



RECREATING THE PATTERN TO DESTABILIZE: A READING OF THE RELIGIOUS CAREER OF MARGERY KEMPE AND MIRABAI

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Abstract

This paper explores how Margery Kempe and Mirabai, across vastly different cultures, subvert patriarchal norms through deeply personal and spiritually radical devotion. By transgressing marital and religious boundaries, both women reclaim agency within systems designed to suppress them. Margery's mystic Christianity and Mira's bhakti-driven defiance challenge institutional expectations of female piety. Their sexual renunciation becomes a spiritual weapon, not submission. Through their bodily and mystical experiences, they create alternative models of womanhood. Though embedded in heteropatriarchal frames, their resistance unsettles rigid binaries of virtue and rebellion. The article thus locates feminist potential within devotional practice. It reveals how sanctity can become subversive.

Keywords

Monolithic, Feminist Resistance, Female Sexuality, Devotee, Bride, etc.

Full Article

No culture can be monolithic in leaving no conjectural spaces in its hegemonic structure are a message which is proved time and again by history; and “her” story of feminist resistance is no exception to it. Religion, like marriage, established itself as very strong patriarchal institutions in the arena of regulating and controlling female sexuality, often joining as handmaidens. Against this backdrop, even a rudimentary reading of the life, career, creative experience and social consequence of two women, occupying very different topographical and sociocultural space—Mirabai and Margery Kempe—may exhibit how a breach is created in the continuity of the power play by their zeal to carve a niche for themselves.

B. A. Windeatt, the translator and editor of “The Book of Margery Kempe” designates the book (probably the earliest autobiographical work in English) as “an extraordinary text” which “records the experience of a married woman, housewife and mother who, in the face of criticism and challenge, charts her own way in life as a visionary and holy woman in the early decades of the fifteenth century” (Kempe 11). The book is a record of her feelings, especially religious, and revelations which challenges generic categorization, readerly expectation and critical interpretation and proves “indomitable and compelling as she was herself” (Kempe, 12). Though anachronistic in nature, the author tries to situate her very personal experience in the tradition of Christian female mystics. The task of scribing the book commenced on 22nd July, the day after the feast of St Mary Magdalene, which again is the feast of St Bridget of Sweden, that is, 23rd July. The availability of such specificity about the date – otherwise absent – about the commencement of writing is a pointer to Kempe’s desire to place herself in the shadow of the ancient as well as the contemporary models of “female sanctity: virgin martyrs, penitent sexual sinners and married



women” (Kempe, 18). She constantly locates her situation in company of virgin martyrs like St Margaret, St Barbara and St Katherine of Alexandria and penitent sexual sinners such as St Mary of Egypt and St Mary Magdalene, married ones like Elizabeth of Hungary, Bridget of Sweden or St. Bride and Mary of Oignies – last two being emulated by the author in various ways.

About the other female persona of our concern, John Stratton Hawley points out, “Among all the singer-saints of medieval or early modern North India none is better known today than Mirabai. Songs attributed to her are sung from one end of the subcontinent to the other” (Hawley, 76). Given the understated role played by the authors in traditional cultural performances in India, maybe resulting from an indifference to the ownership/authorship, in case of Bhakti Pads, the oral signature plays a significant role. It may be a strategy to personalize God absolutely or to show extreme dedication of everything associated with one’s own, but it becomes really daring for a woman to announce her attachment, erotic in nature, to her Lord Krishna “Giridhari, the Mountain-lifter” so boldly. It appears quite unlikely that all the poems attributed to Mirabai could have been composed by a single sixteenth-century princess. But “because she was a woman, her signature may well have served as an umbrella for a number of other female poets, and the force of her life story doubtless drew poets of both genders to her banner” (Hawley, 56). If the oral signature expresses the authorship and more importantly authority, it also acts as a seal: in most cases the first half of Mira's signature line contains the phrase “Mira ke prabhu Giridhara nāgara” (Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain-Lifter) exuding the feeling that the whole clause belongs together as “an indissoluble unit of devotion in which the emphasis is distributed between Mira and her Lord” (Hawley, 70). Positioned in this mutually reciprocated relationship, she actually replicates the devotion of the cow-herding women “gopis” in the land of Braj, just south of Delhi during the time when the Avtar of Krishna lived there.

