prefer or choose, to serve and honour, to love and adore. The suffix *ktin* is usually added to a verb to form an action or agent noun. Thus bhakti (+ *ti*) can mean participation as well as recourse, experience as well as practice, reverence as well as love and adoration....According to the rules of Panini, bhakti indicates a *bhava* or condition. In the relevant sutra in the *Ashtadhyayi*, he uses the word in the sense of excessive fondness and devotion, and illustrates its meaning with different objects and personalities. (Sharma 40)

It is equally relevant to focus on the concept of culture in India. Culture represents the values of a nation; beliefs and outlook towards life of its inhabitants. Culture is manifest in the ideologies of the life of a nation. In India, ideologies are deeply influenced by religion and thus they influence our culture. All forms of music, dance, and paintings are largely religious in flavour and deeply embedded in folk culture. The Bhakti movement also intensified the urge to build temples as an expression of devotion. The temples were the centre of religious fervour and social congregation. Many temples still disseminate religious and cultural values by engaging people in discourses. Temples provided the stage for the evolution of collective dance and music. The biggest contribution of the Bhakti movement to the Indian culture was the composition of the songs and poetry which were intertwined with folk music and group singing. The bhakti songs were full of passions, heartfelt emotions and sentiments thereby, enhancing its cultural value. Most of the *sant* poets belonged to the lower strata of society like *kumbis*, tailors, potters, carpenters, gardeners and barbers.

For many *sants* like Akka Mahadevi, Andal and Mira Bai the main goal of bhakti was to attain salvation through self-surrender to God. The Bhakti movement popularised more because it offered an equal status to all *bhakts*. Therefore, the meekest from the orthodox sections of the society became a part of it.

Life and works of Mira Bai

Mirabai was married to Bhoja Raj in 1516 and the couple did not have any child. She was the grand-daughter of Rao Duda. Hermann Goetz opines that Mirabai must have attained the age of 65 or 67 years. He asserts that she could not have died before A.D. 1563 or 1565. This can be corroborated by the legends connecting her with Akbar, Man Singh, Birbal, Tansen and Tulsidas. Her association with Akbar and others has been considered as unhistorical because many scholars believed that she died in A.D. 1546. There is evidence of her disappearance but not her death, and therefore, one can argue that she lived much longer (Goetz).

The Bhakti movement was at its zenith between the fifteenth and seventeenth century. The faith of *sant* poets in the efficacy of *bhakti bhava* (devotional love) over other forms of oneness with God became the creed. They practiced to surrender to the will of God and learnt to sacrifice everything that they owned. They believed that the best mortification made their souls humble. Kabir and Mirabai are the most popular *sant* poets from North India. The Western interest in Mirabai's poetry began when Britishers colonised India in the mid-eighteenth century. Mirabai's poetic creations are conventionally known as "*Padavali*". The word *Padavali* means a series of *padas*. *Pada* was a short song providing an instruction on spiritualism. Since it was composed in simple rhythms, therefore it enabled an easy adaptation for singing purposes. The melody or *raga* was specified and usually had a *dhruvak* or refrain in the opening line or second line (Alston 27). Mirabai's songs have survived more than five hundred years through the itinerant singers who memorised them and sang them sometimes after making some alterations and additions to them. Everyone accepts that Mirabai's songs have been altered by the singers who sang them often. Her songs have come to us in various dialects which carried the linguistic fervour of the singers who sang them. Many a times they sang different versions of the songs which were altered by individuals to suit their own likings or the taste of the audience. Acharya Chaturvedi's *Padavali* which is a 2008 edition includes 201 *padas*.

Mirabai was not a revolutionary and she never condemned any social or religious practices. Her poetry does not focus upon the social order like Kabir.

She only followed Vaishnavism or particularly Krishnaism. Her poetry emerges from her own mystical experiences with her Lord Krishna. *Madhurya bhava* is predominant in her poetry. Women poets conforming to *madhur rasa* tradition, considered their personal God as their husband, and surrendered to their respective God completely. That is primarily the reason Mirabai considered Giridhari Lal as her husband. Mirabai considered herself as a reincarnation of *gopi* Lalita. There are various such references in her verses –*meri unki preet purani* (Chaturvedi, verse 20); *purabjanam ko kol* (verse 22); *purabjanam ko kant* (verse 124). Her life story was deliberately muddled up by many writers. Acharya Chaturvedi avers that she was presented as the wife of Rana Kumbha by many writers due to the politics of her times. Krishna P. Bahadur opines that few incidents of her life survived as they were in consonance with the *Vaishnava* sect. For instance, her short verbal spat with Jiv Gosain in Vrindavan. Similarly, her terms with Tulsidas pleased the followers of Lord Ram as they wanted to demean the Krishna devotees. Many incidents of her life were narrated from the perspective of the lower middle class with whom she mingled. As the middle class without understanding the political angle of her life kept reiterating the same for the regular quarrels in their household. Mirabai has survived despite all the varied interpolations and distortions of her life story.

