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Interpreting the Tale of Assertion of Mirabai in Gurcharan Das's Mira

Kanu Priya

Department of English, Amity School of Liberal Arts
Amity University Haryana, India
kanu13aug@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Mirabai was one of the most celebrated Indian poet and singer of the 15th and 16th century. Her popularity as the Hindu mystical poet was based on her famous compositions but Gurcharan Das in the play *Mira* underscores a different aspect of Mirabai's life which was erased from history. The play focuses on the hollowness and alienation characterizing relationships between men and women. It is also an indictment of the worn-out customs and ways of life of royal clan. The play foregrounds the stifling conventions that crushed women's individuality and denied them the right to freedom of choice or expression. The play also highlights how a woman has been treated like a son-generating machine since ages.

Keywords: Love, Devotion, Female Identity, Resentment

INTRODUCTION

Mirabai was born in the year 1498 at Merta in Nagpur District of Rajasthan. Merta was an independent kingdom under the reign of her grandfather, Rao Dudaji, who was succeeded by her father Ratan Singh. Having lost her mother at an early age, she came to stay with her grandparents. Rao Dudaji was not only an able ruler and a well-known warrior but he was also a devout worshipper of Vishnu. Thus, Mirabai acquired a religious leaning from early childhood. Educated at home, she underwent a rigorous training in music which later got manifested in her own verses. It is quite possible that her education was not limited to cultivating desirable qualities in a princess. She was also imparted skills needed by a Rajput woman to cope with the critical times of sixteenth century Rajasthan. It is said that during her childhood Mirabai was given an idol of Krishna by a mendicant. She became deeply

attached to it; and her religious fervor grew stronger (Nilsson 12). She used to converse with the picture of Krishna day and night when she was six years old. Mira included Krishna into her daily existence and was compelled to wed Prince Bhoj Raj, the eldest son of Rana Sanga, in the Rajput kingdom of Mewar, the most powerful state of the early sixteenth century, unlike every lady raised in Indian society.

Mirabai experienced immediate discrimination for her lifestyle because it ran against patriarchal expectations and the orthodox outlook of the period. Her affiliation with the Bhakts, devotion to Lord Krishna, refusal to worship her in-law's goddess Kali, and renunciation of all material possessions left a negative impact on her family. She declared herself free, three years after her husband's passing because she would now be able to devote herself entirely to Lord Krishna, defying the custom of high-class Rajput widows by accompanying her husband to the cremation pyre. She saw it as a chance to advance on the bhakti and devotional path.

The Rajput era in Indian history is that juncture when ideas and customs developed that gave female honor a particular personality. It connected the chastity and honor of the clan with women's honor. The most egregious transgression of the Rajput concept of nobility can be seen in the Mirabai narrative. The dichotomy that Mirabai embodies is explored in the play. She was vilified by feudal society for her deviance from the traditional, repressive conventions that aimed to govern and regulate women's life. She struck a radical blow at nearly everything that constituted the feudal conventions of the Rajput aristocracy, and the mighty Sisodiyas of Chittor felt ashamed by her public defiance. She had violated Rajput honour and disregarded male prerogative by leaving her marriage. In retaliation, the Rajputs hid her name from written records as well as from the collective memory of society. Her devotional melodies, which were so well-liked throughout the nation, were not sung in Rajasthan for a very long time. Mira is still admired and respected today, and she continues to exist in the public's cultural consciousness.

Gurcharan Das, by his reconstruction of the character of Mira, in a way criticizes the prejudices which gripped the Indian society of the sixteenth century. Deep-rooted customs hamper the development of women and women's freedom from such fetters was necessary for the emancipation of the nation. Mirabai's life continues to be recognized as truly revolutionary in a culture where divorce is viewed as evil and where marriage is equated to holy communion for women, unwed mothers, and childless women are frowned upon.