A remarkable factor about Kempe is that her choice of prioritizing a deeply religious life over the regular social one did not result from any desire to escape from a social or financial marginalized position. Born in a wealthy and elite merchant family, her father John Brunham was an influential figure in the governance in Lynn. Mirabai, on the other hand, according to the “*Bhaktamal*”, was a Rajput princess of the princely state of Merta so immersed in the love of Krishna from early childhood that she believed herself to be his bride and therefore when she got married to the Rana of Mewar, she regarded this earthly marriage as a matter of secondary importance. Her deep attachment to Giridhar Krishna in his heroic role as lifter of Mount Govardhan made her direct the mantras she said in her heart to her divine husband while following her rana around the marriage fire. As a dowry she carried the image of Krishna and arriving at her in-laws' house, she refused to bow her head either to her mother-in-law or to the deity of the household reeking much dishonour to her own father's lineage. Thus, family bonds of all sides were threatened by Mira's conduct.

However, Mira, situating herself within the closed group of Gopis, cared little for the social stigma or moral prescriptions of the conventional religion. The milkmaidens of Vrindavana too had 'husband-gods' (patidev) to whom they were bound with the oath of lifelong service according to the Hindu laws endorsed by Manu. But they always failed to resist themselves from instantly abandoning the demands of conventional social codes at the sound of Krishna's flute. Dropping their brooms, churning sticks, and cooking implements, and even the conjugal bed itself, they rushed madly out to Kanha in order to participate in the dance of love – “*ras dance*”. As codified by the ‘Laws of Manu’, the proper relations in a society structured by cast and gender hierarchy was governed by certain codes of living and behaving – ‘*varnashrama dharma*’, “a set of proper obligations (dharma) that apply differentially depending on one's status in society (varna) and one's stage in life (asrama)” (Hawley, 73). But the very movement of Bhakti (love of God) poses a challenge to the canons of dharma since Krishna, an Avtar of Visnu - a figure of the primal trinity



according to Hindu myth - is present here as the chief artisan who instrumentalize love to defy religion. At the beginning of 'Bhaktamāl' Nabhadās quotes a poem which sets forth the issue that "Modesty in public, the chains of family life- / Mira shed both for the Lifter of Mountains. / Like a latter-day gopi, she showed what love can mean in this devastated, age-ending age." (Qtd. In Hawley, 77). The lines openly and clearly highlight the opposition between the demands of familial codes of conduct and Mira's addiction of singing the love of Krishna, which in turn, is a replication in this degenerate world of the same tension which mobilized the life of Gopis in Brajraj on mythic level. Her beating the great annunciatory nisan drum also broke asunder the bonds of ordinary morality. The same anxiety is responsible for many people denying any connection between Mira and Ravidās since a Rajput woman's devotion to an untouchable as a guru is as revolting as Mira's dalliance with traveling male "sādhus" devoted to Krishna.