Despite the limitation of the reach of vernacular languages used by Mirabai for expression, her creations have been translated and re-interpreted by reputed translators and scholars across nations. Mirabai composed *sagun* poetry. Mirabai composed many *bhajans* and couplets which express her devotion to Giridhar (Krishna) as the upholder of the mountain. According to Hinduism, five types of emotions comprise *bhakti-shanta*, *dasya*, *sakhiya*, *vatsalya* and *madhurya*. There are many *padas* of Mirabai that have been identified as comprising the *madhurya bhava* or *viraha vedana*. Schelling has done an in-depth analysis of her *padas* in the light of eroticism. Her poetry abounds with themes of love, devotion and spiritual illumination. She created a corpus of poetry which was based on emotions, sentiments and pure devotion. Like the Sanskrit poets of the early period, Mirabai presented *shringar rasa* (based on passions) sentiment in her poetry besides *Madhurya Bhava* and *Viraha Vedna* (dwelling on pangs of separation from her beloved). In many of her creations it is evident that the body indulges in physical pleasure whereas divinity is attained by the enlightened soul. Her condensed efforts and her calibrated enquiry during her spiritual journey make her life an exceptional saga of struggle and determination to reach the divine. The elements of *shringar rasa* and *madhurya bhava* bring sublimity to her poetry. The simple rhythm and repeated refrain in her songs encouraged millions to sing her songs and relate with her intense longing for the divine. To quote a few lines:

*Maim giradhar rang rachi saiyam mai giridhar rang rachi
Pacaramaga chola pahera sakhi mai
Jhira mita khelan jati
Vajhir mitmai milyo sawaro,
Khola mili tana gati.
Jinaka piya pardes basata haim,
Likham likham bhejat pati,
Mera piya mere hiya basta hai,
Na kahu mai jati.*

(Mira said to her companion:

My heart is steeped

In Krsna's love,

I wore a robe of five colours

And went to play hide and seek,

I saw my Dark Lover there

and gave him my body for keeps.

Others send letters to declare

Their love: but my Lover's in my heart

What need I have to go anywhere?) (Bahadur 45)

Mirabai's verses have both spontaneity and instinctiveness in the rhythm and melody. Royal households trained the princesses in playing musical instruments. Krishna P. Bahadur opines that "Mirabai did not deliberately choose her words to create an effect, rather her poetry was so spontaneous outpouring of her heart, and achieved perfection because of her artless and deep emotions" (31). Mirabai as a royal princess must have learnt music and perhaps dance also. That seems to be the reason that she knew different *ragas* and sang *bhajans* perfectly. Mirabai used colloquial language for singing *bhajans*. Her efforts were not in the direction of exhibiting her poetic talents or appeasing others. She sang for her Giridhar Lal and also for her self-attainment. Most of her poems are in Western Rajasthani (the dialect spoken in Mewat) where she was born and brought up. There are also traces of Braj (a dialect of Hindi in and around Vrindavan) and Gujarati as she spent considerable time in Vrindavan. Mirabai's interest in combining the classical and traditional with the vernacular made her poetry sublime. Mirabai described in simple language the concept of righteousness, philosophy and salvation/liberation. It is through the allegorical constructs that the masses understand the idea of salvation as propagated by different schools of philosophy and also in Mirabai's poetry.

