

A Gynocritical Study Of Meera Bai's 'Bhajans'

Brinda Samanta

B.Ed. Student

Institute of Education (P.G) for Women, Chandernagore, Hooghly

Abstract

There Are Diverse Ways In Which Literature Can Be Decoded. Some Are Decoded From The Perspective Of Male Writers. However, With The Emergence Of Feminist Literary Theory, Another Branch Of Criticism That Aimed To Create A Separate Branch Of Women's Poetics Was Gynocriticism. Gynocriticism Not Only Aimed To Express The Voices Hitherto Unexpressed, It Has Also Helped Women Authors To Show Their Creativity Keeping Women At The Centre. As We All Know, India Is A Land Of Diverse Culture And This Country Is Inhabited By People From Various Religions. People From All Parts Of The Country Have Engaged In Various Religious Movements Which Upheld Particular Values And Principles. One Such Movement Was The Bhakti Movement That Followed The Path Of Devotion To Reach God. The Most Prominent Members Of The Bhakti Movement Were The Marginalized Sections And Women As These Two Sections Found Their Fullest Expression Through This Movement. Women Saint Poets From All Parts Of India Started Composing Verses In Praise Of God To Express Their Intense Devotion And Mark This As A Form Of Their Expression. One Of The Most Popular Women Saint Poets Is Meera Bai. She Is A Saint Poet Of The North Indian Hindu Tradition, Who Through Her Bhajans Has Not Only Expressed Her Devotion Towards Her 'Girdhar Nagar' But Also Has Taken The Readers On A Venture To The Deepest Reaches Of Her Heart. Besides Showing Us The Picture Of Her Inner Psyche, She Also Expresses The Kind Of Humiliation She Had Faced At The House Of Her In Laws After Her Husband's Death. Her Quest For The Companionship Of God, Her Dedication, Her Intense 'Bhakti' And Obviously Her Diction Make Her A Marvelous Author In The True Sense Of The Term.

Keywords: - Meera Bai, Bhakti Movement, Gynocriticism, 'Bhajans', 'Women's Poetics'.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gynocriticism as the name itself suggests, aims to create a separate branch of 'women's poetics'. Gynocriticism is the study of women's writing. The term gynocritics was coined by Elaine Showalter in 1979 to refer to a form of feminist literary criticism that is concerned with women as writers. There are thousands of women across the globe who have been trying to express their voice either in the form of prose, poetry or verses. Gynocriticism has also given rise to female creative expression. Women poets from India particularly the women saint poets of the Bhakti movement have found their own form of expression through their writings. Meera Bai from Rajasthan, Akka Mahadevi from Karnataka, Lal Ded from Kashmir, Andal from Tamil Nadu, Janabai and Kanhopatra from Maharashtra are some of them. From the title of the paper, we can understand that this paper is mainly going to analyze the 'bhajans' or the devotional songs of Meera Bai from the perspective of gynocriticism.

II. MEERA BAI AS AN AUTHOR

Meera Bai or sometimes called Mira Bai was a 16th Century Hindu woman saint poet from the North Indian tradition. She was born in Kudki (Kurki), a little village near Merta City, which is presently in the Nagaur district of Rajasthan in northwest India. As a child Meera Bai was deeply enamoured by the idol of Krishna, so much so that later on she organized a marriage with Lord Krishna and considered him to be her lover. In her verses, Krishna is a yogi and she is a yogini who is ready to establish a companionship with Lord Krishna. It is the spiritual union between Meera and Lord Krishna that leads to the emergence of these verses. What becomes a significant aspect of Meera Bai's verses is the 'quest motif'. Quest as we all know, is an ardent search for something. It is a kind of journey undertaken by a person in pursuit of something. A Quest is the pursuit of an important treasure or item, knowledge, power, or spiritual awakening. Although people usually relate quests to a physical journey or adventure, the quests to maturity, or coming of age novels, as well as the journey of self-discovery are common applications of this motif. Quest can be as defined as the ability to gain a kind of awakening that can ultimately lead to our development both physically as well as intellectually. What we notice

in the verses of Meera Bai is the spiritual quest for the almighty. She constantly tries to be at one with God, to be in perfect harmony with Lord Krishna. What we can perceive in Meera Bai's verses is intense 'Bhakti' as 'Bhakti' is considered to be the simplest form of devotion.

Bhagavad Gita, a very widely known text of yoga gives various definitions of yoga. Yoga is serenity. Yoga is the remover of misery and destroyer of pain. Yoga is derived from a Sanskrit word 'yuj' which means to connect or balance. The purpose of yoga is to connect the individual being with the supreme being. This oneness is not physical but spiritual. Within Bhagavad Gita there are three paths to understand the divine; karma yoga - yoga of action, jnana yoga-yoga of intellect, bhakti yoga-yoga of devotion. Meera Bai had chosen the path of 'Bhakti Yoga' to achieve spiritual union with God. Bhakti is the purest, unselfish and the most beautiful form of love where the devotee feels connected to God in his/her every breath. (Singh, 2022)

Meera Bai in one of her verses says,

meeradaaseejanamjanam ki
ang se ang lagaaho
Meera is your servant birth after birth
Unite me with you in every limb

(Subramanian, 2005, p.20)

From the above lines, it is evident that Meera Bai is seeking complete spiritual union with God. In the above-mentioned lines, we have also seen the feeling of servitude. V K Subramanian in the introduction to his book *Mystic Songs of Meera* says that there can be five different types of attitudes available in loving God;

1. Bridal mysticism of treating God as the lover or Beloved,
2. Loving God as a parent
3. Loving God as a child
4. Loving God as a friend
5. Loving God as a servant would a Master

(p.16)

Although we mainly notice bridal mysticism in Meera Bai's bhajans, but in some 'bhajans', we can clearly notice the 'dasya' bhava, where she considers herself to be a servant of God.