In similar fashion, Kempe's religious behaviour, with its intensity, simplicity and sincerity posed as problematic to the structured religion, especially its misogynistic traits. However, as Windeatt observed, her uncontrollably painful and vivid reaction to Christ's passion is evidence of her "attachment to the tradition of tenderly affective meditation on the humanity of Christ popularized by the immensely influential fourteenth-century *Meditationes Vitae Christi*", (Kempe, 21). The Mediaeval tradition of meditation inspired the devout to visualize various Biblical episodes, especially those associated with the life and career of Christ and to participate in them as actor performing a role. It was taken for granted that it is impossible to know everything Christ said or did, and naturally re-imagining things would be permissible until they are in tune with true spirit of the gospel. According to Windeatt, "In meditation, Gospel incidents might be embroidered with imaginative licence as a route to deeper moral understanding, for such meditative empathy was itself prompted by grace" (Kempe, 21). Kempe religiously followed the *Meditationes*' advice to participate in the scenes which Christ lived through in order to have an authentic feeling of his presence and Kempe's playing her role in the Nativity and Passion scenes on psychological plain should not be termed "egotistical intrusion, writing herself into the Gospel episodes" (Kempe, 22). She appropriates in a strange way the charge of feminine fantasy/irrationality by the mechanism of breaking the boundary between everyday life superimposed with her life of imagination constantly stepping into and out of one or the other. During her visit to holy land or watching a mother nursing her baby she could vividly imagine the pain of Christ during his tribulations or enjoy the company as the handmaiden of mother Merry. Her regular conversation with Christ himself during her spiritual crisis, her curiosity about ordinary matters and about her afterlife and everyday ordinary things show "how focused she is on the inner life, to which outward experience becomes only a distraction" (Kempe, 23). The root of the disturbance that her conduct created lies in the fact that Kempe's uncontrollable screaming upon her vision of Christ's Passion, her vocation to dress all in white, her vegetarianism, her preaching – all were viewed as usurpation of clerical role specifically fixed for men.

However, the real threat consists in the most elemental level, in both women though in a very different way, through the transgression of the boundary of marital obligation and sanctity. Margery Kempe chooses her marriage as the vantage point to commence the act of repentance and redemption since, as a sexually experienced woman, Kempe considers herself as irretrievably excluded from the perfection attainable in virginity, which Christianity teaches to be advantageous to attain spiritual grace as it does not disturb the familiar familial structure. Christ's assurance of Margery's eligibility to attain spiritual grace during her postpartum trauma implies that her sexual experience could not hinder her spiritual vocation, foregrounding the will to chastity leading almost to a willed virginity of spirit conferring greater worth to spirit than body. Her dilemma arises out of the conflict between her wish for chastity and her obligation to fulfil her husband's demands for sexual intercourse until she settles the debt of marriage. The complications deepen



with her ambition to become the bride of Christ and latter's pleased consent to it. The erotic terms as well as the various roles granted to her by Christ, like that of mother, sister and daughter, authenticate her identity as a woman.

The intense labour pain and sickness which followed the child birth made her feel the urgent need for confession, and interestingly, the confessor's failure to perform his appointed role and his reproofs increased Kempe's fear of damnation from which she was rescued only by Christ's words that he never forsook her. Being ensured, she started to hear the melody of Heaven and began to feel a deep disgust with sexual intercourse and she would consent to this abomination of paying the debt of matrimony only out of obedience to social codes internalized by women of her time. But she proved herself bold enough to declare to her husband that, "I may not deny you my body, but all the love and affection of my heart is withdrawn from all earthly creatures and set on God alone" (Kempe, 50). A further complication is added as she constantly refers to her temptation of lechery during her preliminary years of trials and temptations as she almost craved for a sexual communion with a man she liked during the time she abhorred the "debts of marriage". Her inclination towards chastity gets another dimension as a way, maybe unconsciously, of avoiding sexual union with her husband, the branded sexual partner through marriage. One day during their pilgrimage to York her husband asked whether she will allow a person to cut off his head or allow him to make love to her, and then she said with great sorrow, "Truly, I would rather see you being killed, than that we should turn back to our uncleanness" (Kempe, 65).

A further dimension is added to this proviso as we discover it is woman's body, and not her soul which actually is the apple of discord. In response to her husband's conditional avowal of chastity Kempe begged, "Grant me that you will not come into my bed, and I grant you that I will pay your debts before I go to Jerusalem. And make my body free to God, so that you never make any claim on me requesting any conjugal debt after this day as long as you live – and I shall eat and drink on Fridays at your bidding." Her husband granted, "May your body be as freely available to God as it has been to me" (Kempe, 66). Thus, when it comes to woman's body, it is not considered blasphemous for the man to think himself sharing same plain with God Himself. The saviour's grace pours in through the forgiveness of all her past sins (including bodily pollution) as he promises, "Therefore I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you... when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore, you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you want" (Kempe, 139). Notably, Margery's accusers, The Steward and the Mayor in Leicester, also accused her as a strumpet, questioned her bodily chastity and the Steward even threatened her with rape as a punishment through his looks and gestures and suggested burning for cleansing her polluted body. And now in order to avoid her fate she could plead only in name of her wedlock: "I take witness of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose body is here present in the sacrament of the altar, that I never had part of any man's body in this world in actual deed by way of sin, except my husband's body, to whom I am bound by the law of matrimony, and by whom I have borne fourteen children" (Kempe, 170).

