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Women and Literature in Medieval India

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ABSTRACT

This article opens enormous scope to analyze medieval women poetic power and divinity in context of literature and nature, because their poetics present a magnitude of human struggle within the social environment, which in itself represents a part of nature. As a woman poetess Mirabai as well as Gulbadan-Bano-Begam were the first to reflect upon the humanity, nature and God in creative unity and as a poetess of divinity they were the first to locate diversity and disharmony between the men and the nature. They felt pity for the human laws, customs, traditions and the humans violation of the nature's law that sings music of sublimity, nobility and joyousness. The study engenders the intellectual simulation, dialogue and significance not only in context of gender and voice, but it also throws an alternative perspective to rethink and reinvent Indian History in context of environment, ecological balance and cosmic harmony.

KEY WORDS: Orthodox, Bhakti Movement, Social Enviornment, Humanity.

INTRODUCTION

The status of women saw a great decline in the medieval period, slowly worsening their position in the society. During this period, female infanticide, child marriage, Purdah, Jauhar, and Sati were the main social evils contributing to the low status of women and hindering their overall development.

However, the Bhakti and Sufi Movements that occurred during the same period as the mughal rule played an important role in improving the condition of women again. According to Dev, Tiwari & Khan, "This age also saw the emergence of writing by women saint poets, the most prominent among which are Lalleshwari and Habba Khatoon in Kashmiri, Mirabai in Hindi, Gujrati and Marathi, Avvayyar in Tamil, Mudduparani in Telgu and Akka Mahadevi in Kannada."[1] The life of Mira Bai who refused to commit sati after her husband's death is a historic example of women's independence and individuality. Kabir and Guru Nanak preached equality between men and women. Ramanand was the first Bhakti reformer who threw open the gates of hearty worship to women and made disciples from amongst them. Padmawati and Sursuri, who were pupils of Ramanand, had equal contribution to the Bhakti movement.[2] Indian woman since ancient days played an important role in the socio-cultural and philosophical development of the country. Especially in the medieval India, the royal ladies of the Mughal dynasty were almost as remarkable as their male counterparts. Royal Mughal ladies like Gulbadan-Bano-Begam, Gulrukh Begam, Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara, Zebunisa etc. not only played a dominant role in contemporary politics but also contributed a lot to literature field. The contribution of the Royal Mughal Ladies too, in the field of Art and Architecture, art of Decoration and Designing etc, is without doubt remarkable.

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STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL PEROID

A brief account of the status enjoyed by women during early medieval period of India is quite necessary for our understanding of the position of women in Indian society. Women of high status such as queens, princesses, and wives of nobles, courtesans and dancers were educated in different fields including that of statecraft so that they would give right advice at the right time to their husbands. At the same time, queens warranted by the exigencies like the death of their husbands took the reins of administration into their hands.

Ganapamba, daughter of Kakatiya king Ganapathy and wife of Kota Chief Beta, ruled the region after the death of her husband. Ganapamba can be regarded as an ideal woman and devoted wife who widely commanded the respect and loyalty of her subjects.[3]

ANDAL(GODA)

Andal is the only female Alwar among the 12 Alwar saint of South India. She was born in 7th and 8th century at Thiruvilliputhur (Tamilnadu). The Alwar saints are known for their affiliation to the Srivaishnava tradition of Hinduism. Active in the 8th century,with some suggesting 7th century, Andal is credited with the great Tamil works, 'Thiruppavai' and 'Nachiar Tirumozhi', which are still recited by devotees during the winter festival season of Margazhi. Some researches suggest that Andal belonged to the Devadasi community and she lived and died in the Sri Rangam Temple.[4]

CONTRIBUTION OF MIRABAI

Mira Bai is an important figure in medieval Hindi literature. She is known to have crossed boundaries of caste, creed, colour showing great courage to become a bhakta (devotee) renouncing family honour and comfort. She earns a special honour incomparable with any other saint-poet of North India. Mira's fame spread far and wide. Her dauntless devotion and surrender to Lord Krishna; her radiance of spirit, self-confidence; evolved consciousness, concentrated effort to achieve the divine is outstanding.

Mira Bai, a 16th century Indian princess was an exclusive aficionado of Sri Krishna. She was spiritual aspirant of love; the most celebrated of the women poets of medieval times. She is placed in the era of 1300 A.D. to 1650 A.D. known as the Bhakti movement. Most historians believe that Mira was born in (Vikram Samvat 1555) 1498 A.D. in village Kudaki, near Medata, a small state in Marwad, Rajasthan. Mira was the daughter of Ratan Singh Rathod and the grand-daughter of Dudaji of Medata. The Rathods of Medata were great devotees of Lord Vishnu. Mira Bai grew up amidst Vaishnava (devoted to Lord Vishnu) influence which moulded her life towards devotion for Lord Krishna. Etymologically, Mira means 'light' in Hindi; 'sea' or 'ocean' in Sanskrit; used as a short form of names beginning with the Slavic element mir, meaning 'peace'. Mira started to worship Sri Krishna since her childhood. She has also been regarded as an incarnation of Radha. Krishna P. Bahadur opines –"Mira did not deliberately choose her words to create an effect" but measured her poetry to be "the spontaneous outburst of her heart" which "achieved perfection because of her artless and deep emotions."[5] She herself believed to have been a Gopi (cowherd maid driven mad on hearing the sweet melody of Lord Krishna's flute) in a former birth like the Alvar poetess Goda.

