

# “I found my Guru”: Mirabai’s Neo-Feminist Approach to Enlightenment

Aman Bisht<sup>1</sup>, Jasmine Sharma<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dr. B.R Ambedkar University, Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup>Vivekananda School of English Studies, Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies, Delhi, India

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### Correspondence

Jasmine Sharma  
jasmine@vips.edu

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## ABSTRACT

Mirabai as a figure in medieval Indian culture is trailblazing due to the poet’s personal life choices which stood in opposition to her immediate society. Yet, her poetry and methodology as a mystic features hyperfeminine imagery that alludes to Indian classical femme from literature, myth, or folklore. This choice emerges contrary to her persona as the depiction of gender in classical literatures produced during archaic times feature non-antagonistic characters, and ideals that follow moral codes of conduct while exercising their righteousness. Even though these moral codes are inherently flawed and politically incorrect from the standards of contemporary times, their portrayal engenders vibrant shades of celebration and acceptance in classical medieval literatures. This article examines the poet’s choice to use the social construct (which is not intrinsic) to her advantage as a Bhakti poet, and achieve a neo-feminist enlightenment. Neo-feminism as an epistemology problematizes the assumed inferiority of feminine sensibility to masculine superiority, while also disregarding the characteristics of this sensibility which are designed to oppress women and serve patriarchy as a system. Despite neo-feminism as a movement is associated with Western feminism, this article aims to establish the Bhakti movement poet, Mirabai as a neo-feminist.

## INTRODUCTION

### THEORIZING NEO-FEMINISM

Neo-feminism as a school of thought represents the acceptance of “femininity” or the “womanly essence” that was problematized by the second-wave feminists. Hilary Radner (2016, 141) terms this idea as “post-feminist”, sharing similarities with French feminist school of thought that also problematized the androcentric approach to equality. By acknowledging the goodness of femininity, the neo-feminists aim to reject the position of masculinity at the top of the hierarchy of gender politics.

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The construct of femininity is celebrated in its entirety be it, aestheticism or anything labelled as feminine, (inferior) by the society. Aya Gruber (2013, 1326) identifies neo-feminism as a school that crosses and “incorporates intersectional anti-subordination analysis and responds to observed problems with past”.

In her essay “Female, Feminine and Feminist”, Toril Moi (1997, 186) explains the distinction between the three terms which connote that being feminine doesn’t necessarily make it feminist. Hence, the categorization of most of her poetry (where she uses femininity to achieve a connection with God through devotion) as “feminist” comes into question. But in the same essay, the academic also quotes Simone De Beauvoir (2016, 367) famous statement, “One isn’t born a woman, one becomes one”. Proving there is a choice to be made to become/display feminine/femininity or not.

The idea of neo-feminism (regarding the choice to use the gendered sensibility forced upon them by patriarchy) may seem similar to that of cultural feminists. Still, the point where it deviates from it, or any other school of feminism is its flexibility. Rather than being stuck on the orthodoxies of cultural, dominant, or liberal schools of feminism, neo-feminism enables the practitioner to choose without the structuralist and less adaptable technicalities of the mentioned schools. The rigid beliefs of a dominant feminist would criticize the feminine performativity and the entire “submission” aspect of Vaishnavite philosophy in Mirabai’s sensuality. Similarly, the cultural feminists who hail femininity to the extent that they focus and advocate exclusively for motherhood and female-centric spaces would also not be compatible with Mirabai’s participation in male-dominated circles of theological philosophy and hermeticism without arguing for a separate female-centered one.

With that, she also displays the zeal of a liberal feminist, with the aspirations and ambitions to create the dialogue and simply practice her faith in the masculine space. Be it the house she is wedded into (the rebellion being to exercise her religion instead of adopting “Rana’s”) or in the space of poetry/theology where she uses the analogy and archetype, created by the theologians and poets of the Bhakti period to apply it on her real life, taking back the agency over femininity while also entering the male-dominated space of sainthood.

Besides the aforementioned unorthodox aspect of the neo-feminist methodology, her approach crosses and incorporates the solutions and approaches of feminists hailing from other sects of feminism. The rebellion to achieve “self-actualisation” or “transcendence” as well as the quest for individual freedom and itself is a characteristic of a neo-feminist as Hilary Radner highlights in her essay “Neo-feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture”. The struggle not being for the betterment of the collective population present in the Indian medieval society but simply for self-realization features as an appropriate dimension for a Bhakti poet like Mirabai.