The fusion of the erotic with the devotion, instead of its rejection, is the marked characteristic of Mira's brand of Bhakti. Having declared herself the bride of Giridhar, she shakes off the public modesty and shame in her confession of her desire for her Lotus-Eyed lord: "He's bound my heart with the powers he owns, Mother- /he with the lotus eyes. /Arrows like spears: this body is pierced, ...now it's too much to bear. Talismans, spells, medicines- /I've tried, but the pain won't go" (Hawley's Translation, 133). This feverish sensation ("body's fire") could only be



quenched by “Mira’s Mountain-Lifter Lord”, with those power he alone owns, “those powers you’ve bound” (Hawley’s Translation, 133.). Sometimes Krishna is called Mohan, the Beguiler, highlighting his association with Kama: “My body is baked in the fever of feeling. / ... Now that he’s come, I’m burning with love- / shot through, shameless to couple with him, friend. / ... Body, mind, wealth – they’re offered to his youth... I’m forfeiting everything....” (Hawley’s translation, 134). “Drenched with the liquid pleasure of making love, flushed with what makes a woman colour- Mind-Churning Love appears in such garb that the joy of it makes eyes rise / with desire. / Drunken, exposed. / ... Mantras cannot bind a mind / the Mountain-Lifter’s limbs have loosed: / Mira’s Lord has laid his stamp / on a woman’s heart- / with his foot” (Hawley’s Translation, 139). Here the epiphany witnesses the transition from Kama to Krishna: rhyming verses ending ‘with desire’ (bhāya su) now becomes ‘his foot’ (paya su) creating an ambivalence between devotional and phallic meaning. On another occasion, she is contented as “Mira’s Lord, / the clever Mountain-Lifter” “made me his wife” (Hawley’s translation, 135). And now being graced with the highest bliss imaginable, Mira avows, “Never will I let myself let Hari be forgotten, never forget Hari inside” (Hawley’s translation, 136).

In her early songs Krishna is a lover evoking an unquenchable thirst in his devotee Mira. But Mira becomes enigmatic as she departs from the conventional depiction of Krishna by other Bhakti poets as she now portrays him as a yogi and herself as a yogini. Even in this role she remains indifferent to her earthly status of a married woman: “Yogi, day and night I watch the road, that difficult path where feet refuse to go- so blocked, so steep, so overgrown. A yogi came to town. He roamed around but didn’t find the love in my mind, ... Now it’s been many days that I’ve watched for that yogi, and still he hasn’t come: The flame of loneliness is kindled inside me- inside my body, fire” (Hawley 146). In other poems the absence of her yogi appears to be endless, sucking away her youth and life blood as her hair turns white and she feels sick; in some other poems she states that the shadow of death is visible; in another poem she even portrays herself as a sati: “Don’t go, yogi, don’t go, don’t go, / I fall, a slave, at your feet. / The footpath of love is ever so strange, / so please: show me the road. / I’ll build myself a pyre of aloes and sandalwood- / come: light it yourself, / And after the fire has turned to ash, / cover yourself with the cinders” (Hawley’s translation, 147). With another twist her adoption of widowhood, shunning the jewellery, shaving of her head etc. acquire a different meaning—that of a mendicant yoga in search of her beloved: “My dark one has gone to an alien land... / seeking him in all four directions. / Mira: unless she meets the Dark One, her Lord, / she doesn’t even want to live” (Hawley’s translation, 147.).