MIRABAI IN INDIAN HISTORY AND INDIAN POETICS

The poetry of Mirabai manifests an absolute sense of aesthetic beauty and expresses a sense of quest. She does not possess the multitude of human efforts like Kabir, consciousness of mind and soul like Tulsi and inward knowledge and vision like Surdas, yet Mirbai in her poetic songs alike her contemporary poets poignantly determines the basic perception and knowledge of the humanity and professes the value-oriented essential characteristics of the Veda. Therefore her songs even in the contemporary times of changes in political situation of the country as well as in the social conditions have the poetic truth and poetic taste. It is true that her poetic truth and beauty lies in her vision of humanity and nature in day to day life, it is neither the future world, nor it is beyond the range of sight. However in her songs she never related to any of the contemporary social taboos, fragmented nobility, destroyed values and declining tradition, although she herself had been the sufferer of these oppressive factors of the worldly life. She never protested against these miseries of being dispossessed and deprived, rather she attained strength from her adverse circumstances through her cultivated brilliance. She in her own way represented the least privileged group of women. It is apt to quote:

"To look at a much later period, the tradition of 'medieval mystical poets', well established by the fifteenth century, included exponents who were influenced both by the egalitarianism of the Hindu Bhakti movement and by that of the Muslim Sufis, and their far-reaching rejection of social barriers brings out sharply the reach of arguments across the divisions of caste and class. Many of these poets came from economically and socially humble backgrounds, and their questioning of social divisions as well as of the barriers of disparate religions reflected a profound attempt to deny the relevance of these artificial restrictions and the issues of contemporary equality that characterize so much of contemporary society."[6]

CONTRIBUTION OF MUGHAL WOMEN

The improvement of women's status was also visible in the royal sultanate rule and later to a greater extent, under the Mughals. Women living in the royal courts were allowed to receive education and were even given a chance to prove themselves in different fields. They even took part in the administration of the country. The Sultanate period bears witness to this, where woman played a great role in Administration and Harem management. The most valuable source of medieval Indian history, Tarikh-e-Firoz Shahi by Zia-ud-Din Barni deals with these ladies with great respect, namely, Shah Turkan (wife of Iltutmis), Malika Jahan (wife of Jalaluddin Khilji), Khudaband Jadeh (sister of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq), Makhdume Jahan (mother of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq), Shams Khatoon (wife of Bahlol Lodi), Bibi Amba (also wife of Bahlol Lodi), Bibi Mattu (wife of Islam Khan Lodi), Bibi Jamal (daughter of Mouinuddin Chishti), Bibi Julekha (mother of Nizamuddin Auliya), Bibi Rasti (daughter of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq), Bibi Fatima and others.

Among the women that made their mark in the Delhi Sultanate, the name Raziya Sultana stands out even today. Raziya Sultana was the only woman to sit on the throne of Delhi. Despite much opposition to her gender, she was able to ascend to the throne and rule the Delhi Sultanate for four

years (1236-1240) before being deposed and later murdered. Her four short years were very valuable as she gave a lot of patronage to poets and authors, and campaigned for equal rights for women. Her endeavors helped in the advancement of Persian language and literature in India. One can never know how much literature and art would have flourished had she been allowed to reign a little longer. Persian or Farsi was the administrative language of the Sultanate dynasty. Sikandar Lodi was the first ruler who made Persian an official language in 1514. According to Sharma & Sharma, "He himself was a great poet of Persian language and wrote 9,000 verses in Persian."[7] However, a little contribution of women under the later Sultanate rulers can be seen.

At that time, some Mughal ladies played a great role in the development of the Persian language in India, namely, Gulbadan-Bano-Begum, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara, Zeb-un-Nisa, to name just a few. Qutluq-Nigar Khanum and Aisan-Daulat, who were Emperor Babur's mother and grandmother respectively, were educated ladies, and provided intellectual environment for Babur. Gulrukh Begum another lady of Mughal, had composed a number of verses in Persian and Turkish.