The play Mira by Gurcharan Das is popular with contemporary audiences. She was born and raised in a society that fiercely protected women's sexual virtue. Though history has completely erased Mira's longings and natural desires, as if she was less than human, Gurcharan Das foregrounds Mira as a human being who seeks the love of her husband like any other woman. She would like him to be with her, love her, and fulfill her emotional needs. She leaves no stone unturned to come close to him but in vain. He does not seem to be sensitive to her desires. He only needs a son to

run the clan and help him in wars. Mira, on the other hand, has been portrayed as a normal human being—emotional and loving.

She sheds all kinds of customs, traditions, and rituals which the traditional society adhered to. So, Das's Mira is modernistic in stance. Mirabai doesn't represent the society of her time, whereas her sister-in-law Udabai, conforms to the tenets of the ruling class. Bound by tradition, she forces Mira to worship their family deity Kali. She also feels that Mira's resistance is a bad omen, which will have terrible consequences for the family. Like everyone else, she believes that only a son can continue the line of the Rana's lineage. To convince Mira, she tries every possible method but fails. Udabai represents the conformity associated with the ruling class women.

For a variety of reasons, the life and bravery of Mirabai still strike a chord in the hearts of many Indians today. She epitomises a particular form of resistance with her act of rejection. Gurcharan Das demonstrates how she refused the lure of prosperity while living in the lap of luxury. Mira was a childless woman who dared to break away from the traditional role of mother, an idea that Indian women have always related to. Her sister-in-law makes fun of her for being childless and infertile. Udabai even promotes malicious rumours and insults directed against Mirabai. She even goes so far as to claim that because Mira can hear her discussions with Krishna, guys are entertained in Mira's chamber.

Women have long been seen as representing the honour of their husbands, families, clans, castes, and countries. The erstwhile 'holy' Indian priests and religious preachers believed that women should be dominated by the male members and were not deserving of independence. They believed that a woman's sexual purity needed to be upheld in order for her to maintain the respect of her family, community, and country. Societies impose certain norms on women that they must abide by in order to uphold the so-called honour. Such rules become harsher in emergencies—warfare, political turmoil, attack from strange cultures, riots etc. Mirabai too shunned all the worldly responsibilities, may be unintentionally, but her struggle to live a life of her own made her different from all other women in those times.

Since ancient times, women have been taught to submit to male dominance. As a result, servitude became profoundly ingrained in their conscience. Not only were the male humans sought to submit to, but also the Divine. Women were indoctrinated to believe that male supremacy was not only a gift from God and that they may seek refuge in the all-powerful Divine if human males were not willing to provide it.

Mirabai's inner spiritual experience was just the opposite: On the one hand, she refused the protection of human lords, and on the other hand the divine ruler of her conscience was completely unrelated to the traditional idea of God. By his attraction, Krishna not only dragged her from the anti-women society of the Rajputs but by acting like a yogi he forbade her to take refuge in a divine protector. But this decision created a paradoxical lordship of Krishna. In order to serve him, Mirabai had to become a self-determined, free person, and had therefore to accept the agony caused by non-fulfillment of her

desire for divine protection. That acknowledgement was indeed a revolutionary break-through in her traditional self-perception. In this way she got a powerful internal court of self-determination. Her experience of female freedom was still utopian for the masses of the women of her day and age. Today it has become irresistibly attractive for female consciousness even if there are still many powerful kinds of female self-repression and patriarchal violence. Living in a time of great changes of human consciousness she actively took part in development of female liberation.

In the beginning of the play, Mira is shown as an innocent young girl. She does not understand the mindset of monarchs. She has been told by her husband that she was married to the Rana just for the sake of son. They impel her to worship their goddess Kali but she would not acquiesce out of sheer innocence and devotion to Krishna:

Actor 1: Bow to Mother!

Actress 1: She hesitates.

Actor 1: Bow to her. Kali is our family goddess

Actress 1: I don't like her face.

Actor 1: What?

Actress 1: Mira is frightened.