Naturally, the battle over the issue of marital fidelity and sexual propriety forms the crux of Mirabai’s conflict with her family in particular, and the society at large. “My eyes are greedy... / So here I am, standing at my door / to get a good look at Mohan when he comes, abandoning my beautiful veil and the modesty / that guards my family’s honour, showing my face. Mother-in-law, sister-in-law: day and night they monitor, lecturing me about it all and lecturing once again./ Yet my quick, giddy eyes will brook no hindrance. They’re sold into someone else’s hands./ Some will say I’m good, some will say I’m bad- whatever their opinion, I exalt it as a gift, / But Mira is the lover of her Lord, the Mountain-Lifter” (Hawley’s translation, 138). Interestingly, in the early poems found during 16 and 17th century Mss the problem of family propriety finds little place which became the central piece in Mira’s latter-found poems and which are more a part of her hagiography. As Hawley argues, “Mira characteristically represents her yoga not as a static, meditative art but as a discipline of life that keeps her always on the move, wandering for Krishna’s sake” (Hawley’s translation, 149). And consequently, in company of Krishna, yoga and marriage become identical – and this ideology that destabilizes both the institution, nevertheless, establishes the parakīyā pattern of the gopis of Braj, abandoning familial bonding and bondages.



Actually, this signifies absolute sacrifice, sacrifice of one's ego or identity as woman for the divine call, an ideal so frequently preached in religions but so seldom practised or even tolerated if it comes to a woman.

Mira's engagement with other devotees of Krishna, mostly men, also provokes others to question her feminine sanctity as the saga of her accepting the untouchable Rabidas is revolting. The transgressions lead to events like making her drink poison by Rana from which she escapes miraculously. Familial sphere apart, challenges come from even her compatriots. Once a vile and dissolute man approaches her in the guise of a sadhu and demands that she should submit herself to his advances since the command has come from Giridhar himself. Fearless to perform any task her Krishna bids to do, she simply replies that she would follow the command, but she only desires to lay out the bower in the presence of the members of Satsang since the communal nature of devotional is an important Krishnaite virtue. Now the leech feels really ashamed and repentantly begs her to guide him attain the godly devotion.

Religion, as an institution, could not allow the individual, especially a woman, to appropriate its structure beyond a certain extent and tried its best to regulate the heretic or sexual transgressor within its periphery. Margery is cautioned by her confessor that she still needs the earthly guidance of a holy man which is a part of institutional Catholicism: 'I charge you to receive such thoughts - when God will give them - as meekly and devoutly as you can, and then come and tell me what they are, and I shall, by the leave of our Lord Jesus Christ, tell you whether they are from the Holy Ghost or else from your enemy the devil' (Kempe, 57). The institutionalization of her personal experience is part of internalization of the patriarchal nature of the society. Even Christ commands her to fulfil her marital obligations and promises even to forgive any laxity caused by her performance. Once her husband fell down and was injured badly, people slandered against her holding her responsible for not looking after him as they were living apart to avoid people's evil tongue about their deception of avowal of living chaste. She was commanded now by her Lord to take him under her care during his sickness 'you shall have as much reward for looking after him and helping him in his need at home, as if you were in church to say your prayers... I pray you now, look after him for love of me, for he has sometime fulfilled both your will and my will, and he has made your body freely available to me, so that you should serve me and live chaste and clean, and therefore I wish you to be available to help him in his need, in my name' (Kempe, 245). Unlike Mira, whose prize for tolerating social and familial torture for her unwavering fidelity to her Lord consists of her beloved's company, Margery is granted an assurance of her recognition as a devotee to the world as the Lady told her, "Daughter, you are greatly blessed, for my son Jesus will infuse so much grace into you that the whole world will marvel at you... And therefore, dear daughter, don't be ashamed of him who is your God, your Lord and your love, any more than I was ashamed when I saw him hang on the cross - my sweet son Jesus - to cry and to weep for the pain of my sweet son, Jesus Christ. Nor was Mary Magdalene ashamed to cry and weep for my son's love. And therefore, daughter, if you will be a partaker in our joy, you must be a partaker in our sorrow" (Kempe, 119).

