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## Religion and Literature: A Poetic Interface

**Wasia Mushtaq**

Research Scholar

Department of English

Central University of Kashmir

Since times immemorial, literature has served as an integral part of the social order. Nearly every happening has found a literary outlet whether in the form of prose or poetry. All the world movements be they philosophical, political or religious, in orientation, have exerted a substantial influence in the literary domain. Religion and religious movements from time to time have always achieved a considerable space in literature. Not only have they laid a remarkable impact but have also provided a space for many poetic geniuses to come to the fore. Be it through the poetry of Christina Rossetti, Mathew Arnold, Emily Dickenson, William Blake or others, religion and literature have gone hand in hand calling out for re-interpretations and re-readings. In India, religious movements like the Bhakti and the Sufi gave rise to a number of poet saints who not only made their name in the religious domain but created a separate niche of devotional poetry, thereby, adding to the world literature. The medieval India witnessed a religious uprising in the form of Bhakti movement which revolutionized the overall religious paraphernalia and gave birth to innumerable poet saints who changed the religious as well as the literary outlook. One such important poet saint who came on the scene was Meerabai, a woman who laid the basis of contemporary feminism as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century and set a stage for revolution through devotional poetry at social as well as the religious level. The present paper will bring into limelight the devotional spirit of Meerabai expressed through poetry, thereby, examining the union of religion and literature. An attempt will be made to study her mystic spirit as revealed through her poetry and how it challenged the orthodoxy and the way in which it, even today, continues to transform cultures globally.

Meerabai, also known as Meera was born in a village, Kudki, to a 15<sup>th</sup> century royal Rajasthani Rajput family. She was the daughter of Ratan Singh, the Rajput ruler and losing her mother at an early age, was brought up by her grandfather, Rao Dudaji. The spiritual and the devotional fervour within her began to be revealed from an early age. She would pluck flowers, offer them at god's feet and join the prayers, thereby, engaging herself in the divine practises from the very beginning of her life. Every religious matter was of a great interest to her and she adopted all the fundamental customs which were centered on the worship of God be they preparing garlands or joining the family priest in worship. Her divine inclination gradually became an indispensable part of her personality and her devotion reached a stage wherein she annihilated herself from the rest and adopted Lord Krishna as her whole world. Meera rested all her love, her faith, her devotion with Krishna and found in Him her sole refuge. This love grew to such an extent that she accepted Him as her husband. She says:

*jake sir more mukut, mero pati soye*  
One who wears the peacock crown  
Is my husband (Chaturvedi: 23)

She started behaving like a perfect devotee who knew nothing more than the presence of Lord around. She would carry out her day to day activities with Krishna by her side, in the form of idol, never letting Him apart. This tendency of hers worried her family and she was forced into marriage with Bhoj Raj, prince of Chittor. A spark of rebellion was ignited within her and it came to the forefront in the form of poetry that she narrated giving space to her devotion, her love and her experiences as well. It was customary for the bride to leave her natal home with the groom. Meera did leave her natal family but took the idol of Krishna along and this was the beginning of indifference for her in-laws worshipped a separate deity and Meera categorically refused to do the same saying:

*mere tou girdhar gopal, dusro na koi*  
Meera's Lord is the courtly Girdhar (Alston: 47).

This spirit of defiance which gained momentum through her love became a point of prestige for the kingdom that she belonged to. Meera belonged to a conservative Rajput lineage. It was a society where a woman was considered responsible for preserving the dignity and honour of her father's and husband's family. There were set limits which couldn't be crossed at any costs. In this society, Meera emerged as a transgressor who categorically refused to adhere to any of the set customs or rules. She used her poetry to express her disregard for the world and love for the Supreme. She emerged as a woman who took her own path, immersed herself in love and meditation and denounced the worldly status and material treasures. Meera gained the recognition of a global religious model and a specifically female voice. A defiant, fearless, passionate, clear eyed rebel took her above the status of being just a Mystic. As a companion to men and women on the spiritual odyssey, Meera provided the courage to step out of expectations.

