

# Lal Ded and Mirabai Revisited: A Socio-Feminist Perspective

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The field of literature is an ever-growing/ever-evolving field and there are varied contemporary emerging trends which get manifested in the literary works. Ranging from the British canon to the marginal literature, we get to see all conventional boundaries dissolve. The most significant quality of literature is that no literary work is ever out dated and there are revisions and reinterpretations which take place on a continual mode and an important area of recent development from this parameter is the field of Comparative Studies and English Translation. The field has facilitated a revision and re-interpretation of many Classics. The current paper aims at comparing two medieval Indian poets—Lal Ded and Mirabai whose works have been translated into English and establishing their contemporary relevance from a Socio-Feminist Perspective.*

**Keywords:** *Emancipation, Empowerment, Feminism, Medievalism, Patriarchy*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The medieval India witnessed a diversified growth in the area of literature. To some extent, it was medievalism which laid the foundation of the modern and the contemporary Indian literature. Therefore, studying the medieval works becomes quite important in itself. Not only medieval, in fact, the pre-medieval India also had a substantial literary output in languages like Sanskrit, Tamil and Kannada, and women were no less a part of that (Paniker, 1997, p. 5). While Kashmiri literature started with Lal Ded, moved to Habba Khatoon, Rupa Bhavani and, later on, Arnimaal, literature in languages like Rajasthani, Hindi, Tamil, and Kannada reached the zenith through poets like Mirabai, Avvayyar and Akkamahadevi, respectively:

The mystical thought of Lal Dyad, the devotional fervour of Mira, the metaphysical reach of Avvayyar, the spirit of dedication of Akkamahadevi and the limpid sadness of Habba Khatoon are among the high points of the medieval Indian poetry. Their writings have a handspun quality, great authenticity, intense genuineness, and utmost sincerity.

(Paniker, 1997, p. 31)

Scholars argue that women always found opportunities for involvement in the literary tradition in the context of powerful historical movements even those questioning the Aryan or Brahminical dominance (Tharu and Lalita, 1991, p. 52). It was the 8<sup>th</sup> century Tamil poet, Ammaiyar, who initiated a long line of women's poetry. Among these many women poets, Lal Ded and Mirabai, are seen as the very embodiments of women strength (*streeshakti*). The poetry of both these women centers on the devotional and the revolutionary spirit which grants them a common space to share. Both of them relate to each other on many grounds ranging from mystic to social and feminist.

Lal Ded and Mirabai belonged to two major religious sects of Hinduism, the Shaiva and the Vaishnava, respectively. In spite of the difference in cultures and traditions, both represented a cross section of women at large. The anger at the patriarchal society, the torment that they underwent during their pursuit, the injustice which was prevalent in their respective societies and the use of poetry to highlight all these experiences in order to dislodge the patriarchal set-up makes them share and celebrate one common larger than life domain, that of womanhood. A woman's life in the Rajputana society was quite more restricted than other communities. Meera's rebellion directed at its norms granted her the dynamic and iconic feminist status. She protested against the gendered society using powerful language, symbols and images in her poetry. The exposure to orthodoxy and having suffered at its hands made her emerge as a rebel. However, she used the sphere of devotion as the source of strength and support and emerged as a trendsetter. Lal Ded belonging to the Kashmiri tradition, was exposed to a different manifestation of patriarchal domination which she subverted by adopting a more intellectual and a radically rebellious approach towards the society. Being a Shaiva, Lalla's poetry is replete with the typically philosophical concepts of Shaivism like yoga, pranayama and others. While Meera's devotional poetry is more emotional in its orientation towards the Divine, Lalla's is intellectually more appealing. Both of them belong to two different cultures and faiths and are, therefore, bound to differ in their choices, attitudes, preferences and ways of expressions, yet, basically they share a common sphere, that of Mysticism. It is this realm that they take refuge in and express in their particular ways the resentment directed towards the society, religious orthodoxy and patriarchy through their poetry. Both of them revolted and responded to the injustices prevalent in their respective societies by giving such themes a good amount of space. The paper aims at studying their poetry from a social and a feminist perspective.

