

## The Mystical, Magical, Maverick Mira: The Poetics of Dissent

Paritosh Chandra Dugar

*Department of College Education, Rajasthan*

### I

One needn't delve into any historical and hagiographical accounts pertaining to Medieval India to learn how Mira, a sixteenth-century princess-turned-poet-saint of Rajasthan, chose Lord Krishna as her true lover/husband and sacrificed her "body, mind, wealth and all" (Alston, 2008: 37) for the love of the Lord; how she mingled freely, setting aside all distinctions of class and caste, with those who sang the glories of God; how she remained indifferent to her worldly husband; how her conduct was considered as a transgression of the cherished values of aristocratic Rajput community; how her in-laws attempted to persecute, even kill, her for her defiant demeanour. In fact, all her devotional songs, put together, seem to serve as a concise autobiography wherein all these facts are presented poetically. This observation about Mira's songs may allow us to use an exclusively text-based approach in our attempt to understand her poetics of mystic devotion and dissent by analysing her metaphysics, aesthetics and ethics as revealed through her songs. The English translations of Mira's poems are taken from A. J. Alston's book, *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*.

It is noteworthy that in almost every song, Mira openly proclaims her bridal love for a personal Deity, Lord Krishna. Implicit in her proclamations is her desire to attain a direct union with the Divine which invariably characterises her relationship with the Deity as bridal mysticism. Though in her yearning for a direct union with the Eternal she seems akin to many mystics of the world, she differs from them in terms of her adorations of a personal Deity and her conception of the Deity as an equal partner in the spiritual love-game. Mira's love for the Lord is not the love that exists between conventionally married Hindu wife and husband – a relationship in which the wife traditionally occupies a subsidiary or subordinate position. Rather, it is the love that prospers between two equal lovers sharing the joys of the love-game, a kind of spiritual "dating," expected to

culminate in marriage and union. This kind of love can be described as bridal mysticism. In choosing the path of bridal mysticism, Mira seems to depart from all other traditional paths of devotion. And in pursuing her own devotional path, Mira also came to dissent from all those traditions, customs and conventions of society which came in her way as obstacles.

That Mira did have, metaphysically, a Vedantic belief in the unity of the soul and God is evident from her repeated assertions like: "I am dyed deep in the love of Shyam" (Alston, 2008: 40), "Krishna belongs to me/And I belong to Him" (Alston, 2008: 61), and "Thou and I are one/Like the sun and its heat" (Alston, 2008: 80). Yet the duality in her devotion to Lord Krishna (a human incarnation of God) is equally evident from expressions like: "Thou art my companion of many births" (Alston, 2008: 77) and "The link between me and Shyam/Cannot be broken" (Alston, 2008: 63). Mira's relationship with the Deity seems rather paradoxical. For her, God is at once transcendent and immanent. He is at once within and without her. In her spiritual love, she stands in a paradoxical relationship with the Divine. One may ask here: Was Mira, in her love for Lord Krishna, striving to elevate herself to the level of the Supreme Being or was she endeavouring to bring the Divinity down to an earthly status or was she doing both? Mira's devotion is no doubt marked by love – the love that exists between two equal partners in the love-game. It was perhaps through this particular type of love that Mira sought to raise herself or her *self* to the level of the Universal Self. It could be a *saguna*<sup>1</sup> way of transcending the bounds of Time and Space and be one with the Infinite. But here it may also be asked: Did not Mira seek to bring God down from His transcendental heights to an earthly level – a level that God himself had chosen in bygone days? Paradoxically, Mira did both. She did both in order to adjust the levels and create a common ground where she could easily be united with the Divine, not as a differentiated one but as an identical or nearly identical one. This is perhaps one

of the reasons for Mira's perennial popularity among the masses – that she made God so tangible and approachable to human beings.

