

LAL DED AND MEERABAI: A FEMINIST

PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Literature over the ages has played a vital part in the progress of the world. In addition to serving as a platform for expression of varied ideologies, it has also acted as an agent of transformation and change at the personal, social, cultural, gender and even political levels across Cultures. The present paper aims at studying the poetry of two medieval Indian women poets—Lal Ded and Meerabai. The two women used literature/poetry as the medium to voice their selves and break the social and cultural taboos at a time when Feminism was unheard of. The paper explores the feminist aspect in their poetry and proves them at par with the western feminists, thereby, granting them a distinct cultural and gender identity.

I. PAPER

Feminism, very broadly, exists as a political stance as well as a theory focusing on gender as its subject of analysis. It exists as a platform for women to demand equal rights and justice. The key and the basic underlying assumption is that gender roles are pre-determined and a woman is trained to fit into the roles prescribed to her by the society, religion and culture. “Feminism is a cultural as well as a political movement. It changes the way women think and feel and affects how women and men live and interpret the world” (Hannam, 2007, p. 2). This implies that the roles like a mother or daughter aren’t natural but constructed by the society which in addition to role construction trains a woman to think, talk and act in particular ways. Feminism, therefore, explores the different dimensions of a woman’s life. According to this school of thought, religion, family, education, arts and knowledge systems are all social and cultural structures that enable the perpetual reinforcement of this inequality (Nayar, 2010). All the cultural structures actually are ideological constructs which provide a set system of beliefs seeking a woman’s consent to be subordinated. It is this ideology of domination that Feminism and the feminist theory aims at unpacking and, thereby, analyzes how gender relations are constructed and experienced. The defining features of Feminism as a movement included the recognition of the imbalance of power between sexes with women in a subordinate role to man, the belief that the condition of women can be changed (because it is socially constructed) and an emphasis on the female autonomy (Hannam, 2007).

An important agent which facilitated the flourishing of patriarchal discourse and unequal power relations in the society was literature. The literary culture played an important role in the socialization of girls and the neutralization of the power structures as women readily accepted the roles ascribed to them. For a major historical portion, women were not only deprived of education and financial aid but they had to struggle against a male

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ideology also which condemned them to virtual silence and obedience. The literary canon constituted of men as the authors and they were considered to be effective commentators on the conditions of women. Their writings portrayed women as angels, goddesses, whores and suggested them being good wives and mothers, thereby, perpetuating the constructed ideologies. This was one of the primary reasons which made women around the globe to raise their voices. A woman's text could produce an altogether different picture of the desires, psyche and needs of women (Nayar, 2010). The recognition of this disparity and the need to speak one's self ignited a worldwide movement of Feminism. Although different cultures saw the uprisings differently in their respective domains but certain concerns were nearly shared by all the women who made a say and inspired others also for the same. The concept of Feminism, therefore, became closely associated with woman's movement throughout the globe and India was no exception on the scene. The feminist movement in India posed challenges to the established patriarchal institutions and the dominating social systems. The feminist campaign in India included an in-depth and sophisticated understanding of the nature of the Indian society.

In the pre-Independence era, in India, some major issues like the spread of education, prohibition of child marriage, abolition of Sati system, widow re-marriage and other such social issues were addressed (Jackson, 2010). However, the analysis of a larger woman question in the colonial India was very much limited in its scope and approach and it concerned mostly the upper class Hindu women of the society. Scholars like Anupama Rao identified it as *Brahmanical* Feminism (Ghosal, 2005). In the 19th century, another concept of womanhood developed which shaped the key political relations of the period and after independence, some kind of apathy and quietness on the feminist issues prevailed for nearly three decades. The last decades of the twentieth century, then, saw a spread of feminist ideas with a revival of woman's questions and problems at its core. The movement that began in the 70's grew out of a number of radically active political and social movements of the time. Women fiction writers like Kamla Markandya, Nayantara Saigal, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and poets like Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Imtiaz Dharker and many others figure among the well known women writers of India (Jackson, 2010). Through their works, they highlighted and offered a valuable insight into the dynamics and complexities of human relationships and their feminist concerns can be placed within the historical and theoretical frameworks. They lead to the start of a trend wherein, Indian women, through their writing began to challenge the cultural idealization of womanhood and the maternal self-sacrifice which tends to be less evident in the West. There is a mark of protest, exploration and vision offered through the woman writings in India. However, this development which in the present day world is named Indian Feminism had its roots in the ancient and medieval India. Women of India had long back learnt to voice their feelings and make their concerns public in the form of poetry which was sung back in the medieval India.