### **I. Lal Ded and Mirabai: Feminist Perspective**

Lalla was married in a family which allowed no space to exist for her. Instead, they subjected her to torment and torture and thereby, acted as a hindrance in the spiritual path. She, therefore, was left with no option but to leave her married life and pursue her own path. It was impossible for her to carry on with the divine practices in a family which labeled her tryst with god as "infidelity" and accused her for unjustified reasons. She threw away the garb of domestic sensibility and went out to seek refuge in the spiritual world. Otherwise, in the Shaiva tradition, resorting to the life of a wandering ascetic is not advocated:

As a woman in fourteenth century Kashmir, she was locked into a social location that did not offer the options open to Abhinavgupta (male Shaiva saint). Forced into an archetypically oppressive marriage, with husband at best indifferent and in-laws actively hostile to her spiritual pursuits, her only route of escape was stepping outside of all available systems of social support, flouting convention (as symbolized by her legendary nakedness) by becoming a wandering renouncer.

(Nelson, 2011, p. 7)

The Shaivite philosophy preaches achieving supreme wisdom by being immersed in the daily activities. According to the Shaivas, one can attain union with the divine sitting at home as well. Therefore, there is no need to leave the home and hearth. Lalla's case, however, was different owing to the environment that she had in her in-laws home. It was not at all suitable for practising anything pertaining to religion or its philosophy. She had no option but to leave and disown it in order to trace out her true spirit and reach her real destination.

Breaking the worldly marriage, therefore, became the first revolutionary step that she took in order to accomplish her mission. This was “the only way that was available to her in the historical period that she occupied” (Kak, 1997, p. 92). In the patriarchal society, where a woman was reduced to nothing but a mere caretaker of house fulfilling the household chores and looking after the family, Lal Ded dared to raise a voice, challenge the status quo and set in a tradition of defiance through her poetry. Her poetry was the medium through which all her experiences became public starting from the domestic abuse to the societal reactions. Her poetry, further, was emblematic of the strength that she possessed and the way she responded to the abuses and false accusations charged by the society and people around her. It, in fact, reflects her extraordinary capacity to deal with the hurdles that she encountered, especially for the reason that she was a woman. In response to the insults, accusations and curses, she sums up her attitude in the following line:

Their barking means nothing to me

(Hoskote, 2011, p. 95)

Being a woman, she had to deal with oppositions from multiple sections of society. These included the domestic, the public and the literary as well.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century Kashmir was a culture where religion was also a patriarchal hub in essence. It was dominated by men whether as Shaiva gurus or saints and accommodating a woman in this arena was quite unusual and unacceptable as well. After transgressing the domestic and public bounds, Lalla did dare to make an entry into the literary, philosophical and religious domain as well and emerged successful. It was her inner zeal and true potential that made her create an unflinching image which continues to exist even today. She is revered by all irrespective of the personal, religious or national differences. Through her poetry, Lalla wasn't only able to attain her destiny but she altogether revolutionized the world for generations to come. She became the first woman poet from Kashmir to lay the foundations of a new linguistic, matriarchal and mystic world. Same was done by Meera in Rajasthan.