While discussing the varieties of Hindu mysticism in his book, S. N. Dasgupta says: "Love is a great leveller; the best way of realizing God is by making Him an equal partner in life by force of intense love" (Dasgupta, 1959: 142). Here, the following argument of the same author may help us resolve the paradox of Mira's relationship with God. Dasgupta argues that in devotional mysticism there is:

... an alternation of feeling which sometimes expresses itself as an experience of communion or contemplative unity with God and then by its own inner movement passes for its own realization into the various other modes of relationships through which ordinary human love can express itself. It is a circular movement. At one stage within it, man becomes God, but, at the other, God slowly becomes man and participates with him in diverse human relationships of love and its joys. (Dasgupta, 1959: 129)

A similar argument is extended by David G. Murray in his essay *The Need for a Metaphysical Model in the Comparative Study of Mystical Experience*:

In this (mystical) experience, however, a certain tension emerges which is of vital interest to our discussion. Though a unitary absolute being may be affirmed metaphysically and a unipersonal divinity may be upheld theologically, *in reality what we might term "the presence of relation in the absolute" is experientially intuited.* (Murray: 2)

The kind of relationship Mira established with her Lord implies her extreme sense of freedom and courage. And it was this sense of freedom and courage that made it possible for her to redefine or reinterpret several long-held social and philosophical notions/concepts which have hitherto been the foundations of patriarchy, most of them being male-minted. To define everything in or of society, including notions and norms related to women, has been the self-proclaimed privilege of men. Counter to this, Mira redefined several crucial concepts like *pativrata* or the duties of a wife, true devotion, man's relationship with the Divine, and the world, in her own way.

For example, the plainness and openness with which Mira defines true devotion in the following song reminds us of Kabir.<sup>2</sup> She says:

You cannot call this true devotion,  
To bathe one's forehead and apply the tilak  
Without cleansing the impurities of the heart.  
That cruel cur desire  
Has bound me with the cord of greed.  
The butcher of anger remains within me,  
How can I hope to meet Gopal?  
The greedy senses are like a cat,

And I keep on giving them food.  
Weakened by my hunger for sense-objects  
I do not take the Name of God.  
I worship not God but myself,  
And glow with ecstasy.  
Now that I have built up  
This towering rock of pride,  
Where can the water of true wisdom collect?  
You cannot deceive Him who knows  
The inmost recesses of your soul.  
The Name of Hari does not enter my heart,  
Though I tell with my lips  
The beads of my bejeweled rosary.  
Learn to love the compassionate Lord,  
Give up faith in the world.  
Mira is the slave of courtly Giridhara,  
She has adopted the path of simple detachment.

(Alston, 2008: 99)

Likewise, Mira redefines the term *pativrata*. Traditionally, to be obedient and loyal to her husband in all respects has been a social and religious duty and virtue of a wife in a Hindu community. The loyalty must not be less than treating the husband as God. A wife having this loyalty is called *pativrata*. Mira went counter to this. She ignored her worldly husband, refused to become a *sati*,<sup>3</sup> and treated God as husband rather than husband as God. From an orthodox point of view, Mira could be called an adulteress. But from Mira's own point of view, which appeared startlingly radical to her relatives and community, she was a perfect *pativrata* to the husband of her choice, Lord Krishna. To the women who criticised her conduct she showed that she was far ahead of them in her wifely duties and devotion, in being *pativrata*!

Mira's refusal to become *sati* also suggests her belief that by being a wife of the Indestructible she cannot be widowed. It also suggests her acceptance of the value and meaning of human birth and the corporeal world while being aware of its falsity. A true *bhakta* (devotee, but much more), she seems to believe, utilises her human life for her devotional purpose. Devotion is possible so long as one lives. In other words, the *bhakta* uses the very means of the phenomenal or material world to transcend it. This is exactly what Mira did. Refusing to be an ascetic, she used the very human, erotic emotions, so characteristic of the corporeal world, to achieve a mystic union with God. But, at the same time, Mira rejected any attachment to this world. Being fully aware of its falsity, she says: "False are rubies and pearls/False all glamour and glimmer/False is all external finery" (Alston, 2008: 44). In another song, she speaks: "False is the ocean of transmigration/False is the bondage to this world/False are family ties" (Alston, 2008: 77). In yet another song, she declares plainly: "Worldly comfort is an illusion/As soon as you get it, it goes" (Alston, 2008: 116). That Mira

accepted the value of the phenomenal world is evident from her choice of bridal path – one of the most mundane forms of human experience. But this path in its sublime form, as K. C. Varadachari observes, becomes:

The culmination of a seeking for union in an integral or total way which includes the essence of all other realizations. It is the culmination indeed of the *jnana, karma and bhakti* paths. It is therefore called *Sringar* path. And it is the most dynamic creativity that is the fruit of infinite love for God. Mysticism reaches the peak of existence-consciousness in this alone. God's Infinite Beauty as Krsna is the eternal enchantment of the mystic's urge for union. For verily the finite belongs to the Infinite and the Infinite longs for the finite. (Varadachari)

Mira repudiates everything as false that impedes her path to the realisation of her unity with the Indestructible, the Supreme Being. She seems to believe that all material comforts, glimmer and glamour, riches and reputation make one worship not God but the self. Thus, she regards them all as false and futile. In one of her songs, quoted earlier, she remarks ironically:

Weakened by my hunger for sense-objects  
I do not take the Name of God  
I worship not God but myself,  
And glow with ecstasy. (Alston, 2008: 99)

Mira's rejection of the phenomenal world is emphatically suggested by her choice of the immortal Shyam as bridegroom and not of the one "Who will die at each rebirth" (Alston, 2008: 119). As she takes the world as false and meaningless, she remains indifferent to her inimical in-laws. She harbours no ill will against them. She does not even speak spitefully or revengefully of them.

## II

Mira's songs are spontaneous expressions of her purely subjective experience – an experience which has its own beauty. Shanta Subba Rao observes: "The pangs of separation, *viraha*, the torture of estrangement and inconsolable grief find a framework in the most spontaneous and natural flow of the (Mira's) *padas* (verses)" (Rao, 1998: 115). It is in fact both Mira's perception of the celestial beauty of the object of her worship and her poetic expression of her mystic experience that provide a magical charm to her songs. Her aesthetics consists in, or is produced by, the sensual and emotional way in which she establishes her love-relationship with Lord Krishna and the symbolic expression of her desire to be united with Him. The mystic experience involves a creative and sublime use of erotic emotions that all human beings, irrespective of caste, creed, clime, age and religion, share.

The exuberance of such emotions, which may otherwise be harmful to human mind and body, paradoxically purges her, exalts her, and makes her eligible for a direct encounter with the Divine.

Dasgupta observes:

For a true bhakta, it is not necessary, therefore, that his sense inclinations should be destroyed. What is necessary is merely that these should be turned towards God and not towards himself, i.e., that he use his senses not for his own worldly satisfaction but to find enjoyment and satisfaction in the great love-drama of God by identifying himself with one of the spiritual partners of God in his love play. (Dasgupta, 1959: 143)

Mira's aesthetics operates at the level of both experience and expression. Here, "experience" refers to what the poet herself experiences as beauty and "expression" means how the poetic articulation of the poet's experience makes the *sahrdaya* (the sensible reader) experience beauty. To analyse the latter, Bharata Muni's concept of *rasa* is used here. An analysis of some representative songs of Mira in terms of this concept can provide richer insights into the dynamics of the *bhakta's* consciousness.

Mira's own experience of beauty is unique in itself. It is defined primarily by her perception of Lord Krishna's person, postures, and embellishments. It is characterised by the *adbudha rasa* (the wondrous) that Mira enjoys while looking at the Lord's idol. Here, as I have elsewhere elaborated: "She (Mira) feels bewitched as she looks at His eyes; enthralled as she sees His fingers on the flute; captivated as she glances at His *tribhanga* dancing posture; wonder-struck as she sees the *mor-mukut*<sup>4</sup> on His head and the *vaijayantimal* around his neck" (Duggar, 2010: 83). In the context of Mira's understanding of the Lord as the creator and sustainer of the universe, her experience of His beauty may be interpreted metaphysically as something beyond a matter of mere sensuous perception. Then, Shyam's *mor-mukut* might be symbolic of all fauna; His *vaijayantimal*<sup>5</sup> – of all flora; His *pitambar*<sup>6</sup> – of all grain; His flute – of universal harmony; His body's hue – of the sky and the ocean; His eyes – of the light; and His *tribhanga*<sup>7</sup> posture – of the three worlds<sup>8</sup> (*lokas*).