Feminism, in India, though being a contemporary literary trend, started with the women who opposed the radical orthodoxy in the form of Buddhist and Bhakti movements in religion. The Bhakti Movement had already introduced a poetic trend of expression. There were innumerable saints-poets who came on the forefront and women were no exception on the scene (Ramaswamy, 1992). The 6th century Tamil women poet-saint, Ammaiyar, initiated the women Bhakti tradition, creating a space for women to open up. This led to the establishment of a long line of women poets who mocked pedantry, rejected ascetic withdrawal and emphasized the intense and mystical

experience of personal devotion. The transgressing trend continued to emerge century after century and spread from South to the North of India. Starting with Tamils in the 6th century, it was propounded in Karnataka by the Virashaivas (12th century), then, Varharis and Manibharis in Maharashtra (12th to 17th). Later, in the 14th, 15th and 16th century moved to Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kashmir, Punjab and Bengal (quoted in Paniker, 1997, p. 457). The rebellion of women started with the poetic expression of themselves. Their poetry moved from the inner to the external domain, from the courts and temples to open spaces of the field, the workplaces and the common woman's hearth. Breaking the literary and the religious holds of Sanskrit, the women poets composed poetry in religious languages to address the people in languages they could understand. Women emerged very powerful in many aspects. The two most important women to ignite the feminist spur in India were Lal Ded and Meerabai. Both women poets created a niche for themselves and laid down a path which inspired many other women to take on as emblematic of fearlessness, courage, liberation and freedom from the patriarchal bondages. The seeds of what is today known as Feminism were long back, therefore, sown by these two women. They emerged as the pioneers and trend-setters of the current feministic school of thought.

Lal Ded and Meerabai chose poetry as the medium of expression. An important reason for their turn to poetry could have been the environments that they were parts of. In Lalla's time, the writing tradition was not much in vogue apart from the religious and philosophical manuscripts and they employed Sanskrit as the standard language (quoted in Paniker, 1997, p. 215). Lalla brought in the vernacular, Kashmiri, as the language of expression to make it more comprehensible for the masses and poetry has always been recognized as the universal genre. Therefore, she used the universal genre to convey universal messages, thereby, avoiding the complexities of prose and intellectual languages. Meerabai also did the same by speaking out her poems in the *Brajhasha*, the local dialect of Rajasthan. However, unlike Lal Ded, her environment was packed with saints, bhaktas and sadhus who had already made poetry the medium of communication. Therefore, in that sense, Meera carried on with the genre that was already in practice. "Mirabai lived in an era, which had no publicity devices other than word of mouth. The inspiration to sing and dance her lyrics (*padas*) came from their innate quality" (Garg, 2013). Both of them, through their poetry, established an accessible world for themselves as well as for others.

Although the poetry of Lal Ded and Meerabai is primarily mystic in nature, it is through their mysticism that one gets to know the underlying thoughts, which are those of rebellion, revocation and defiance. It was the mystic sphere which gave them the strength and the space to voice fearlessly. Their poetry acts as a pre-cursor to the larger movements of women that originated in the later centuries. Their poetry portrays certain features which make them as the initiators of Feminism in the medieval India. Be it deconstructing the established ethos of patriarchy, raising voice for liberation as women, critiquing the orthodox principles or daring to speak out the self, all these qualities were embedded in their poetry and all these features became the basic principles of later day Feminism as a movement.