Margery's vocation proves challenges to the church and society which fail to offer a woman a structure to contain her spiritual statement. More than once the charge of heresy was brought against her and she was threatened with the possibility of being excommunicated and be burnt alive as a witch. Not merely the church, her potential influence on mind of mass appeared to be a threat to the regimented religion of Christianity at large including the civil authority. The Mayor of York had the fear that the wives will go astray if they follow her model in pursuing religion, the clerics of York feared that people will do the same at her preaching. The archbishop directly asked her, "You shall swear that you will not teach people or call them to account in my diocese." However, she was bold enough to refuse to abide by Arch bishop: "No, sir, I will not



swear, for I shall speak of God ...until such time that the Pope and Holy Church have ordained that nobody shall be so bold as to speak of God, for God Almighty does not forbid, sir, that we should speak of him” (Kempe, 182).

Actually, her well-wishers and Margery herself tried to assert her public role as one specially blessed by the Trinity by introducing various miracles which somehow situates her above the ordinary sphere of life designed for other women. The relaxations are justified by the miracles like the incident of escaping unscathed a fall of masonry in St Margaret church, the travels she undertook in an advanced age and often without means of survival, her role as an “intercessor with God, divinely assured that by her prayers many hundreds of thousands of souls will be saved” (Kempe, 25) and others. Popular believe was very important highlighting the communitarian nature of her religious experience. It is this image of Margery which compelled her companion pilgrims accompany her in a galley when she was warned by lord not to sail in the ship which they arranged for themselves although previously. However, they withheld her money, her maidservant, her things collected upon much trouble and left her alone in a foreign land following her refusal to eat meat and be merry at meal and owing to her incessant talk of holy things. She often becomes the tool for forwarding church’s interest e.g. when a widow requested her to pray for her husband’s soul, Margery declared the remedy for the thirty years of purgatorial punishment unless eased by his earthly wife’s donation of three or four pounds in masses and in alms-giving to poor folk.

However, Margery was assured by Christ that her purgatory is her tolerance of slander which is the reenactment of crucifixion on a humbler level. She dares the authority as part of her participation in Christ’s tribulations and partly she is told by Jesus, “daughter, I tell you, he that dreads the shame of the world may not perfectly love God” (Kempe, 219). She even becomes instrumental in exhibiting God’s glory: “And so I shall be worshipped on earth for your love, daughter, for I will have the grace I have shown you on earth known to the world, so that people may wonder at my goodness that I have shown to you who have been sinful. And because I have been so gracious and merciful to you, they who are in the world shall not despair, be they never so sinful, for they may have mercy and grace, if they will, themselves” (Kempe, 273). In fact, the final act of writing was only a way of establishing God’s glory: “For though you were in church and both wept together as bitterly as you ever did, you still would not please me more than you do with your writing, for, daughter, by this book many a man shall be turned to me and believe” (Kempe, 284).

Mira, in her turn, was stigmatized with innumerable slanders and had to undergo several ordeals. The secular authority apart, during Mira’s visit to Brindavan, the centre of Krishna worship, she even was refused an audience with the Vaishnava philosopher Jiv Gosvāmi on account of his avowal not to speak to a woman. She instantly pointed out to him that he is denying the core truth of his Dharma as in Braj Krishna alone was male and his companions were female (misogynistic expulsion of women from religious practise is a code endorsed by Manu refuted by Vaishnava Dharma itself). The challenges to the traditional concepts of Dharma posed by this Bhakti heroes cause such discomfort to dharma, that reconciliation is attempted time and again from the end of Dharma itself. The patriarchal project of appropriation starts with the written retelling of the story of Mirabai. Modern versions of the life and works of Bhakti poets take special care of Mira’s life maybe because her life, according to Hawley, “must have been considered too flamboyant to be promulgated to the masses in the terms set forth by the Bhaktamāl. Doubtless this was particularly the case because of Mira's sex” (Hawley, 91). Time and again Mira’s hagiographers resolved the dilemma of glorifying Mira’s ecstatic devotion to God himself which threatens her role as a married woman by introducing, prioritizing and highlighting the miraculous element of every story of the torture on her to throw the latter into