Meera was forcefully married to Prince Bhoj Raj. Her marriage proved for her nothing more than a source of trouble and torture. Owing to her defiant attitude with regard to the family customs right from the beginning, Meera became a target to attack for people of the dynasty. Her refusal to worship the family deity, denial of the earthly marriage and all the traditions associated with it and repudiation to abide by other norms of the *kul* (dynasty/clan) earned her disfavour and alienation. She was considered to be a blot by all others who belonged to the elite Rajputana class. In fact, several attempts were made to kill her for she was seen as someone who in public was throwing the *mardaya* (norms/ codes of conduct) to winds. She was seen as a trespasser, a transgressor who engaged in indecent activities like moving with men of lower class, singing and dancing in public leading the Rajputs to shame. Meera added to their fury by refusing to give up her behaviour. She, in fact, was very conscious of the fact that her family members were conspiring against her and that many attempts were made to kill her. In spite of being aware of this threat, she didn't move from her stand. She talks about this all in her poems and in fact declares her fearlessness in the lines like:

*The rana sent me a basket with a snake inside it*

*When I opened the lid, lo! It was a stone idol*

*Krishna is my protector, how can one harm ever*

*Him whom the lord loves*

(Bahadur, 2002, pp. 94-95)

Meera emerged as a very powerful and daring woman who openly critiqued the high class society and also expressed her views regarding them with sarcasm. The elite status, the wealth and the kingdoms, she saw all with cynicism. She mocked at the attitude of people around her, adding to their abhorrence and disgust. One of the most radical steps that Meera took was the refusal to burn herself on the pyre of husband. It was customary for a woman to become a *sati* by burning herself with the burning of dead husband's body. When Bhoj Raj died, the same was expected from Meera but she categorically refused to do so saying that the earthly marriage to her never had any meaning and that she was wedded to Krishna for all ages to come. An important dimension to this is that in the Rajput community, at large, in the Rajasthani community, it was customary for women to put on ornaments and jewelry. Rajasthan has always had this tradition. "Nowhere except in Rajasthan do women traditionally wear ivory bangles from the wrist to the armpit. The intricate jewelry, the *boria* (jewelry worn in the parting of hair), all denote the fetishized female object, the *suhaagan* (married woman)" (Bhatnagar, 2004, p. 30). Some of it acted as a symbol of being married, some was symbolic of the steadfast devotion and attachment one shared with one's husband and some of it was put on for it was believed to prolong the life of one's *suhaag* (husband). What Meera did was that she removed all her jewelry and other costly ornaments labeling them as clutches. She freed herself of all these attachments. Her poems confront this commoditization of women in Rajasthan and she herself showed a complete refusal to these things. She says, "armpits and bangles do not please me/nor vermillion in my hair parting" (Jafri, 2004, p. 137). She describes renouncing as an act of liberating herself from the bondage of married woman's jewelry saying, "I gave up all my jewels/unlocking the armlet I freed myself" (quoted in Dube, 2004, p.31). She chose to wear alternate symbols as markers of her femininity. The most significant being Krishna's love for her. This acts as a substantial parallel to Lal Ded. Lalla relieved herself of the clothes and Meera of the ornaments implying a liberated and free existence which both of them accomplished and attained. These steps were another strongest blow to the society which expected women to be governed by the existence of their worldly husbands. Meera altogether denied it, symbolically as well as practically and emerged as the forerunner of a change.

An important achievement of Lal Ded and Mirabai's poetry lies in the creation of a "third space". Jaishree Odin Kak discusses this as a very striking feature of Lal Ded's poetry. Lal Ded, according to her, created an altogether separate world where no distinction of gender existed because her Lord to her was the Transcendent. She created a world which existed beyond the dualities of sex and therefore, woman there wasn't viewed as the "other" but instead, possessed a status at par with her Lord. She completely lost her worldly self in the mystic realm. According to Odin, Lal Ded made "a deliberate attempt...to stay locked out of any aesthetic experience of the world. Her most profound verses then reflect her desire to lose herself in mystical experience rather than to use it as the ground to lead a more fulfilling material existence" (1997, p.91). The mystic world, to her, was a world of her choice and a world which in return also provided her with the choices to look for and in fact find a transcendent locus beyond any worldly distinction and duality. Her renunciation of this world and her acceptance of the world of mysticism was the result of her dissatisfaction with the traditionally set gender roles. In order to break that pattern of the society, she discovered a new world for her where no distinctions existed. The feudal society in Kashmir at that time was governed to a great extent by various Brahminical discourses. She, in reaction, to those introduced her own new way of behaviour flaying the pre-constructed feminine modes of behaviour. "The ideology of ideal wife and mother promotes the self-sacrificing ethos of women. This ethos