In the 14th century, a woman voicing the self was a very rare phenomenon. However, this took place in Kashmir when Lal Ded emerged as a voice. She came to the forefront as a moral guide, a prophetess and the originator of practical wisdom (Mattoo, 2002). Her universally direct appeal and her significant utterances bestowed her with the

label 'mother' and even today, she is recognized as Lal *mouj* (mother). The life she lived started in a typically traditional and patriarchal mode, getting married at an early age with an ill-matched husband and having a hostile mother-in-law. Both of them had no sensibility of mind to share or understand the concerns of Lal Ded. Kaul writes in this regard:

Her mother-in-law had invented ingenious means of cruel treatment. She would, for instance, serve food to her, spreading a thin layer of cooked rice so as to cover a lump of stone which was placed in her plate...Not only this, her mother-in-law had other, more sinister, stratagems up her sleeve...slyly accusing her of infidelity to her husband...

(1973, p.10)

Lal Ded had to bear constant rebuke and taunts and was subjected to improper and cruel treatment by her mother-in-law. A legend goes that every morning Lal Ded would visit a nearby pond to fetch a pitcher of water. She would devote some of her time in the worship of her Lord there and have a tryst with the Supreme. Her mother-in-law, however, took advantage of this and used this practice of Lalla as another weapon to bring in suffering for her. She instigated her son (Lalla's husband) against Lalla accusing her of disloyalty (Nelson, 2011). He took it for conjugal infidelity and one day when Lalla was coming back after meditation with a pitcher of water on her head he, in rage at her conduct, struck the pitcher with a stick into pieces. However, "the water in it stood frozen on her head till she filled all pots in the kitchen and then threw what remained of it outside which surprisingly collected into a pond and came to be known as *Lalla Trag* (the pond of Lalla)" (Kaul, 1973). This incident of domestic violence is believed to have been the severest of all the tortures that she had received. After this, she decided to leave her home and hearth. She emerged as a woman who set a revolution in move through her poetry which enabled her to come out of the reserved feminine boundaries (Mattoo, 2002).

The first step, therefore, that she took to liberate herself from the conventional set-up was her rejection of the marriage and, at large, of the traditional and the expected gender role. She left her husband, her family and chose to lead a solitary life. She stepped boldly into the public domain and through her *vaakhs*, created a platform for her self-expression. Not only did she express herself through her poetry but she used to discuss the intellectual queries with the scholars of her time. A well known conversation of Lal Ded is with her *guru* (teacher), Sed Bayu (Temple, 2005). One day she was sitting with Him when the query cropped up: "Which was the greatest of all lights? Which was the most famous of all pilgrimages? Which was the best of all relations? Which was the best manner of ease?" Lalla replied, "There is no light like that of the sun. There is no pilgrimage like Ganga. There is no relation like a brother: There is no ease like that of a wife" (Grierson, 1999, p. 61). Sed Guru didn't agree to this. His answer was:

There is no light like that of the eyes;
There is no pilgrimage like that of the knees
There is no relation like one's pocket
There is no ease like that of a blanket

Lal Ded, however, refused to be out-witted by her master. She replied back:

There is no pilgrimage like that of knowledge

There is no pilgrimage like that of an ardent love

There is no relation to be compared with the deity

There is no ease like that got from fear of God

(Grierson, 1999, p. 62)

The conversation above reveals the unflinching and independent spirit of Lal Ded. She was among the ones who had the power to voice their own visions and views. She did have a teacher but she met him on equal grounds “without false modesty and coy humility” (Mattoo, 2002, p. 70). She would not hesitate in venturing out explanations according to her own intellectual capacities. “Her work reveals that she conversed and discussed with the most learned scholars (all men) of her time on an equal footing, without any trace of gender inequality, self-consciousness or the so called womanly reserve” (Mattoo, 2002, p.69).