### **MIRABAI: AN EPITOME OF INDIAN MEDIEVAL FEMININE SENSIBILITY**

Before the creation of the infamous *Manu Smriti*, in the Indian subcontinent, the implication of any human being close to God or the divine status remained unheard of. The commemoration of the text marked a regressive mindset of the husband being the God, and the wife a subordinate. Drawing another hierarchy in the domestic setting, like the one that emerged to exist in the society with the Brahmins assuming the top tier in the social hierarchy of the Indian subcontinent.

Mirabai as a poet stands in the time when the Indian subcontinent was going through a tremendous and progressive wave of liberal phenomenon in the theological sphere, The Bhakti movement. The rise of religions such as Buddhism and Jainism already had pointed out the critical issues with orthodox Hinduism which itself was the aftermath of *Manu Smriti* (circa 100 CE). The movement took the initiative of channeling religion into building a relationship of love and devotion between God and devotee instead of the castist (Brahminical supremacist) and patriarchy rooted, state of the religion then. As the endeavors of the scholars, saints, and poets (hailing from a similar sect of religion) of that tradition chose the same objective of attainment of spirituality, enlightenment, and oneness with God, their trajectories to reach this space also followed the similar trajectory. Amongst them was the poet/saint Mirabai, who used the sensibility she was assigned by the society to equip herself to get towards her objective.

The conversations around the egotism and pride attached to idea of masculinity are in no way new. In a patriarchal society that expects women to be subservient and submissive to their male counterparts, the false notion of deserving respect and authority (without the men acquiring any remarkable feats or performing an act for the good) works as wind to the fire of the ego of the masculine order. Mirabai born, brought up, and wedded off in such a space is capable enough to achieve a remarkable feat, not just associated to talent to write amongst her determination to devotion but also her comprehension of the mechanics of the patriarchal society she lived in. The awareness of the masculine and feminine sensibility as imposed by society provides her with immense power to create, criticize, and defy the order of this society.

## MIRABAI’S REBELLION

“Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in

youth, and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence”

(Manu 9.3)

As mentioned above, the tenets of *Manu Smriti*, one of the ominous casebooks of the Hindu code reveal (the post-Vedic to medieval) Indian perception of women. The term “guard” in the above lines reveals not only the lack of agency of women over themselves but also this forced dependence on the male. In several instances, Manu even compares women to “properties”. The property is the vessel of honor of the family. Even in the parts where he praises the role of the female, it simply comes out as the “mother” and “wife,” the women are simply reduced to their associations with men. When he discusses the relationships of fathers with daughters, they too are related to her marriage with a man of appropriate class and caste. The one who is responsible and able to “bind the family unit” is seen as physically and mentally inferior by him. With independence, comes a risk of impropriety which as the “vulnerable” (as seen by Manu) gender, women are not trusted to be fit. There also hangs the burden of the entire family’s position in society, which is absent in the case of males as Manu suggests virtuous women serve

their husbands even if they are “devoid of virtues,” hence the virtue-less men deserving subordination and submission even if they do not deserve it. Independence is not allowed furthermore, as it even puts the society’s outlook towards the family at risk.

“Mira dances, how can her ankle bells not dance?

‘Mira is insane,’ strangers say that. ‘The family’s ruined.’

Poison came to the door one day; she drank it and laughed.”

(Mirabai 23)

The act of dance (or even any sort of performative discipline or act) is prevalent and popular as a means to achieve enlightenment and transcendence amongst Bhakti and even Sufi poets (be it Bharatnatyam or Sufi whirling). Yet as a woman, it creates a political statement and scandal which then leads to a discourse of persecution and torment, at a level that is both psychological and life-threatening. This subsequently alludes to the horrific act of honor killing that has been prevalent since archaic times. The female body is reduced to vessels of shame and honor, an encumbrance on the path to transcendence (a step in the humanist psychologist’s “hierarchy of needs”, above “self-realization”) revealing the unyielding will of the poet and her disregard towards the society. Doing this, she “risks” the reputation of the family and behaves unlike it is expected from women of her social standing. As she calls this idea of “shame” as “worldly” she also reveals the prevalence of this universal phenomenon of chaining women with shackles of honor. It was non-existent to her as a saint and a poet of the bhakti tradition.