shadow: the poison which was sent by the Rana in the guise of a liquid offering to Krishna was taken by Mira as expected, but it got transmuted into the immortal liquid by his touch making her glow with an even greater health and happiness than before. At other time when Rana knocked Mira's door with a sword in his hand to find out her paramour, he is stunned by the presence of the image of Krishna and momentarily turned into a stone.

In her new literal incarnation, Mira is represented as a model of wifely devotion. A "masterly metamorphosis" is designed to split the single unidentified Rana into two separate personages: Mira's actual husband who is virtuous and ready to repent any misunderstanding about Mira's fidelity, and consequently, any obligation to him little interfering with her divine loyalty who died early, and the second being his brother – initiating all assaults and to whom she owes no conjugal obligation according to Dharma. While Mira exemplifies the Rajput virtue of brave independence, her rejection of marital fidelity poses a challenge. Moreover, her conduct towards so coveted a figure in collective memory poses problem which was resolved by the story that after Bhojraj died, Mira was set upon by his evil brother, a second Rana Vikramajit. Apart from forwarding a justification for her desired sexual abstinence the dual personage theory also justifies her leaving the household duties in a suitable age ("Vanaprastha") after her husband's death. As Hawley observed, "She certainly owed nothing to her husband's heinous brother, so her insistent marriage to Krishna was emptied of its scandal, at least once Bhojraj had died" (Hawley, 163). Moving a step further, in the Prem Abodh, the atrocious Rana of the external "samsara" turns out to be her own father establishing her natal relation with Mewar, who, getting disillusioned about Mira's clandestine love affair becomes her disciple. Anant Pai, the editor and founder of 'Amar Chitra Katha' found it obligatory, addressing the children of Modern India (especially urban and English-speaking), to improvise Mira's story further by obliterating even the name of Vikramajit lest the stigmatization of the heroic Mewari line hurts the sentiment of patriarchal concept of national integrity. He represents Mira as a loved wife allowed to serve her Giridhari after fulfilling her household duties (a prescription for modern working women) and retells Akbar's episode in a way that it appears to be misunderstanding on part of Bhojraj instigated by another woman Uda. While older hagiographers presented Mira as Radha reborn, 'Amar Chitrakatha' presents a Sita-like Mira who finally agrees to go back to her conjugal life after her husband apologizes and it is on that note of conjugal amity that her husband dies leaving her free to follow the footsteps of her Lord.

Patriarchy is operational in building her memory through an interesting history of reception, perception and production instead of digging deep into her historicity, her royal genealogy. As Hawley nicely puts it, we know much more about Mira as an "object of attention than as its subject, the focus of a gaze rather than its eye" (Hawley, 126). Interestingly enough, though hundreds of songs are sung in Mira's name, scholars have located less than twenty-five poems bearing her oral signature that appeared in the seventeenth century manuscripts. These literary representations apart, in St. Mira's School for Girls and St Mira's College incarnated Mira as a saint and tried to endorse an education "uniquely tailored to the life of a woman, including a woman's special charge to teach morals to her children" (Hawley, 165).

However, despite all glory deserved to be accorded to these fearless women creating a potential breach in the hegemonic structure of patriarchy manifested through its twin institution of religion and family, we should not miss the inescapable pattern patriarchy established which they could not ultimately escape. In their daring devotion to their chosen ones Both Mirabai and Margery Kempe replicated the heteropatriarchal pattern of the complete subjugation of the women to the male partners.