An analysis of Mira's aesthetics of expression in terms of the *rasa* concept may help us understand more clearly her poetics of bridal mysticism and dissent from the orthodox and conventional paths of devotion. The analysis is based on Bharata Muni's dictum "*Vibhavanubhava-vyabhichari samyogad rasa-nispatti*"<sup>9</sup> (quoted in Kapoor, 1998: 105) and his exposition of the *sringar rasa* (the Erotic Sentiment). According to Bharata Muni, the *sthayi bhava* (the Dominant Emotion) in the *sringar rasa* (the Erotic Sentiment) is *rati* (love). The *sringar rasa* has two bases: (1) *sambhoga* (union) and (2) *vipralambha* (separation).<sup>10</sup> Keeping this classification in view, two songs of Mira



dealing with separation and one with union are chosen here for analysis.

The first song representing separation opens with an apostrophe to Lord Krishna as “*Jogi*”<sup>11</sup> or yogi/ascetic (Alston, 2008: 52). Mira expresses her disappointment over having missed the opportunity “to entrap and hold” the *jogi* when he happened to be around her. Now, Mira is in a frantic search for the *jogi* who is her Divine Beloved, Lord Krishna. But as a woman, she has her own limitations: she lacks the stamina to carry on her search endlessly. She therefore passionately petitions the Lord to come on His own and “quench the veritable fire” of love that is “raging in her body.” Yet her inability to see the Beloved causes apprehensions in her mind about the fate or intentions of the *jogi*. She feels “abandoned and perplexed.” Her bewilderment and desperation are revealed through her agitated self-questioning: “What can I do? Where shall I go?” Her frantic search for the Lord disguised as *jogi* acting as the *alambana vibhava* (substantial excitant), her petitioning Him to come to her, her apprehensions about His motives, and her feeling of abandonment bring into focus *rati* as the dominant emotion and her separation from the Beloved as the *uddipana vibhava* (Determinants). Her anxiety, agitation, apprehensiveness and distractedness act as the *vyabhichari bhava* (Concomitants). Her panting and sighing emerge as the *sattavika bhava* (Consequents). In their total effect, all these *bhavas* come together to produce the *sringar rasa* (the Erotic Sentiment) in the *sahridaya* who for a moment experiences empathically the intensity and depth of Mira’s bridal love for the lord.

In the second song of separation, we find Mira making an open declaration about her passionate love and suffering for Lord Krishna:

Without Krishna I cannot sleep.  
Tortured by longing, I cannot sleep,  
And the fire of love  
Drives me to wander hither and thither. (Alston, 2008: 64)

Such a declaration immediately drives us to recognize *rati* or love as the dominant emotion in the song and separation from the Beloved as the *uddipana vibhava*, with Lord Krishna and herself being the *alambana vibhava* to each other – all three acting as Determinants. The “fire of love,” as Mira admits, keeps her sleepless, restless and agitated, gives her a feeling of sickness, and even causes her to become wayward. The experience of sickness, insomnia, and agitation of the mind and heart acts as the *vyabhichari bhava* (Concomitants) and is clearly revealed in such expressions as:

And I pass the nights awake.  
When will my Beloved return home?

The frogs are croaking, the peacock’s cry  
And the cuckoo’s song is heard.  
Low black clouds are gathering,  
Lightning flashes, stirring fear in the heart.  
My eyes fill with tears.  
What shall I do? Where shall I go?  
Who can quench my pain?  
My body has been bitten  
By the snake of “absence,”  
And my life is ebbing away  
With every beat of the heart. (Alston, 2008: 64)

Here, the croaking of frogs, the peacock’s cry, the cuckoo’s song and the presence of low black clouds foreboding heavy rains can be understood as the *uddipana vibhava* which, by contrast, only accentuate her pangs of separation and anguish of longing. The psychosomatic effect or the *sattavika bhava* of all this appears in the form of her tears or *asru*. She utters sadly: “My eyes fill with tears.” The harmonious amalgamation of Determinants, Concomitants and Consequents leads to the creation of the *sringar rasa* in the *sahridaya* who immediately recognises through empathy the poignancy and intensity of the poet’s suffering as a love-sick woman.