The feministic flavour in Lal Ded’s verses gained momentum from the linguistic level itself. Language, according to Virginia Woolf, was the primary weapon which women could use to challenge the patriarchy and create a space of their own (quoted in Nayar, 2010, p. 97). This was done by Lal Ded as early as the 14th century. She used the vernacular Kashmiri language to express her self and her experiences.

Lal [D]ed was a Kashmiri girl and though she came of a Brahman family and very probably, was a lettered person, yet her language, its diction and forms would be more colloquial and less learned (than other scholarly texts). Lal Ded’s vaakh has been a significant landmark in the linguistic transition from old to modern Kashmiri... As poet, in her own genre, vaakh, as well as generally, she remains unsurpassed.

(Kaul, 1973, p. 61)

The use of common language is one of the most dominating features of her poetry. Though there are many Sanskrit terms that she used as a part of her philosophy but the major expression was in the common language which was comprehensible to people. She introduced a poetically new idiom through poetry. “There is no elitist, Brahminical choice of word, phrase or metaphor-these are drawn from a woman’s world of domesticity, even though she walked out of marriage and home. Her poetry is woman’s work in this regard and she gives a voice to woman” (Mattoo, 2002, p. 69). Lal Ded appeared as a voice undeterred by conventions. The absence of gender dynamics, absence of feelings of regret at the transgression and following her own wishes became a symbol of her feminist temperament. She gave expression to all those women who wanted a way out from the male domination.

The poetry of Lal Ded reflects revulsion for the world. She believed that in order to attain liberation, it was necessary to withdraw from the world and maintain limits with regard to the temptations. She insisted upon not being enamoured by the material delights and her own life exemplified the same philosophy. This is what she says in the following lines:

In life I sought neither wealth nor power

Nor ran after the pleasures of sense

Patiently bore my lot, my pain and poverty,

And loved my God

(Kaul, 1973, p. 98)

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She was an outcast in her society and understood its orientation with regard to patriarchy. She distanced from the society but empowered herself in the spiritual realm. Her thoughts were shaped by the tradition but in a contradictory regard. For a woman living in an age where the Brahmanical discourse was dominating, it must have been difficult to make a say but Lalla dared to voice and establish herself. She, by seeking refuge in the spiritual domain, challenged the society dominated by men (Kak, 1999). Lal Ded created a transcendental space for herself wherein only oneness existed, dissolving all distinctions. She talks about it as:

I, Lalla, entered by the gate of mine own mind
And there (O joy)! I saw Shiva and Shakti sealed in one.

(Kaul, 1973, p. 131)

Mysticism became an important agency for her to achieve liberation in the form of union and it contained the feminist roots. According to Luce Irigaray, a French feminist:

The mystic discourse has provided the only space for women where they can express themselves so publicly. They break out of the self contained enclosure where hierarchies and dualities rule, and find themselves in a space where the distinction between the inside/outside is transgressed...the experience is like an abyss that swallows up all persons, all names, even proper names...

(quoted in Kak, 1999, p. 88)

Irigaray describes the mystic experience as essentially a feminine experience and the total absence of gender is a dominant feature in Lal Ded's art.

After leaving her home, an important step that Lal Ded took was to disrobe herself. By dwelling upon the inner self, Lalla had understood the real nature of things. As soon as she realized this, she decided to do away with all the unnecessary baggage that she carried with her in the form of tradition, so-called culture and clothing. Regarding the dawning of awareness, Lalla says:

That became the turning point in Lalla's life
And naked I began to dance

(Kotru, 1989, p. 11)

While for scholars like Nil Kanth Kotru, her nakedness symbolized her union with the Ultimate, for feminists, her roaming naked was a major challenge that she posed to the society. Jayshree Kak translates the same lines as:

That became my initiation
That is why I began to wander naked

(1999, p. 110)

According to Kak, her wandering nude was symbolic of the rejection that she posed to all worldly attachments including family, friends and home. It was a categorical violation of the patriarchal authoritative code of conduct. Neerja Mattoo (2002) opines that nakedness became a symbol and a powerful sign of authority which was Lal Ded's own for it signaled a transcendence of her female body:

She seems to have become completely unself-conscious; almost unaware of her body... she refused to be bothered by what the world would say when she went about naked. When she was asked whether she felt no

shame at showing her body to all men around her, she asked whether there was a man around! To her ordinary mass of people was no better than sheep or other dumb animals ... who apart from the lord was a real man?