III. GYNOCRITICAL STUDY OF MEERA BAI'S 'BHAJANS'

We already know that gynocriticism is the branch of feminist criticism that focuses on women's art, with the aim of developing a 'women's poetics' (Mukhopadhyay, 2016, p. 45). Gynocriticism emphasizes the significance of women as writers. Keeping this view in mind we can say that the 'bhajans' written by Meera Bai fall under this category. Meera Bai in her 'bhajans' not only talks about Lord Krishna as her beloved but also about her own self which passionately longs for spiritual union with God. Apart from Meera Bai, another woman saint poet called Akka Mahadevi has contributed significantly to the Kannada literature. She is seen as an inspirational woman in Kannada literature and the history of Karnataka. She renounced her family in search of her eternal soulmate Lord Shiva. What becomes a significant part of her poems is her pursuit of enlightenment. Her poetry explores the rejection of mortal love. Her poetry deals with the everlasting love for God.

Coming back to Meera Bai, we can trace somewhat similar elements in her 'bhajans' as well. Her poetry mainly deals with love for Lord Krishna. Meera in one of her 'bhajans' says she has rejected all earthly pleasures and her heart constantly longs for that divine power. What draws our attention to her verses is the intense courage to write these things in an age when women were completely under the supervision of their in-laws. Meera Bai has often been shown as a mystic rebel especially because of her courage to break the shackles made by her in-laws to prevent her from worshipping Lord Krishna. Her in-laws had often tried to persecute her by sending poisonous elements but every time she was saved by her Lord Krishna with whom she longs for spiritual union. She mostly addresses Lord Krishna as 'Girdhar Nagar' or 'the mountain holder'.

meerake prabhu girdharnagar
avat prem ke dol
When Meera's lord Giridhar Krishna comes,
love swings!

(Subramanian, 2005, p. 22)

According to Meera, her 'Girdhar' is not only her beloved but also her protector and also an ultimate source of love that can help her transcend from the sordid world of worries. In several of her verses, she talks about how she is willing to accept the servitude of God to achieve his company. Throughout her verses, the most important thing that comes to our notice is her quest for the ideal. While talking about the quest motif one is also reminded of the thematic elements that we find in the odes of Romantic poets like Shelley, Keats where they talk about the quest for the ideal.

The entire theme of gynocriticism is predicated upon the fact that women need to be established as authors. Women's writing needs to be prioritised to develop a separate branch of Women's literature. Gynocriticism is the branch of feminist criticism that focuses on women's art. Elaine Showalter in *Towards a Feminist Poetics* and *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness* aims to develop two distinct categories in feminist criticism: (a) the women reader as a consumer of literature and (b) the woman author, the producer of literature. (Mukhopadhyay, 2016, p.47)

Bhakti Movement originated from South India in the 7th Century. Initially it started as a movement to show devotion towards God with religion as the base of its inspiration but later on it emerged as a movement to bring about an egalitarian society. The Bhakti Movement accommodated people from all sections of the society especially people from the marginalized sections which included women as well. Women chose this path of devotion to express themselves at a time when the society was under male dominion. Many women saint poets formed their own groups and started performing devotional songs. Bhakti movement was also seen as an act of reformation. Most of the women saint poets were made to choose between their Bhakti and their marriage and domestic life. One such woman saint poet was Meera Bai who did not consummate her marriage with Bhoj Raj to be in complete union with God (Thaosen, 2017). She had always considered Krishna to be her beloved 'Girdhar' and to achieve his company, she composed verses in praise of Lord Krishna.

Throughout her verses we not only see her devotion towards Lord Krishna, we also get to know a lot about her inner psyche. Her psyche gets us acquainted with a plethora of emotions that would have remained unexpressed, if she had not endeavored to write such beautiful 'bhajans'. Her 'bhajans' deal a lot with the psychodynamics of her creativity. For her God's sake, she even gives up all the earthly pleasures, so that she can fully concentrate on her pursuit of divine love. If we take a close look at the verses that she has written, we will get to know her emotional turmoil as well. In one of her 'bhajans' she says that she is waiting for her Lord to come but He is making her wait. The passion with which she had composed her poems has made her poems popular among all the generations. While decoding her 'bhajans' we also see the range of characters she adopts. She mostly uses 'bridal mysticism', but we also see her offering herself as a servant and also as an object of sacrifice to God. Not only does she imagine herself in various characters, she also addresses Lord Krishna in various names like Giridhar, Ram or Ramaiyya. Her dedication choice of words, language and her fervent verses written in praise of Lord Krishna have made her a true element of 'women's poetics'.

IV. CONCLUSION

Meera Bai with her childlike simplicity, marvelous diction and her passionate 'bhajans' have carved a separate niche for herself. Besides being a celebrated woman saint poet of the Bhakti tradition, she is sometimes also referred to as a mystic rebel. Her courage to discard earthly pleasure as well as the barriers imposed on her by her in-laws in order to pursue her path of devotion makes her a true rebel which is evident in her verses. Her verses not only talk about her love for Lord Krishna but also paves a way to her inner thoughts which she might have harboured while writing the 'bhajans'. The most significant part of her 'bhajans' is the intense yearning for her beloved Lord Krishna. Through the course of her verses, we discover her as servant who wants the 'lotus' feet of Lord Krishna. We also see her calling herself an object of sacrifice to the feet of Lord Krishna and finally as a beloved who longs for the companionship of her lover. Her passion and intense determination to achieve 'the lotus feet' of Lord Krishna make her a poet in the true sense. Her 'bhajans' have contributed significantly to the growth of women's literature.

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