Meera is placed among the most prominent Bhakti saints. Bhakti was a religious movement which arose in India in the medieval times as a response to the strict, conventional, and a highly orthodox caste based system of Hinduism. It was both a challenge as well as a reaction. Bhakti movement advocated the belief that salvation could be attained by anyone irrespective of caste, colour and gender. This made it a universal domain for it provided a space to nearly everyone belonging to any section of the society. Women, who were always marginalized, also achieved a platform to make a say. Bhakti, which literally means devotion, thus, became a means of liberation. Tracing it back to 12<sup>th</sup> century India, Akka Mahadevi emerged as the first woman poet saint from South India transgressing conventions and setting in a new tradition which was then, carried forward by Mystic rebel-poets like Lal Ded, Bahina Bai, Rupa Bhavani, Avvayar, Meerabai and many others in later centuries. Many of the women saints had to struggle for acceptance within the largely male-dominated system but they extraordinarily rejected the norms leaving behind families, husbands and the societies to exalt their love for God. Meera is considered as an epitome of this fierce spirit of devotional rebellion for she dared to raise her voice against the injustice which was executed in the society at multiple levels. Her poetry carried more weight owing to the aristocratic background and the powerful position she held in spite of the fact that she denounced the elite status. In a poem, she says:

*taat maat bandhu bhraat apna na koi*  
*chand dai kul ko kaan, ka karega he koi*

*ansuan jal seench seench prem bel boyi  
dasi mira prabhu lagan lagi ab mohin*

I have no father, no mother, no relatives or brothers  
I have broken family ties; who can do anything?  
I have spoken of my love through my tears  
Servant Meera has fallen  
in love with the lord (Subramaniam: 34-35)

Meera, the devotee and Meera, the poet are so intricately merged together that it becomes obligatory to study her poetry in the context of her religious beliefs. In-fact in order to understand her poetry, it is important to look at the Bhakti spirit within her for it was this spirit which granted her impetus to narrate and change the system through her poetry. Meera was not a reformer, nor was she a preacher and neither did she establish any sect of believers. She was like many other humans who are caught in the web of this material world and who desire liberation from the social clutches. To her, religion became the means of achieving this liberation. She united herself with Krishna and attained salvation but the path that she took wasn't easy. There were many stages that needed to be crossed in order to arrive at the ultimate state of Mystic union. The path of Bhakti is considered to be nine-fold, comprising of nine steps, nine practices or nine stages in order to reach the final destination of rapture (Nilsson: 25-26). Meera followed this path in full body and spirit as was required of a devotee. The first step was *Shrava*. It was the practise of hearing the praise of one's lord day and night. Meera accomplished this by keeping company with saints (*sadhus*) and wandering from places to places with them. The next practice was that of *Kirtana*, the singing of praises to lord. Nearly all poems of Meera revolve around appreciation and exaltation of Krishna. Next practice in the path is that of *Smarana* which aims at remembrance and recollection. A large number of Meera's poems contain the bitter-sweet joy of remembrance. She talks about the experiences of her love and laments her departure from Krishna. Next important feature of Bhakti that was upheld by Meera was that of *Padasevana* which meant service at the feet of lord. Meera could never forget the dignity of her lover Krishna and for this reason, serving the lotus-feet of Girdhar acquired a deeper meaning. The next practices in the path were that of *Archana* and *Vandana*. Both of these dealt with external rituals of worship like that of worshipping a particular image of God and paying respect to Him. Meera from her childhood had attached herself with Krishna in the form of an idol which she carried with her all along. She practised this form of devotion throughout her life. Another important characteristic of the Bhakti domain was that of *dasya*-development of a servile sentiment towards the lord that one worshipped. This wasn't the prominent feature as far as Meera's Bhakti was concerned but we do find this sentiment present in some of her poems. On the other hand, her poems possessed the feature of *sakhya*. *Sakhya* was the development of familiarity with God and to relate to Him on friendly terms. This familiarity developed upon the growth of attachment. The ninth and the last feature of the path was *Atmanivedan*. This related to the expression of one's feelings towards God. This is a constant feature of Meera's poems. She continuously keeps on narrating her experiences to Krishna. In-fact, at many instances, she directly talks to him on a one to one basis. Meera placed in a lot of efforts in order to reach Krishna and make Him an inseparable part of her existence.

Her poems have been placed broadly into two categories, the poems of entreaty and the poems of love. The poems of entreaty aren't much in number and in these poems; she has portrayed herself as helpless, unprotected and sinful, pleading God to overlook her faults and help her. She maintains modesty, continuously seeking protection at His feet. She says:

*meera ke prabhu girdhar nagar  
charan kamval balihaari*  
Mira's lord is the courtly Girdhar  
She offers herself in sacrifice  
To His lotus-feet (Alston: 105)

In her poetry of love, Krishna is talked about as being her bridegroom. She would spend nights and days with Him, getting visions of Him. Love granted her the peace and courage to remain steadfast in her devotion. She bore all taunts and maltreatment but never gave up her love for her Lord. The society labeled her as a licentious woman under the suspicion that love was meant only for humans and Girdhar was someone Meera secretly met. She, however, endured all the rough treatment and ignored the world altogether focusing on her Lord. She became a yogini in his search doing away with all the oppositions and restrictions. K.P. Bahadur mentions that "Krishna came to her as a bridegroom and she fancied she was wedded to him with all the ceremonies attending marriage. Ever since that moment she considered herself to be Krishna's bride and used to weep for him night and day till her eyes became red with lack of sleep" (18).