(Mattoo, 2002, p. 76)

Her wandering in this manner is symbolic of the transgression of customs and the gender factor which occupied much of the mental space of people and continues to occupy even today. She categorically refused to be bothered about the world and the people who inhabited it. Upon being asked if she felt no shame in the way she moved around, she replied that no man existed there for her and the ones who existed were no better than sheep or other dumb animals. She had tremendous confidence in herself and this faith acted as an instrument in attaining the supreme bliss and maintaining her transgressing spirit as a woman. According to her, it was important to possess an eye which could see the reality that lay beyond and behind the apparent. She advocated that one should seek the spirit in its true form, in 'nakedness' (Mattoo, 2002). She found herself covered with His presence and thus, remained unmoved by public opinion:

Hers is no weak, helpless voice appealing for succor or aid from a mere man. In fact, it is the powerful voice giving expression to the wishes of all those men and women who wish to find a way out...Perhaps to a real mystic like Lal Ded, the body which is responsible for male and female identity, is important not to emphasize the differences between genders but as a vehicle to carry the spirit in which there is no difference.

(Mattoo, 2002, p. 72)

Lalla's verses reveal that she was a woman conscious of her desires, feelings and thoughts. She suffered trials and tribulations owing to her transgressing spirit but she stood firm in body and spirit and remained unaffected by the worldly opinions. She was aware of the social construction but she positively used it for rising above the same. She says in one of her verses:

I, Lalla, set out hoping to bloom like a cotton flower
The ginner and the carder gave me hard blows.
After the spinner spun me into fine yarn
I was stretched on the loom in the weaver's shop

(Kak, 2007, p.42)

In the above vaakh, she discusses her coming to this world as a flower full of enthusiasm, potential and possibilities but upon receiving harder blows from the society she was turned into something that could be put into service or use (Kak, 2007). Lalla felt an inner need to transcend the socially assigned roles. She set herself free from the shackles of the society by comparing the process with that of washing a piece of cloth. She relates the cleansing of herself with rubbing a cloth with soap and dashing it on the slab to let hold of the dirt. She describes the shredding of her worldly self, her worldly identity in terms of the washed cloth being cut into bits by a tailor (Temple, 2005). The 'washerman' in the following verse relates to the self within her that aspires to reach the Supreme and hence engages in acts which empowered Lalla to transcend the feminine self. Every bit of cloth which is cut relates to the parts of Lalla's personality which turn into shreds and allow her true identity to come to the fore. Lalla, the

daughter, Lalla, the daughter-in-law and Lalla, the wife, all these disassociated personalities leave hold of her and she emerges as a woman categorically refusing to confine to the socially prescribed modes of behaviour (Kak, 2007). She says:

When the washerman dashed me on a slab of stone,
Rubbing me with much soap and washing soda
And the tailor cut me into bits with scissors,
I, Lalla, attained supreme bliss

(Kak, 2007, p. 43)

Lalla felt the need to transcend the conditioning that women were accustomed to and used her poetry to generate that awareness of self-empowerment and self-esteem. Be it at the linguistic level, the social level or in the religious domain, she created a space for women. Later on, many women poets emerged on the scene and carried forward the tradition that Lal Ded started. It was not only in Kashmir that Lal Ded became an inspiration for poets like Rupa Bhavani who revered her as Guru but her influence grew outside Kashmir also. Lal Ded is often regarded as the precursor to Meerabai who was same in the feminist spirit to her (Mattoo, 2002).