traps a woman in relationships so that she misses opportunities to expand herself politically, spiritually, or intellectually” (Kak, 1999, p. 46). As a result of this, a woman is always left as in charge of the domestic. Lalla, thus, made a space for her outside the community making her body the site of resistance which refused to conform to the traditional gender roles. She managed to exist outside the patriarchal clutches but side by side remained tied to her society through her teachings and criticism.

Meera, on other hand, also made the spiritual world as her inn but she recreated and relived the very relations and the hierarchical dualities of the earthly world in the spiritual world. She challenged the patriarchy and the gender construction at the worldly level but re-executed it on the spiritual plane calling herself the servant of Krishna. She continued to remain a sexualized female in the spiritual realm also. Her language while approaching Krishna was of subordination and subalternity. She didn't see Him as on an equal plane with her but regarded herself subservient to Him. To her, the spiritual world was the reality, the refuge but not devoid of gender. At many places in her poems, Meera calls herself as the servant of her Lord. She says:

I am your slave through many lives

(Bahadur, 2002, p. 102)

She further says:

My mind is at His feet forever

(Bahadur, 2002, p.77)

However, resorting to the status of a daasi (servant) indirectly implied a revolt towards the elite Rajputs. Meera refused to bow down to them but bowed down before Krishna. As a daasi, she occupied the subject position of a female slave as a rhetorical weapon for making claims and asserting her rights (Bhatnagar and Dube, 2004, p. 32). By calling herself daasi, she disavowed the status and claim to the luxuries that she was entitled to being a member of the Rajput clan. She transformed herself into a public figure against the norms of the ruling class. She took to a position of servitude in order to voice and claim her rights. Meera's relationship with her Lord was based purely on love and devotion. Therefore, she had no objection in existing as a female lover. She didn't find any need to transcend gender because in Bhakti, every devotee was a female in relation to the god worshipped. The concept of a female, thus, was quite different in the world of Bhaktas. What was believed and practised was that god alone was a male and therefore, all others in relation to Him were females. This made the male Bhaktas change their gender and resort to a female self and it for Meera, therefore, acted as advantage. In the spiritual world, she already had the privileged identity. Therefore, her challenge to patriarchy existed in relation to the ephemeral world. She sought liberation from that and used her feminity as her weapon against it. This attitude of Meera, in fact, finds a legendary parallel in Lal Ded. Once Lalla was asked if she felt no shame at moving around naked, her answer was that she didn't need to cover herself for no male being existed in the world for her (Temple, 2005, p.8). Lal Ded had done away with the gender distinctions. To her, if anything existed, that was oneness of the Supreme Being and it was devoid of any dualities. Meera, on the other hand, upon going to meet Jiv Goswami, a saint, wasn't allowed to see him. She was told that he met only men and not women. To this, Meera responded by saying that none apart from her Lord was a real man and that all beings were female in relation to the Lord (Alston, 1980, p. 6). Both Lalla and Meera in their own ways were suffused with the grace of Supreme and the public opinion had no place for them. However, in the world of Bhakti, femaleness became something which men had to adopt in order to gain spiritual advantages:

Several male Bhaktas, predecessors and contemporaries of Mira including Kabir use the voice of woman, wife or bride and figures of servitude, sensuous desire or yearning. This voice has certain universalizing aspirations but nevertheless speaks of the ways in which gender is described and indicates the spread and tentacular reach of patriarchal assumptions and practices. Further, the ability to adopt female voice, when loving itself becomes worship, also enunciates the contradictory shaping of desire by patriarchal morality.