The third song under consideration deals with union. It opens with Mira’s spirited invocation of the cloud. She invites the cloud to come with fullness of water. This metaphorically conveys her own sense of fullness of joy. She is in an extremely joyful and exultant mood, the occasion being the prospective visit of her Beloved, Lord Krishna, who is the *alambana vibhava* to her. She is enjoying the rains, the *koel*’s<sup>12</sup> cry, the sweet breeze and the sight of thick clouds in the sky. This joyous atmosphere acts as the *uddipana vibhava*. Mira’s contentment, joy and even anxiety about having the Lord by her side function as the *vyabhichari bhava* or Concomitants and are conveyed through her invitation to the cloud, her sensuous enjoyment of nature and readiness to welcome the Divine Beloved. She sings exultantly:

Just listen to the koil’s cry.  
A sweet breeze is playing  
To the music of thunder,  
And the sky is overcast with clouds.  
Today the Beloved will come to my house.  
I have prepared a bed for Him,  
And you, O my companions,  
Will sing Him songs of welcome. (Alston, 2008: 95)

Her exclamatory declamation at the end marks the *sattavika bhava* (Consequents) of *romanca* (thrill). She speaks: “Fortunate indeed are those who attain Thy side” (Alston, 2008: 95). The synthesis of Determinants, Concomitants and Consequents converts the *sthayi bhava* or the dominant emotion into the *sringar rasa* or the Erotic

Sentiment which is immediately experienced by the *sahrdaya* as *alaukika* (transcendental) experience.

It can be seen from the foregoing analysis that the source of Mira's aesthetics is her bridal mysticism – her whole-hearted and unalloyed love for the Deity. And it is her bridal mysticism that becomes the very source of her ethics too.

### III

In many of her songs, Mira refers to her persecution at the hands of her in-laws and their bitter criticism of her conduct as a devotee. Why did Mira's in-laws try to oppress and persecute her? Why did her brother-in-law, king of Chittor, make attempts to kill her by sending a cup of poison and a deadly venomous snake? These questions can be answered by asking: How could they, the upholders of the oppressive patriarchal laws and cultural hegemony in the form of class and caste distinctions, gender distinction, suppression of women's freedom and right to choose or oppose, allow the princess Mira to transgress cherished family customs, abandon the traditional role and duties of a wife, choose her own Deity, her own path of devotion and mix with mendicants sharing the joys of devotion?

Mira has often been described as a challenger of the status quo, an iconoclast or a rebel against gender distinction. These descriptions may be accepted as true but with a qualification. Mira did not make any deliberate and conscious attempt to be a challenger, an iconoclast or a social rebel. She was fundamentally a *bhakta*, an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna. But the path of *bhakti* (devotion, but again, much more) that she chose was at variance with the social code of conduct prescribed for married women. It was also at variance with the orthodox forms of worship enjoined by institutionalized religion. To successfully pursue her path, Mira developed a great sense of freedom and courage which in turn made her a great maverick, enabled her to suffer, survive and thrive despite all odds; and allowed her to proclaim her choices openly and dissent fearlessly from all those repressive and oppressive cultural practices that were impediments to her spiritual pursuits and the individuality of women. She chose the "vice" of becoming independent and maverick in a society where dependence on or subservience to orthodox feudal laws and authority was considered a virtue for women. In her words and deeds, she seems to have followed the dictates of her own conscience and not of those in power. She expresses her maverick attitude frequently in her songs, sometimes plainly and openly, at other times, metaphorically. Her maverick attitude manifests itself in the unhesitant declarations of her choice of Lord Krishna as her bridegroom, her