Meera's form and intensity of devotion was slightly different from Lal Ded but her strength of mind was quite stronger, especially with regard to the rebelliousness in the domain of women. Meera also emerged as an open challenge to patriarchy, customs and the tradition and she was fearless in saying:

Mira has dedicated herself to Girdhar
And roams about in ecstatic mood arising out of deep love

(Behari, 2006, p.43)

She transgressed all the boundaries and emerged as a powerful woman. In fact, the spirit of defiance in her was executed at multiple levels. Women from different backgrounds even today identify themselves with her. Be it in relation to the oppression which women were subjected to as low castes, be it the suffocation that women had to suffer from owing to a high caste stature or be they simply the women who had to sacrifice themselves at the hands of tradition, Meera had a say for all (Mukta, 1994). She emerged as an epitome of strength that one required to make an individual place in the society. She carried forward the tradition of revolt that had already been set in motion long back by Lal Ded and her rebellion as a woman was diversely intense.

Starting with the marriage itself, she initially refused to marry the groom chosen for her. However, upon being forced into marriage with him, she refused to adhere to any of the rituals and norms of the dynasty. The first defiant move from her side was the refusal to worship the family deity of Rajputs, *Kuldevi*. Having declared Krishna as her husband, she completely refused to bow down before any other god, thereby, inviting criticism from the community. After refuting the norms within the family, she moved into the public domain violating the laws at a much larger level (Bahadur, 2002). It was strictly prohibited for women to move freely in public but Meera didn't bother about any such laws. She openly mingled with people from other communities especially saints and the low castes and in fact revered them, preferring their low social status to the elite standing in society. Meera was very firm in her stand and established popular moves of resistance to domination. She categorically did away with all the bondages saying:

When I am not interested in big lakes

Why should I care for small pools

Even ganga and jamuna are of no use to me

(Subramanian, 2005, pp. 136-137)

Her work displayed a collective practice of resistance and it related not only to women but to the subaltern also. She refused to be part of a particular clan and brought into practice a new trend which incorporated every section of the society ranging from women of upper class to the ones who belonged to the lower sections of society. “Meera’s refusal to be a part of a sect-she wants to belong to the world and to leave her work to the world rather than to her Rajput lineage-opens up the possibility of co-authorship by diverse sections of subaltern classes” (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, p. 10). All the ways in which Meera has so far been viewed or studied reveal that she has remained a live tradition of protest and resistance. Starting with the domestic domain she after refusing to adhere to the norms of tradition, disavowed the preference for a son. She claimed the name to live by the works and by her sayings and not by giving birth to any son and thereby, refused to continue the Rajputana lineage. This was a major blow which she struck at the patriarchy because in the Rajput society, women were valued as mothers of sons and not as women in themselves (Jain & Sharma, 2002). Meera categorically refused to adhere to any such practice and emerged as a violator of the established norms. In a poem, she says:

Yes! I will give up my life for Him

Because of you, I have given up

Worldly modesty and family restrictions

(Subramaniam, 2005, pp. 126-127)

She adamantly denied any earthly marriage or bond, thereby, disavowing her husband and her family including her in-laws. She ignored the claims of *suhaag* (husband) declaring the marriage with a mortal as complete *mithya* (illusive) and herself already wedded to Krishna. “As an errant, disobliging wife, Meera acquires not only an active freedom from an expected role, but also the preconditions for access to wisdom, authority, self-sufficiency, spiritual growth, and most of all, marriage to Krishna” (Sangari, 1990, p. 1467). In the following pada, she says:

I know only Girdhar

He is my father, husband, kin and none besides

(Behari, 1971, p. 106)

Meera’s womanly spirit to rebel operated at multiple levels. It encompassed nearly all domains ranging from personal to social:

The rejection of earthly marriage, alongside the honour of the family, of kul, and the bonds of kinship, is in effect a rejection not only of their educative and organizing functions but of the whole social order within which they are enmeshed. Further, the break with domesticity is a rejection of the primary domain where sexuality is customarily regulated.