“I will not be restrained now, O Rana,

Despite all you do to block my path.

I have torn off the veil of worldly shame;

Only the company of Saints is dear to me.”

(Mirabai 3)

Mirabai gives several autobiographical details in her poetry, one of them referring to her relationship with “Rana” (king), whom she refuses to call her husband (as she gives that place to her God). Her poetry reveals her suffering in her household

where she is sneered at by her in-laws and locked inside her room by the king to be stooped into being submissive to her “husband” (as he sees it), eventually given poison too which she happily consumes but is saved by the grace of her God (a myth associated with the failed attempt of honor killing). The only concern of the poet is metaphysical and not societal in many ways which itself appears as a stance against patriarchy, (as the “worldly shame” is a social construct created by patriarchy forcefully put on women) that is, feminist. The only utility of the earthly connection is to achieve her spiritual awakening that compels her to surround herself with saints for wisdom and education in theology.

In her poem, “I Found My Guru”, Mirabai introduces the reader with autobiographical elements while she discusses her academic endeavors and her choosing to become a disciple of Saint “Ravidas” (the saint being from a “lower” caste, yet again proving her disregard to the norms of the patriarchal and Brahmin supremacist society) as she manages to undo this conditioning, unwrap it to its rudimentary layers but as it lays unraveled in front of her, she uses it to its appropriate use that is, to attain the enlightenment and oneness with her lord.

Despite all these acts of rebellion against the patriarchal ideal of “the feminine,” the poet’s work also pays homage to femininity through tradition and its representation in culture (epics or canon theological texts, i.e., Puranas). This fascination and respect for the sensibility could be a political stance as it is held to a lower standard in a patriarchal society in comparison to masculinity but as a poet of Bhakti period hailing from the Vaishnava tradition there comes a need to follow it and do away with the masculine egotism, to reach enlightenment.

## **VAISHNAVISM AND THE CONCEPT OF SURRENDER**

“If you always remember me, by my grace, you shall overcome all obstacles and difficulties. But if, due to pride, you do not listen to my advice, you will perish.”

(Bhagavad Gita 18.58)

The above lines describe the androcentric bias present in medieval Indian societies (also evident in *Manu Smriti* or even “Rana” as written in her poetry). In a theological school with such emphasis on “submission” to God to achieve unity, the masculine characteristics of pride, ego, and mental rigidity, become impediments to being in the state of perpetual humility needed for erudition. To be in the state to achieve the connection with the metaphysical, the complex yet grounded laws of rationality as coded by the patriarchy become useless.

“Mirabai says: The Dark One is my husband now.

Be with me when I lie down; you promised me this in an earlier life.”

(Mirabai 17)

The poet’s approach to achieving her lord leans on the spectrum of love identical to that of the Petrarchan sonneteers (based on vivid metaphors that idolize and sensualize), but instead of one-sidedness or hope to achieve physicality of love with eventual objectification of the muse, Mirabai assumes the role of lover and her perspective towards attaining God i.e., enlightenment becomes similar to achieving “completeness”. The metaphors and characteristics in her poetry often refer to the classic feminine culture and literature. Despite her behaving the opposite of the ideal, she uses their images to convey her musings either as the wife tensed with thoughts of her husband participating in the war, be it “Shabri” from the great epic Ramayana or the “Gopis” in the Krishna folklores. There is humility to her character (as written in her poetry) with subservience, like the classical feminine, it is never because of internalized misogyny but in comparison to her God. “Such surrender it can be argued, however, has been envisioned as female through the imagination of men. Thus, the bhakti practice of a devotee assuming a feminine persona to enter into higher precincts of love and devotion again becomes suspect from a social perspective.” (Jarow 2011, 178)

In the essay, Jarow points out the perception of the devotee (seeking enlightenment) through the eyes of the thinkers of the Vaishnava school of enlightenment. Ramanujan, coined the terms “Prapatti” (emotional longing) “Anasraya” (having no place to refuge), and “Antarang” (an inner

attitude of service). Hence, the qualities thought to be perceived by a woman (emotional, dependent, and internalized determination for servitude). Yamunacharya, coined the term “Saranam” (taking shelter) to do it by bowing the highest part to the “lotus feet” (lowest part of the lord), to establish the helplessness and vulnerability in front of the “Holy Other” so that they could depend upon lord’s absolute mercy for Viraha (separation from the feminine world).