Actor 1: Don't be afraid. A cat holds a mouse and her kitten in the same teeth. Only our enemies are afraid of her.

Actress 1: If it will catch mice why not have a squirrel instead of a cat.

Actor 1: Kali will give you a son if you worship her. (104)

Gurcharan Das highlights the fact that there are seeds of revolt in the character of Mira from the very beginning. The play underscores Mira's rebelliousness which makes her resist patriarchy, monarchy, and deeply ingrained societal attitudes. Das also shows how women are treated like machines to create sons and in a way the norms of patriarchal society kill the dreams of newly wed wives, who dream to lead a life full of love with their husbands.

Actor 1: We will make a son for the kingdom.

Actress 1: A son comes to those who have earned him.

Actor 1: The son will make war and rule the world.

Actress 1: A son will born out of love. (105)

Das focuses on the relationship between a husband and a wife. Initially, there is something novel; the excitement of two young people discovering each other in the typical Indian situation where physical relationship precedes emotional bonding. As the novelty wears off, Rana becomes too involved in the affairs of the state and the imminent war with the Mughals. Mira feels the frustration of a wife whose husband is not available. Mira's demands, both sexual and

emotional, seem to be greater. She naively runs after him and he withdraws further. As she discovers that her husband is not equal to her love, she becomes disillusioned with marriage. She feels the humiliation when she faces rejection from Rana.

Women, may be from the past centuries or present age, have always been forced to live in the service of male relations—that is, father, brother, husband, son. They have invariably been denied any identity of their own. There is a strong contrast between Mira's opinion about war and that of Rana's. Being a warrior, while Rana totally concentrates on war, Mira, on the other hand strongly opposes wars. She is not at all in favour of wars and fights which only lead to destruction and deaths. According to her, "There is never a good war. The best soldiers are not warlike. War is the festival of death." (116)

Mira is, inherently, spontaneous and natural in her demeanor. In conservative set up of monarchy, this is a demerit. Das foregrounds Mira's spontaneity and innocence. She attends her cousin with a show of affection because she treats him in a natural way, but the observation made by Udabai, is aimed at embarrassing her. Udabai even accuses her for having an affair with her cousin Jai, and informs Rana about it. Later she brands her a barren woman as she has not been able to give birth to a son and also that she dances all day and night and sings vulgar songs. She blames her for keeping someone inside with whom she is secretly in love. Her meanness and cruelty cross all limits when she brings a cup of poison in the form of medicine sent by Rana.

The trickery of Udabai, thus, comes to an end when the cup of poison turns into nectar and when she sees Mira playing and singing with a deadly poisonous cobra. These incidents bring about a powerful change in Udabai who, praises Mira for transforming all of them. They begin to worship her as a saint. Mira on the other hand renounces her social life, the warmth of a family, the link with the hereditary rulers, and her rights to riches:

What I paid was my social body, my town
body, my family body, and all my inherited
jewels. The Dark One is my husband now. (Bly xii)

Mirabai's surrender to the Dark One is similarly complete, and that completeness is the source of her strength. Her freedom comes from taking her seat at the feet of Oneness and refusing to budge from her place. Neither the conventions of societal expectation nor the words, the desperate actions of the family, friends, or enemies can touch the invulnerable self Mira has become through that single act. She has gone beyond caste, beyond personal ego, beyond caring who she is. There is something she knows and this is all she needs to know. And so, she becomes a free person.

Gurcharan Das makes a bold attempt to put on trial the deeply ingrained societal attitudes. By focusing on Mira's rebelliousness and her human qualities, Das endows Mira's persona with a fresh radiance. Her defiance of social constructs and meaningless traditions portrays her as a woman having a mind of her own. Mira emerges a human being who has hopes and aspirations which society ruthlessly attempts to crush. To conclude the

play highlights Mira as an individual endowed with revolutionary spark as well as having capability to renounce the worldly trappings.

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