(Sangari, 1990, p. 1467)

After this violation, Meera resorted to composition of verses. Ultimately, it was her poetry which facilitated the revolution that she set in whether thematically or linguistically. Meera deployed the *Brajhasha* (vernacular

language of Rajasthan) as the means to communicate and to articulate the distinctively female enunciation of anti-patriarchy and anti-Rajput opposition in the same way as Lal Ded brought into use Kashmiri as against the dominating Sanskrit language and at large, the male scholars who used it. In addition to Brajbhasha, Meera composed her poems in the western Rajasthani dialect as well as in the regional languages like Gujarathi and Marathi. Her language had multi-dialectic features. "The multidialectic feature of Meera's verse functions as a survival strategy for the women-centered popular movements in the name of Meera" (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, p. 14). Speaking in a multi-lingual mode facilitated a voluminous spread of themes and it was passed from region to region voicing the concerns of women. Meera became a leader granting her poetic construct a generalized dictum. The use of 'I' and other innovative codes were symbolic of a female dissent.

An important aspect in relation to Meera's critique of patriarchy that has been highlighted by the feminist scholars is recognized as the *bidaai* genre (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004). *Bidaai* refers to the leave taking of a woman on the eve of marriage. Meera critiqued the ideology of the genre of *bidaai* and relocated the effect of the poetry or the songs which were sung at that time. The ideology of this genre reinforced the tradition of "child marriage, exogamy, treating daughters as temporary residents in the natal home, and disinheriting them after marriage... these songs sentimentalized the cruelty and detachment with which a woman was made stranger in her only home that she had known" (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, pp. 18-19). Meera subverted the ideological content of this genre and disintegrated the effect from patriarchal ideology. She channelized it towards a modern secular vocabulary which is now called a women's work identity outside the patriarchal domain. However, in the religious domain of Meera, it is named as women's desire for dedication to a self-chosen ideal. Whenever Meera produced a leave-taking poem, it was addressed to a childhood female friend. She enjoyed being a renouncer, detaching herself from the cords.

Her address to a female interlocutor is another characteristic feature of the feminine *écriture*. Helene Cixous (1976), a French feminist, believed that a "woman must write woman" (p. 877). In many of her poems, Meera addresses to her female friend as *sakhi* and at times to a group of friends calling them *sahiliyan* bringing in a contemporary feminist feature as back as the 15th century. She calls upon her female friends to serve as listeners to her padas or at times to join her in activities. She says:

Come my friends! Lets play here and not go to others' houses

(Subramaniam, 2005, pp. 168-169)

At another instance, Meera says, "Friend from my childhood, I long to be a renunciator" (quoted in Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, p. 20). It was both entreaty and challenge. Her desire for renunciation was directly in opposition to the patriarchal religion. Meera turned the *bidaai* genre upside down. The exile of a woman from her natal home forced upon her by her parents and the society becomes in Meera's poems, the renunciation of the natal and marital family brought about by the daughter. Instead of suffering passively, as the trend was, Meera turned things upside down by her emerging as the radical denouncer who shuns off her shoulders everything that confined women to patriarchal premises. She says in a poem:

Family, honour, word of scorn

I care not for these one jot

(Bahadur, 2002, pp. 56-57)

She transformed the phenomenon of *bidaai* into renunciation. “In reconfiguring *bidaai* as renunciation, Meera validates those very experiences in women’s lives that, in folk traditions, are proof of women’s weakness and emotional insecurity. She remakes these experiences of weakness and emotionalism into transformatory experiences that give women privileged access to renunciation” (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004, p. 23). She dared to speak and claim on behalf of all women the right to dedicate themselves to ideals of their own choosing and to seek their own transcendence. She says:

The veil is broken
And I am liberated from the cycle of birth and death

(Subramaniam, 2005, pp. 80-81)