unconcern for the criticism of society and her attempts to redefine/reinterpret orthodox social and religious notions. A large number of her songs either open or end with a loud proclamation of her love and devotion for Lord Krishna whom she variously addresses as "Hari," "Bihari," "Shyam," "Murari," "Giridhara," "Gopal," "Govind," "Mohan," "Manmohan," or "Avinashi" (the Indestructible), these being among the many names of Krishna. She says: "Mira's Lord is Gopal" (Alston, 2008: 34), "Mira's Lord is Hari, the Indestructible" (Alston, 2008: 35), "I sacrifice to Giridhara/Body, mind, wealth and all" (Alston, 2008: 37), "I am dyed deep in the love of Shyam" (Alston, 2008: 43), "My love is reserved for Giridhara Gopal/And for no one else" (Alston, 2008: 40), "Let me go to the house of Giridhara/Giridhara is my true lover" (Alston, 2008: 41). That Mira resolved to tread her spiritual path independently, firmly and fearlessly ignoring all criticism is evident from her words like: "Worldly shame and family custom/I have cast to the winds" (Alston, 2008: 39), "I do not observe the rules of worldly decorum/Fearlessly Sister, will I beat the drum" (Alston, 2008: 48). She makes it clear to the king of Chittor that she will happily endure any suffering, any censure or any loss for following her own path:

O my King,  
I relish this loss of good name greatly.  
Some will revile me, some will praise me,  
But I shall follow my unfathomable path. (Alston, 2008: 47)

And she is so confident of the truth and glory of her path that she tenaciously declares: "I will not descend/From the back of an elephant/To ride upon an ass" (Alston, 2008: 43). What she is trying to suggest through the metaphorical contrast between elephant and ass is that nothing can tempt or force her to give up the blissful path of devotion for vain material pleasures and comforts. In the following song, she metaphorically expresses her unshakeable desire to achieve a direct communion with God without any intermediaries, rituals or priests; and without following any particular sect or school of religion:

I have turned my back on this palace  
Once and for all  
And the bolt is drawn.  
My good deeds in former births  
Have come to fruition.  
I have no use even for great lakes,  
Who would linger for small ponds and reservoirs?  
I care neither for Ganges nor Jamna,  
I am making my way to the sea.  
I do not need worldly associations,  
I have access to the true masters.  
I will not trouble with the officials,  
I will go direct to the court.

I, who beat iron with a sledge-hammer,  
 Am not concerned with pewter and glass.  
 I trade in diamonds  
 And do not care for gold and silver.  
 To my very great good fortune  
 A mine of precious stones is at hand.  
 Who would forsake a cup of nectar  
 To drink brackish water?  
 My Lord,  
 Now I have made my acquaintance with Thy devotees  
 And shun the world from afar.  
 Mira's Lord is the courtly Giridhara:  
 He has fulfilled her desires. (Alston, 2008: 42-43)

One can see here how Mira shuns great lakes, small ponds, reservoirs, Ganges, Jamna, officials – the metaphorical representations of intermediaries and orthodox paths of devotion – to approach the sea/court (metaphorically, God) directly.

Mira is claimed to have developed an egalitarian attitude in the course of her devotional life. True. But this attitude developed spontaneously rather as a product of her mystical devotion to God. In his discussion of Hindu mysticism, Dasgupta has tried to explain how mystical devotion to God may transform the *bhakta* ethically:

All distinctions of caste, creed or social status vanish from those who are filled with this true and sincere devotion to God. It is a great leveller. To the eye of a true *bhakta* all beings are but manifestations of God's power, and they are all equal. Impelled by this idea of universal equality and by the idea of God being in all things and all things in God, he is filled with such a sweetness of temper that howsoever he may be tyrannized over by any one he cannot think of inflicting any injury in return. Nor can he remain unaffected when he sees the sufferings of his fellow beings, however lowly or depraved they may be. (Dasgupta, 1959: 128-129)

Mira's urge for unification with the Supreme Being makes her indifferent to everything that produces distinctions in society. Eventually, the righteousness implied by virtues mentioned in the *Bhagavadgita* becomes a function of her mystic devotion. She may be rightly claimed to have been born to "Divine Estate" as she possesses:

Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in devotion to knowledge, liberality, self-restraint, sacrifice, sacred study, austerity, uprightness, harmlessness, truth, even-temper, abandonment, quietude, an unmalicious tongue, tenderness towards beings, a soul unruffled by desire, gentleness, modesty, constancy, ardour, long-suffering, fortitude, cleanness, freedom from hatred and arrogance. (quoted in Kumarappa, 1979: 75)

Mira's choice of the path of bridal mysticism in her devotion to God; her attempts to define/redefine the role and duties of a wife, true devotion and the world;

her open proclamations of love for Lord Krishna; her disregard for the conventions of family honour, decorum, family gods; her indifference to the censure and banter of her relatives, symbolise her dissent from oppressively binding patriarchal norms for women and from the hegemonic distinctions of class, caste and gender. As a poet, devotee and dissenter she can truly be called mystical, magical, maverick Mira.