(Sangari, 1990, p. 1538)

Femaleness became, therefore, an inversely powerful subalternity which enabled the transformations at a higher plane. The mystic realm provided a feminist space to both the poets although in different ways. Ultimately, for both of them, it implied a larger, self-governed and an independent world liberated from all the claustrophobic bonds. The personal experiences of reality and the direct relationship with their respective Lords granted them authority which being women they might otherwise have lacked in their societies and times.

## II. LAL DED AND MIRABAI: A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

Lal Ded and Meera, in addition to the feminist and the mystic realm, had similarities in their approach towards the society also. Apart from challenging the norms and establishing a world of their own, their poetry acted as an agent for social change as well. Veiled in their critiques were lessons for humanity. For Lal Ded, no difference existed among beings of different castes, religions or colour. To her, everyone was the manifestation of Supreme Siva. He had a trace of Him in all so no question of distinction found any space. She says:

*Shiva lives in many places*

*He doesn't know Hindu from Muslim*

*The self that lives in you and others*

*That's Shiva. Get the measure of Shiva*

(Hoskote, 2011, p.106)

Seeing a common light, a common spirit pervading through all universe, the animate/inanimate, Lal Ded preached love for all through her poetry. Her poetry showed despair and disgust which was the result of an unjust universe, an unfair culture and society. She revolted against ostentation, deceit, falsehood and longed for a freedom from desire. The plight of righteous and poor was visible to her. She says:

*I have seen a learned man die of hunger*

*A sere leaf drop in winter wind*

*I have seen an utter fool beat his cook*

*Since then, I lalla, anxiously await*

*The day when the lure of the world will fall away*

(Kaul, 1960, p. 93)

The above mentioned Vaakh is an example of the day to day discrimination prevailing in the world. The world is a place where wisdom and capabilities can't save one from the pangs of death and the sufferings and people who don't deserve any appreciation are praised and achieve all the basic facilities. Such was the imbalance and this became a subject of distress for Lalla also and she rendered her experience open through her poetry making it public and thus, spreading awareness. She taught people to rise above the illusory world and achieve the real understanding of things:

Lal Ded teaches the people to rise above the plane of sensory perceptions to the subtle plane of recognition and true knowledge. That is the plane of correct understanding. Once man rises to that height, narrow-mindedness and stubborn discrimination between man and man on the basis of the accidents of birth, caste and creed are wiped out.

(Parimoo, 1978, p. xviii)

Like Meera, Lalla's poetry also stands replete with examples from ordinary life. She encompasses everything within her poetic domain. Neerja Mattoo opines:

The porter, weaver, carpenter, blacksmith and other unprivileged classes, who form the backbone of village and town economies, find their work and trade celebrated in her Vaakhs even while they tackle abstruse Shaivite practices. She seems to have noticed the material world around her with a sharp, poet's eye, and used it as her vocabulary of choice, unfettered by conventions of serious, philosophical discourse set down by male authority.

(2002, p. 72)

Nearly all of Lal Ded's metaphors come from the ordinary life. This provided a subaltern touch to her poetry and the same resonances are found in Meera's poetry also.

The striking feature of Bhakti was the accommodation of people from any and every caste and section of society. It advocated and preached the same and Meera being an active proponent of it practised this openness. She mingled with everyone irrespective of their backgrounds. In fact, she kept herself in the company of *sadhus* (saints) and related to other outcastes of the society. According to her,

*To god are alike, high and low*

*He delights in those who give him love*

(Bahadur, 2002, pp.66-67)

This created a lot of conflicts but Meera didn't bother at all. In fact, she critiqued the elite social practices of the society. Meera, in her poetry used symbols of poverty preferring them over the luxuries of life. The way she treated people who belonged to other sections of society was a big lesson for the ones who believed in their superiority. Her poetry aimed at secular, humanitarian and liberal love which she wanted to prevail in the world and for which she was an epitome in herself. Not only this, Meera emerged as a voice for the lower class, also called the subaltern.