The first hindrance in the path of her love was her family. It was forbidden in the Rajput dynasty to mingle with people from other castes or sections of the society and especially for women. Meera interacted with people from all sections of society. She tied jingle bells in her feet and danced in public turning all norms impotent. She stepped out of the feminine bounds and used her religious devotion as a source of strength. She was considered to be a blot by the people of her dynasty and many attempts were made to kill her like being offered a cup of poison and subjected to a poisonous snake. However, she escaped all such attempts and emerged out alive successfully, fearless and engrossed in love. "All these events acquire the potency of a major symbol of her faith in her Lord, her triumph over her detractors and the transmutation of her pain into joy" (Kishwar, Vanita: 82). All the experiences that she was subjected to gained voice through her poetry. In her poems, she has mentioned every trouble and torture that she was faced with. She says:

*visa ka pyala ranaji bhejya, pivita mira hansa re  
mira ke prabhu girdhara nagara, sahaja mila avinasi re*  
The Rana sent me a cup of poison  
I drank it off And laughed and laughed!  
My lord is Girdhara, I am his slave;  
I have won effortlessly  
that eternal beings grace (Bahadur: 82-83)

When she took to streets, her devotion became more public and she had to combat another set of oppositions which arose from the domain of society. She distanced herself from the society and sought the company of Bhaktas. In her poems, she speaks of having such company as a privilege.



The entire world to her was false and whatever she had gained through her Bhakti was true and pure. She speaks of it as:

*jhoothaa maanik motiyaa ree*  
*jhoothee jagmag joti*  
*jhothaa sab aabhooshan ree*  
*samchee piyajee ree poti*  
 Unreal are the rubies and pearls  
 Unreal are the glitter and glamour  
 Unreal are all ornaments  
 Only the love of the beloved Lord is real (Subramaniam: 169)

The realm of Bhakti provided a framework through which the traditionally orthodox and conventional notions of behaviour faded and were subverted. It provided more space than was available to women or the subaltern earlier in the ritualistic religious set-up and in addition to the religious space, a literary space for self-expression was also created. Meera through her poetry emerged as a powerful woman who decided on her own about her religion. She was a woman who refused to serve the tradition, a princess who praised Krishna in public beating the drums of love through singing and dancing. She took refuge in the Mystic sphere and liberated herself from the suffocating worldly luxuries. Her poetry was multidimensional and that is the reason that even today it continues to vibrate and calls for re-interpretations. She exists in the contemporary world as a figure of inspiration. She is no more a 15<sup>th</sup> century woman poet saint but a popular and living tradition whose story and poetry continues to resonate across boundaries. Meera's poetry, in the present day world, provides multiple points of identification for masses. Be it the women who struggle to overcome the conventions, the low castes who face oppression, the human lovers and lovers of God, the nationalists seeking independence from colonial domination or the ones who live against the grain and be true to their hearts and passions, Meera gives a say to all. Her stories and songs have moved beyond linguistic, religious and regional domains. Fundamental to her poetry is her revolt against the hegemony, her suffering and surviving in adversity. In her tale, lies a veiled fervour of resistance and challenge to the status quo. There lies a potential that can readily be developed by any alternate community as people identify with her character and plight in different ways. Her values, hopes and aspirations speak to and for the people in wide ranging cultural, religious, and social locations. From the medieval India, she has gained space in the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Europe, Africa and other parts of the world. Reinforcing the indo-western cultural and religious identities, her story and her poetry has become a popular subject for cultural performances. It has proved to be a testament to her continuing relevance as embodiment of *Shakti* (strength) and Bhakti (devotion) and of triumph of human spirit over adversity (Martin: 14). Her poetry hasn't only served as a link between countries but it is an embodiment of the connection which exists between religion, literature and nations also. Her poetry reflects the underlying associations which the social, religious and political movements have shared with the literary world. Meera's poems are emblematic of the fact that the world literature is a vast sphere which accommodates multiple genres originating from diverse aspects of life whatever be the origin-regional, religious, political or social. There is always a connection that literature shares with life.

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