Hindu religious injunctions defined women as part of the illusory world, stating that they lack a soul and that their *mayavi* (deceptive) nature was a hindrance to the achievement of renunciation by men and therefore, women were prohibited from this (Bhatnagar & Dube, 2004). According to the religious doctrines, the only way for women to attain salvation was to worship their husbands and be at their service. Meera subverted it all. Instead, what she did was to worship God and accept Him as husband. She liberated herself altogether from the earthly bondages and invested the state of marriage with spirituality that had no place in the socio-patriarchal marriage relation but was a large part of women’s narratives, autobiographies and folk songs. The way Meera described herself allowed her to move freely in public, among men, to converse with them and travel from place to place. Meera not only spoke of a rebellion but acted the same way. She threw away the traditional signs of the feminine self like that of wearing jewels, decorating the self with material things and in turn, sought empowerment through the love of Krishna (Jain & Sharma, 2002). She says in a poem:

I have given up pearl, diamond and gold ornaments
Now I wear the garland of tulsi beads and apply
Sandal paste on my forehead
The pride of royal family is gone

(Subramaniam, 2005, p.80-81)

Meera aimed at making the world understand that choosing a life time ideal was an effective way to counter medieval Rajput patriarchal ideology. She highlighted the gender-specific self-alienation of the Rajput women. According to her, a woman is disconnected because she is alienated from her family, children and the right to property. Her role and ability as producer, her creativity and productivity, her power to shape and influence the world around her and connect to the social world as the agent is always hindered by the pre-constructed norms. The voice which Meera symbolized represents a particular configuration, expresses a particular social relation and accounts for a humble yet powerful subalternity. It facilitated a transcendence which cut across genders and gradually, femaleness became something which men resorted to in Bhakti. Saints like Kabir, Narsi and Surdas often resorted in their devotion to a feminine self and for women it was unnecessary to make any such transformation. Their feminity became their strength (Sangari, 1990).

Meera did away with all the forces which promoted and symbolized tyranny, injustice and bias. While Lal Ded withdrew from the world radically and dwelled in a space of her own, Meera as a feminist tore apart all the

constructs ranging from physical to psychological more powerfully. Her poems, therefore, are emblematic of a more powerful spirit of womanhood and contain effective resonances related to the spirit of Feminism. Kumkum sangari opines:

A fifteenth or sixteenth century rebellious woman poet-saint, who pursued her devotion to Krishna with complete dedication, composed exceptionally beautiful songs of love and longing for God and endured severe persecution because she did not behave as a member of the royal household should or because she crossed caste boundaries, seems a likely candidate for those who would look to the past for exemplary women of power and independence.

(quoted in Bose, 2000, p. 162)

Spirituality, for both Meera and Lal Ded, acted as a platform for freedom which the society denied them. Nearly, all the religious scriptures reinforced the doctrine of submission enjoining upon women obedience, chastity and surrender to the male. Even the customs strengthened the exploitation of women, right from the system of *purdah* (veiling of women) to sati. The society failed to provide any scope either for independence or self-expression. It was only in the domain of spirituality that they broke out all the stereotypic prisms and made the unacceptable acceptable. They stood firm in the challenges that they threw at patriarchy. The two female voices, therefore, represented a particular emotional configuration, expressed a particular social relation, and emerged as powerful subalterns. The spirituality and the underlying feminist line of thought enabled a transcendence which cut across and went beyond all the constructed norms. It was this feminist spark which in the later centuries and the contemporary one was re-ignited and a space was given to the womanhood in the form of feminist theory and Feminism as a worldwide movement. Women studies grew, thereafter, as an area of extreme concern having its seeds laid in the medieval age. Lal Ded and Meerabai, thus, served as the very pioneers of the construction of womanhood in their respective ways. They were the harbingers of freedom, independence and self-reliance for women to come for all ages. Their poetry, thus, struck not only the mystic chords but also initiated the practise of voicing as women adding another substantial dimension to the literary and the social world.

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