Margery is ecstatically happy to assert her identity as a woman getting realized through an array of familial relationships instead of forming a newer one like that of the disciples of Jesus,



“When you strive to please me, then you are a true daughter, when you weep and mourn for my pain and my Passion, then you are a true mother having compassion on her child; when you weep for other people's sins and adversities, then you are a true sister; and when you sorrow because you are kept so long from the bliss of heaven, then you are a true spouse and wife, for it is the wife's part to be with her husband and to have no true joy until she has his company” (Kempe, 74). The familiar notions are at work: female body, at least the mind, must maintain virginity to be taken by the male god. “And because you are a maiden in your soul, I shall take you by the one hand in heaven, and my mother by the other, and so you shall dance in heaven with other holy maidens and virgins, for I may call you dearly bought and my own beloved darling” (Kempe, 96). Of course, the relation was mutually reciprocal as Christ swore to her mind, “if it were possible for me to suffer pain again as I have done before, I would rather suffer as much pain as I ever did for your soul alone, rather than that you should be separated from me without end” (Kempe, 73). But the station of the divine partner remains so high ever that it exists outside any question of defying its authority as she did in case of her earthly marriage.

The absolute surrender on part of women is countered with the same possessiveness: Margery is often advised by Christ to love him and him alone without reserve, Mira is hindered in her decision to return to her home at the request of the Brahmins sent by her husband to strike a balance between earthly propriety and heavenly devotion, and Krishna, the great hero of music and anti-structure, cannot allow her and draws her within himself.

Hawley remarks relevantly: “longing has a definite gender: it is feminine” (Hawley, 195). Mira's passionate urge to enjoy a union with her Giridhari is liberating on the level of the frank confession of the erotic desire for the pleasure which Indian women of her time could not imagine to express for their husbands, less in public, but the element of sickness makes it typically feminine. Caraka Samhita, a medical text of c1st century, very significantly draws an opposition and parallel between a separated woman and a pregnant one, in both stages making the absent or not yet male (the unborn child always expected to be a son) the author of the pain or joy, sickness, bodily desires and fulfilment her role as a woman robbing women of agency. She becomes a recipient of even her bodily experience and Mira's much celebrated sickness conforms to this norm.

Mira's desperate longing for Krishna is also predicated upon the accepted canon that he never really returns to the women he leaves behind, both in religious and secular sense. The qualities or virtues (apne guna) which attract women irresistibly are his instruments intrinsic to the conceptualization of Krishna as the dictator of the realm of love. His absence causes affliction; his presence could be the sole cure. Hawley points out the gender realities that are so stark and obvious: “It is the male who inflicts injury, whether that male be understood as love (the god Kama) or the lover (Krishna); and the injured party is female” (Hawley, 197). The heteropatriarchal pattern governs the whole transaction; when Surdas writes poems about ‘Viraha’, a verbal cross dressing takes place and the male poet takes on the female personae emphasizing woman's natural vulnerability and incompleteness naturally construing women in the religious realm as the natural devotee. Marriage as an institution perpetuating the hierarchy is never questioned on the divine level. Hawley rightly observes, “So ‘viraha’ is ...a man's game, a game of trying on women's clothes and women's feelings. It's a game of playing God, the way God (or Goddess!) plays with us men” (Hawley, 207).

However, it cannot be denied that the fearless and rebellious temper exhibited by these women in destabilizing the structure of the socio ethical rubric in order to follow their individual perception of right and propriety exemplify a version of feminist resistance. The absolute uprooting of the heteropatriarchy was not possible, but the way a breach created between the institutions forwarding patriarchal cause, religion and family, potentially opens up possibilities.



Both the women defied the traditional patterns of womanhood in order to serve their respective Gods, perpetually practising virginity, at least of soul to be ready to mate with their coveted ones, constantly attempting escape from the familial household which alone keeps the world of women in course. Thus, while the figure of Margery Kempe exemplified the devout Christian womanhood, Mirabai presented a canonical radical image of bhakti womanhood, both challenging a woman's religion in its most elemental level. They created and continued a feminine continuum and achieved social recognition (Margery Kempe admitted in the Trinity Guild and Mirabai becoming a cannon). They broke beyond the bounds hegemonic structure of tradition forging new meaning of both marriage and religion and appropriated both that were considered to be men's domain.

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