Mirabai's songs were influenced by folk culture and her popularity has made her songs immortal. Mira's popularity can be ascertained by the fact that a comic series named *Amar Chitra Katha* has been written portraying her as an ideal wife. The story focuses on her *dharm* and bhakti. These comics play a very crucial role as they become the markers of popular culture. The various depictions of Mirabai in movies, stories, folktales, plays and movies emphasize upon the idea of her radical bhakti as she placed her love for the divine above her duties as a wife and a daughter-in-law. Mirabai was a true aficionado of Lord Krishna. The language of Mirabai's verses is orchestrated with apt use of words, similes and metaphors that depict her reverence for Lord Krishna. Metaphorical expressions become profoundly significant when they are correctly interpreted. It is also possible that Mirabai used Braj with other languages because metaphors require continuous word-play. Her language is flavored with local vocabulary. The meaning of all such words can be traced contextually. A reader is guided by the intentions and tone of the poet within a historical and social context. The authenticity of the verses of Mirabai and many other poets who used vernacular language has been challenged due to lack of historical evidence and the controversies associated with the vernacular literature. Acharya Parshuram Chaturvedi explains that Mirabai used at least fifteen types of metre or *chhand* in her poetry: *Saar chhand*, *Sarsi chhand*, *Vishnu pada*, *Doha chhand*, *Upmanchhand*, *Smaansavavya*, *Shobhanchhand*, *Tatankchhand*, *Kundalchhand*, etc. (Chaturvedi 53-55). Krishna Sharma referring to Giridhar explains that Mirabai's narratives are the meaningful observations on the society and culture of those days. They are also the representations of the ideologies that were influential in defining the historical processes. Historians have always viewed language as a political device. In her book she quotes the historian Muzaffar Alam, who believed that the Mughals deliberately promoted Persian as the court language while use of Braj in the imperial court was also a political consideration. Braj was an expression of authority, grace, morals, stories of the sword and Brahmanical traditions.

Mirabai often danced in the temples before the idol of Krishna. Her in-laws and many others thought that she was besmirching the honour of the Sisodia Rajputs. They overlooked the fact that dance was an act of devotion in both mythology and religion. Lord Shiva is known to perform *Tandava* whereas Krishna is popular for his *ras-leela* with *gopis*. Hence, her dance cannot be considered as an outrageous act. Mirabai's passion matched with the intense emotions of Chaitanya who also danced while singing. Kabir and Raidas are not close to her in this kind of devotion. In one of her verses, she speaks of the *rangamahala* (the part of the palace which was for the sensual enjoyment): "*virahana baithya mranga mahala mam*" (Bahadur 105). She renounced the

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life of a princess, family comforts and honour to become a true devotee. She broke all the Rajput social codes, wandered on the roads and mingled with people from every social strata. Rana Sanga was her father-in-law who engaged in war with Mughals. It is believed that she defied the norms of upper-class Rajputs and that agitated Rana Sanga. Legend holds that once he pulled the dagger and ran to kill her. He suddenly encountered hundreds of Mira in that room and he did not know which one to kill. There are hundreds of such legendary tales of Mirabai.

Mirabai's spiritual inclination in her poetry did not match with most of the poets of her day like Jai Dev (court poet of North East) or with the poets belonging to the Vallabh school from Braj. She also did not belong to the *Nirgunsants* of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab. She belonged to the *Sagun sants* of Vaishnava sect. Mirabai established a personal relationship with her *Giridhar Nagar*, which was not the case with other *sagun sants*. They were similar to Mirabai only in the acceptance of temple-worship, chanting His name and a faith that devotion will eventually culminate in dissolution in the deity. Chanting of names was an essential aspect of Mirabai's spiritual *sadhana*. She always believed that Lord was limitless and thus viewed him as "*Hari avinasi*," based on the principle of the indestructible, *mirake prabhu hariawinasi* (Bahadur, verse 75). If God is presented in the human form like Krishna, then a devotee like Mirabai could certainly establish an intimate relationship by perceiving herself as a *Gopi* (cow herding girls famous for their unconditional love for Krishna). This certainly demanded an intense passion of a devotee like Mirabai and a woman's tender heart. Mirabai was purely devoted to her Giridhari Lal like a Hindu wife to Krishna. She constantly refers to Ram and Shyam (Krishna) in her verses. Both are believed to be Vishnu's incarnations, so it is the same whether she addresses Ram or Krishna. She reiterates that those who devote many hours to sleep and useless tasks; they are deluded. They can never get rid from the cycle of birth and death and consequently, they can never attain *moksh*. Whereas she is sure of her way of renunciation which is chanting the name of Ram and surrendering to Krishna:

ramana mana leta
apa hi apa puja kai re,
phule ang nasamata....
dasi mira lala giridhara,
sahajakara bairaga (106)
(yet you will not chant Rama's name
You have built dams
of vanity all around you....