In Mira's songs, her use of definitional and declamatory style suggesting her attempt to redefine social laws; her use of metaphors to convey her own understanding of the world and God, her own mental and emotional state as a devotee, and her love-relationship with God; her use of paradoxical expressions to unfold her experience as a bridal mystic; her candid declarations (in the form of refrain) about her love for the Lord; and her use of nature and wildlife imagery to convey the exuberance of her emotions and varying moods as a lovelorn woman – all together constitute her poetics of mystic devotion and dissent.

Mira's dissent from some of the most deeply established cultural constructs of her time may be assumed to be a potential for resistance and revolt against the status quo and oppressive patriarchal laws. Her poetry and poetics, her life and language, and her experience and expression offer people "multiple points of identification" (Martin, 2010: 12) and inspiration for developing a counter-culture.

#### IV

To conclude, Mira's perception of life and God as a mystic and her sufferings as a devotee and as a dissenter can be understood more clearly if they are seen in comparison to those of some other prominent Hindu women mystics like Akka Mahadevi, Andal and Lal Ded. They belong to different periods of Indian history and to different geographical locations of the Indian subcontinent. Though the characteristics of mysticism are common to almost all the mystics of the world, yet "the order and degree of these spiritual states may not always be the same in all of them" (Guttal, 2002: 134).

Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth-century poet-saint of Karnataka, appears, in her devotion to Chennamalikarjuna (Lord Shiva), to be a Virashivite<sup>13</sup> counterpart of Mira. Like Mira, she betrothed herself to the Divine and pined for a direct union with Him. Like Mira, she turned her back upon her worldly husband and relatives and endured sufferings for the Love of the Lord. Yet her sufferings could not be as great as that of the lonely Mira. Mira's independent devotional ways alienated her completely from her immediate social milieu. She had "no true relative or friend" (Alston, 2008: 89) or a guru to consistently provide her moral support and guidance.



Her single-minded mystic devotion to Lord Krishna was in spite of all her persecution at the hands of the king of Chittor, who tormented her ceaselessly and even made attempts to kill her. Miraculously, she was saved every time. Akka Mahadevi, on the other hand, was accepted into the fold of Virashavite monks at Kalyan after being tested by Allama Prabhu, President of *Anubhava Mantapa*.<sup>14</sup> She got trained in the Virashavite sect of Hindu religion. Later, she moved to Srisalem and is believed to have been united with the Divine there. Akka seems to be less modest than Mira in expressing her rejection of the world. In one of her *vacanas* (lyrics), she speaks rather harshly of worldly husbands: "Take these husbands who die, decay, and feed them/ o your kitchen fires!" (Ramanujan, 1993: 116).

Andal's bridal mysticism seems quite similar to that of Mira. Yet there are some subtle differences between this Tamil poet-saint of the eighth century and Mira in terms of their perception of the Deity. Andal or Kotai-Andal, identified as the only female Alvar among the twelve Alvar saints of South India, was trained in the Srivaishnavite<sup>xv</sup> tradition of Hindu religion, while Mira cannot be fully identified with any particular sect or school of Hinduism. She developed an independent approach to and understanding of the Divine which may be found matching only in parts with several religious traditions. While Andal, as her poems *Tiruppavai* and *Nachiar Tirumoli* reveal, looks for her Beloved in the mythical realm of Vrindavan and in the mythical forms and feats of Narayana (Lord Vishnu), Mira claims Lord Krishna for herself not for His superhuman powers and childhood pranks but His physical form, the beauty of this form. While Andal yearns to meet her Beloved as a *gopi* (female friend of Krishna in Vrindavan), Mira seeks Him as Mira. Besides, Andal was not so alienated and lonely as Mira was. If Mira had hostile relatives to impede her path of devotion at every step, Andal was supported by her near ones, especially her father/teacher Vishnuchitta (Periyalvar). Unlike Mira, she could easily ask her relatives to take her to the "lands of her lord":