The first prominent woman scholar under the Mughal rule in India was Gulbadan Begum. Gulbadan-Bano-Begum (1523-1603), the daughter of Mughal Emperor Babur, was a woman of great learning. Although there are no specific records of her education, her knowledge is prominent in her work "Humayun-Nama", which gives a detailed account of her brother Humayun's reign. The book written in Persian language, with lots of Turkish words and phrases, is considered the most important writing of the period. In her book, she describes the domestic affairs of the kingdom, the relations of Babur and Humayun with their wives, daughters and other family members, etc. She gives brief information about Babur and Humayun, and also the royal ladies in their Harems. The mountains, rivers, seasons, art and culture of India are also mentioned. According to Mukherjee, "Nowadays, the original 'Humayun-Nama' is preserved in the British Museum."[8]

Another important figure in this field was Nur Jahan (31 May 1577 -17 December 1645). Nur Jahan's verses, also called poetry of high order, are proof enough for her talent in Persian. According to Mukherjee, "Nur Jahan, like Salima Sultan Begum, wrote under the pen name of Makhfi."[9] She was interested in collecting books and had a personal library, and purchased a Persian book titled 'Diwan-i-Kamran' with three gold coins. From the time of Nur Jahan, because of their influence in Mughal courts, women became more popular as subject matter of paintings.[10]According to Meri, "Nur Jahan originally came from a Persian aristocratic family and patronized Persian style art and architecture."[11] Perhaps, the influence of Persian style writing on Indian poetry also increased as a result of her patronization of the Persian culture in the Mughal court.

The contribution of Mumtaz Mahal also deserves a mention. Mumtaz Mahal - Lady of Taj Mahal (1 September 1593-17 June 1631) -was a woman of literary taste and composed verses in Persian. She was Shah Jahan's wife and a cultured and educated lady. The contribution of women towards Persian literature reached its zenith with the works of Jahanara Begam and Zeb-un-Nisa. Jahanara Begam (2 April 1614 -16 September 1681) was the eldest daughter of Shah Jahan and had learnt Persian and

Quran under Sati-un-Nisa. She was known as a genius in Persian poetry and wrote 'Monis-ul-Arwah'. In this book, she described the speeches of main Sufis and saints of India like Khwaza Mouinuddin Chishti and Mulla Shah Badakhshi. Mirza Mohammad Ali Juhar, a famous Persian poet, has written a *Masnavi* praising Jahanara. According to Jain, "Jahanara awarded him five hundred rupees for his verses."[12]

Zeb-un-Nisa (15 February 1638-26 May 1702), was the eldest daughter of Aurangzeb, who he himself guided and tutored her to learn. Her tutors included Roshan Ara, Hafiza Mariyam[13], Miya Bai[14], Shah Rustum Ghazi, Mulla Jiwan, and Mulla Sayyed Ashraf Mazandrani. Zeb-un-Nisa wrote poetry in Persian within the macaronic framework. Macaronic verse was common in medieval India, where the influence of the Muslim rulers led to poems being written alternatively in indigenous medieval Hindi verse, followed by one in the Persian language. In India, this style was named 'Rekhta'. The Rekhta style is an excellent example of the admixture of two cultures and two civilizations, which transcends man made boundaries and expresses their emotions and feelings. In India, this poetic form was composed in one line of Persian and another line in any of the regional languages then prevalent, as shown below:

"Zeb-un-Nisa jahan me, Dukhtar-e-Alamgir

Nain vilas vilas me, khas kari tahrir."[15]

According to Schimmel, "Zeb-un-Nisa's lyrical diwan titled 'Divan-i-Mahfi' contained 421 gazals."[16] This diwan was about her philosophy on Sufism, unity and peaceful society. According to Soma Mukherjee, she was a poetess and had a beautiful collection of her own verses, but unfortunately, her book of poetry drowned in tank, when it slipped from her servant Iradat Fahman. So that divan was lost and her memory remains. She had another Persian collection that was a collection of letters named 'Zeb-ul-Manshaat'. She used different Persian calligraphy styles in her letters, namely, Nastaliq, Naskh, and Shikaste.[17] She established a department of translation where classical books where translated. Mullah Safluddin Ardbeli translated a book titled 'Tafsir-i-Kabir'. According to Soma Mukherjee, Imam Fakhruddin Razi was a great scholar in Persian and Arabic, and translated the Quran in Persian and named it 'Zeb-ul-Tafasir.'[18], but another writer by the name of Srivastava stated that 'Zeb-ul-Nisa' authored both 'Zib-ul-Tafsir' and 'Zib-ul-Munshaat.'[19]

CONCLUSION

Mira's poetry stands apart in Indian religious literary tradition by its sublimity of thought and expression. Since aesthetic goals in Indian literature are not determined by mere linguistic devices or figures of speech, it goes to the credit of saint-poets like Mira for the effulgence of spirit and elevated style marked by an individual identification with the higher consciousness in the form of God. Mira's poetry evokes through her sublime ideas and style. Her poetry is a proof that emotions can take one to the stage of bhakti, elevated thoughts to the stage of transcendence and expression to the stage of knowledge. Her bhajans, highly regarded for the mystic qualities and rich inherent meanings make them sublime. These are the basic foundations of Mira's poetry, which make her a saint for all times and all places.

The ladies of the Mughal royalty achieved a greater degree of education and occupied themselves in reading, writing and composing verses. Manucci writes that the curriculum for the education of ladies was not confined to Persian and Arabic, but also included subjects such as history and theology.[20] The Mughal Emperors and Mughal women played an important role in developing the Persian language and literature. If we scrutinize the aforementioned details, then one point must come to fore; as the Mughal rule consolidated itself and the culture formation gained momentum, it reflected in the increasing contribution of women in the field of literature and Persian language.

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