Mira says, O Krsna,
I'm your slave,
show me the way to
renunciation.) (Bahadur 107-108)

She lived her life with this constant belief that she was married to Krishna. In one of her verses, she refers to her marriage to Krishna in her dream, “*mai mhane sapne mam parinayam dinanatha*” and refers to her nuptial bed in another verse, “*piya se jsuhage*” (Bahadur, verse 60). Mirabai's poetry combined the devotion to God with a realisation of one's final identity with God. Mirabai is constantly aware of the presence of Krishna in her heart (*dar salahyam sukha – rasi*, Alston, verse 194). All her actions of dancing and singing were her acts of worship of the omnipresent Krishna. Although, it is also true that as long as one is alive God is both present and absent. Whenever Mirabai sensed the distance between her and her beloved Krishna her heart ached, which results in the poetry full of her *viraha-vedna*. Eventually, there is not much difference in the worshippers of *sagun* and *nirgun* poets. Mirabai's poetry is certainly a reflection upon the significant aspects of her life. She never feared punishment by her royal family. She was always determined in the goal of pursuit of her beloved Krishna and she was undeterred by the obstacles that came in her way. She was not interested in understanding anything other than her love and devotion for Krishna. Her soul embraced bhakti of Krishna and all her poetry emerged from her urge to profess her love and yearning for Krishna. The only means of fulfilment for her was surrender and complete devotion to God. Her feelings are evident in the following verse:

*Mira hari ke haath bikini,
Janama Janama Kidasi*
(I am sold to Krsna
I'm his slave
I have pledged my love to him
life after life
and I am united
with him always.) (56)

Conclusion

The legend of Mirabai was told and retold again and again, thus the narrative was also rephrased, whenever it resurfaced in different languages worldwide. Mirabai was understood by various people at various times according

to their individual perspective and purpose. For instance, Andrew Schelling finds her poetry erotic as well as devotional. His emphasis on eroticism in her poetry seems to be a bit exaggerated. But it is relevant in understanding the Western perspective. Acharya Parsuram Chaturvedi and other scholars lament the distortions that have arisen in many available verses. Purohit Hari Narayan claimed that he collected nearly 500 *padas* or verses in handwritten, oral and printed form as the original creations of Mirabai. He also claimed that the *padas* have extensive history associated with them. Almost all renowned scholars accepted less than two fifty *padas* or verses as Mirabai's original creations. Mirabai's *padas* are filled with theological preachings where she emphasised that worshipping and connecting with Krishna is the soul's means of salvation. There are *padas* that underscore *shringarras* as she focuses upon her sensuous body and struggles to contain her desires. It is evident from all resources and references available that Mirabai was a *sagun sant*, who was an ardent Krishna devotee. She viewed Krishna as her husband like Andal. Mirabai chose the absolute and the eternal God for her eternal love. Like Radha, Mirabai also desired Krishna and did not shy away due to the notions of abstinence for women. She repeatedly referred to Krishna as '*Avinasi*' based on the principle of indestructibility. She always believed that she belonged to her Giridhari Lal, and her only purpose in life was to unite with Him. According to Mirabai, only Krishna could help anyone attain *moksh* (salvation). Hence, she completely surrendered herself to Krishna in order to fulfill her aim of salvation/dissolution or emancipation.

Acharya Parsuram Chaturvedi, A. J. Alston, Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield opine that there is no other woman poet of Mirabai's calibre who existed before her. According to A.J. Alston, Mirabai cannot be classified with any other *sant* poet except *sant* Gyaneshwar (Alston 26). The desire to unite with His identity is equally pertinent in Gyaneshwar and Mirabai's poetry, and it is evident in Mirabai's *spada*: *Koi kachukahe mana laga, aisi preet lagai manamohana, Jyumsona mem suhaga* (Bahadur 87). Mirabai is primarily identified as a *bhaktin*; secondarily as a poetess. Most of the scholars opine that her poetry reflects her personal life. She was completely devoted to her Giridhari Lal since her early childhood. Her passion and devotion for Krishna increased after she lost her husband and father. Mirabai was initially repressed in a patriarchal society but she gradually emerged as an archetype of a strong woman in complete control of her own life. This is evident in her poetry. She became a precedent for women who want to stand up on their own by transcending all the boundaries of physicality, gender and societal norms.

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