Meera was more personal in her devotion but her devotion had granted her the power to take a social stand, a stand which made her the spokesperson for people who were slaves at the hands of social institutions. She became a voice for those women who lacked the identities of their own and were valued only because they produced heirs in the forms of sons to their respective dynasties. She gave a voice to those who because of being low castes lacked a position in the society and were always suppressed and given inhuman treatment. She emerged as a figure with which masses identified themselves. The way Lal Ded was distressed upon seeing the injustice and prejudice prevailing among people, in the same way, Meera also was bothered about the social imbalance. She says in her verses:

*The crane is shining white, the cuckoo black in hue*

*River water flows pure, the sea turns it salt*

*Fools are enthroned as kings*

*The kings wander door to door*

(Quoted in Kishwar and Vanita, 1989, p.80)

One of the most infuriating behaviour of Meera, as mentioned earlier also, was that she mingled with people from every class in the same way as Lal Ded did. She treated everyone with equal standards without considering religion, caste or colour. Not only did she teach this through her poetry but she practically showed it to the world by making herself a disciple of a low class worker, Raidas, who was a cobbler by profession but Meera held him high as a guru. The background didn't matter to her at all for she believed that it was only a clear conscience and true love for one's god which could grant one salvation and vision. This attitude of hers was disliked by everyone from the clan but she remained committed to herself and her own passion giving no importance to the opinions of others. She regarded the material world as a complete illusion and found the truth lying in the company of religious people no matter what caste, colour or creed they belonged to. She believed in doing good to all. She says:

*Life is too short, do good to others*

*While yet alive*

(Bahadur, 2002, p. 99)

The imbalance in the society which she gave voice to was a source of trouble for the lower sections of society. They were the targets mostly and subjects for oppression to flourish. The culture of 16<sup>th</sup> century Rajasthan saw the growth of lower and weaker sections of society. While on one side, they were objects for maltreatment, on the other hand, the spiritual domain provided them with the scope of accessing the Ultimate. This spirit was given vent by Meera who kept her association and alliance with them and enabled them to come out of their constructed selves:

While Mira has achieved a tangible link with the dalit communities through her association with Raidas, Mira bhakti is not confined solely to this section. It is very strong amongst the peasant communities too... (Even today) these peasant communities appear to have taken to Mira precisely because she appeared as an antithetical figure to Rajput feudal power... Mira emerges from the bhajans not as a figure of rebellion against one particular Rana, but as someone who despised and condemned the essential embodiment of Rajput kingdom.

(Mukta, 1994, p. 84)

The low caste sections like that of dalits, the peasant class and the worker class people, all identified themselves with Meera. While for Rajputs, she was an object of ridicule, the lower class people viewed her as their spokesperson and a liberator. She, even today, exists as a symbol of strength that falsified and commented on the human social bonds. Hers is the reality of a common creation. She doesn't exist as an abstracted humanity striving for wisdom but as a voice of day to day sufferings ranging from ill-fated marriages, widowhood and caste based bias. Her poetry serves a source of liberation especially for the people who belong to the lower strata of society. The influence of Meera's poetry is such that the whole world is inclined to it now and in the same way to Lal Ded's.



### III.CONCLUSION

Lal Ded and Mirabai both are being revisited in the contemporary literary world owing to the relevance that their poetry has even today. They no more exist as historical figures in the world of literature but have become living traditions in themselves. They continue to dance away from individual claims and instead, invite a transformative participation, crossing boundaries of religions, cultures and time as well. Apparently they differ in their cultural, religious, intellectual orientation but larger themes unite them. Through their poetry, they challenge the norms of masculine discourse, question the patriarchal canons and introduce the specifically feminine experiences of pain, solitude, desire and pleasure. Be it the theme of love, humanity or of being women in a male dominated world, the poetry of both intersects each other at these points and leads them to a common destination that of freedom, liberation and salvation.

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