The woman of long curly hair  
Kotai of Vishnucittan  
king of Pudukkottai,  
city of glittering mansions  
entreated her relatives, boldly demanded  
to be taken everywhere  
from Mathura to Dvaraka  
the lands of her lord  
Those who master her sweet words  
will reach Vaikuntha where he abides. (Venkatesan, 2016: 129)

Lal Ded or Laleshwari or Lalla, a fourteenth-century mystic of the Kashmiri Shaivite<sup>16</sup> sect, reveals more of a

philosophical than emotional element in her devotion to Lord Shiva. Mira's devotion was primarily emotional, and she followed *bhakti marga* (the path of *bhakti*) to attain union with God. As Ranjit Hoskote points out: Lalla's perspective ... is premised far more substantially on *jnana-marga* (the path of knowledge) than on *bhakti-marga*. (Hoskote, 2011: xxviii). In one of her *vakhs* (poems) she sings:

I've bridled my mind-horse, reined him in,  
struggled to tie my ten breath-streams together.  
That's how the moon melted and rained nectar on me  
and a void mingled with the Void! (Hoskote, 2011: 78).

Lalla repudiates "the conventional physical elements of worship in favour of meditative path." She was trained in the Shaivite sect and her guru was Sed Boyu or Siddha Srikantha. Mira, on the contrary, was not systematically groomed in any particular religious sect nor did she become a thorough disciple of any particular guru. She proved a thorough maverick and followed a self-carved path of mystic devotion.

It can be seen from the foregoing brief comparison between Mira and the other important women mystics of the Hindu traditions that Mira as a mystic occupies a unique position in terms of her independent approach to God, her path of bridal devotion, pursued unflinchingly despite all the persecution, and the magnitude of the suffering she endured as a devotee and as a dissenter.

## NOTES

1. In Hinduism, *saguna bhakti* is worship of God with form.
2. Kabir was a fifteenth-century Indian mystic poet-saint. He rejected the hypocrisy and meaningless rituals in both Islam and Hinduism.
3. *Sati* is an outdated Hindu custom where a widow committed self-immolation on her dead husband's funeral pyre.
4. A peacock feather worn as a crown.
5. A necklace consisting of five types of gems: pearl, ruby, emerald, sapphire and diamond.
6. A yellow garment.
7. It refers to angular posture, standing with legs crossed, body slightly bent from the waist, and arms lifted and curved to play the flute.
8. According to a Hindu belief, there are three planes of existence or worlds: (1) the earth, (2) the space between the earth and the "roof" of the sky, and (3) the illuminated but hidden world beyond the roof of the sky.
9. In his *Natyasastra*, the earliest work on Indian aesthetics, Bharata Muni explains how the combination (*samyogada*) of the *vibhava* (objective conditions causing an emotion or Determinants), the *anubhava* (psychosomatic effect which a specific emotion produces on the reader/spectator or Consequents), and the *vyabhichari bhava* (transitory

emotions or Concomitants) produces *rasa* or aesthetic experience of supreme delight. See Bharata, *Natyasastra* 6.32.

10. See Sethuraman 23-24.
11. A wandering ascetic.
12. Cuckoo bird.
13. Derived from Virashaivism, which is a distinct form of Shaivism. It advocates the wearing of *linga*, the symbol of Shiva, upon the body so that the body becomes a temple for God (Shiva) to reside in.
14. An academic centre for saints, philosophers and *sharanas* of the Lingayat tradition in 12th century.
15. Derived from Sri Vaishnavism which is a branch of Vaishnavism in Hinduism. Its name is derived from Sri (goddess Lakshmi) and god Vishnu. It believes in the inseparability of Lakshmi and Vishnu.
16. Kashmiri Shaivism or Kashmiri Shaivite sect as a householder religion was based on a monistic interpretation of the Bhairava-Tantra. God Shiva is sometimes depicted as God Bhairava.

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