It is clear how it can be extremely problematic to see anything female always be written as inferior (by the constant comparison with God). Going by that logic, all rebellion and angst against patriarchy in her poetry eventually are exhibited for the sake of adhering to another masculine order vouched by androcentric philosophers of theology. She calls herself “empty of virtue” and the God “ocean of them”. She calls herself the “servant” and the God “Master”. Furthermore, the dancing referenced throughout her poetry could be interpreted as a Vaishnava religious allegory of “Prakriti” (nature) and “Purusha” (the metaphysical), the “Purusha” assuming the role of the enjoyer and Mirabai “Prakriti” becoming the performer who performs to please while the voyeuristic male gaze comes into the picture.

Although contrary to the philosophy, the inferiority noticeable in her poetry comes from her stances that don’t adhere to an anthropocentric ideology, in the fashion of a bhakti poet she puts the metaphysical/God as the center. Even if much of her poetry depicts her (a woman) as inferior to God (due to it being autobiographical), the lower position in the hierarchy is never reserved only for women. She also references instances from Gajendra Stuti, the salvation, and liberation from a crocodile (the puranic legend itself being an allegory of sin and man). Then there also exists the male bhakti poets/philosophers who also have a similar methodology to achieve enlightenment.

The gender of God itself is not constrained to the masculine side of the gender binary either. There are several depictions of the metaphysical energy of the God of Vaishnava tradition often taking forms of the feminine, be it for the objective of defeating an “asura” (the myth of Bhasmasura) or to mourn for a fallen hero (Iravan in the great

epic Mahabharata). Besides the seductive and empathetic form of “Mohini”, Vishnu also performs the other duality of femininity in a patriarchal society. In her essay “The Dark, Selfish Thief: The Image of Vishnu in Social Justice Movements”, the critic expands upon the gender fluidity of Vishnu: “Among his many epithets, “Jagadyoni” (womb of the universe) and “Padmanabha” (lotus-like navel) are testaments to well-known Dravidian myths of Vishnu birthing Brahma, the creator god, through a placenta-esque lotus that grew from his navel’ (Bryant 2007, 18)

It is evident from these sources, along with numerous others in Vaishnava theology, that to strip Vishnu-Mohini of her/his creative gender and sexuality is to deny Mohini-Vishnu’s creative embodiment, particularly Vishnu’s immanence in and transcendence of sexual and gender fluidity.” The word “Purusha” itself means consciousness or spirit in Indian philosophy. Hence, it annuls the hypermasculine (the masculine ideal) interpretations of the figure of God (i.e. Vishnu, not specifically an avatar of Vishnu like Rama), that features in her poetry. This proves the hyperfeminine metaphors of the poet are simply her tools and methodology to achieve her ambitions but not the perpetuation of the feminine sensibility of medieval society (which the poet herself does not uphold in her “worldly” life).

## DEFENDING MIRABAI’S NEO-FEMINISM

In her essay, “Studying Pretty Pink Garbage: Neo-feminism in Disney Princess™” Ephemera Melanie Hurley (2021, unpaginated) points out the limitations of “the individual empowerment of female-identified individuals over and above a collective feminist politics” by using the Disney princesses as “visual metaphors” of neo-feminism. Like these visual metaphors, one could also read Mirabai as the ideal femme associated with feminine imagery and metaphors. Rightfully so, one does not find the voices of the lower-class women in her poetry either or even the women as a “collective”. The poet, hailing from a royal (Kshatriya) household and aiming for the spot held by the “Brahmin intellectual class” could also be seen as problematic. It could be compared to the same problem with the suffragettes in retrospect of the third-wave/pre-civil rights movement feminists.

The speculation over her being a classist and castist could simply be dismantled owing to her methodology being that of the bhakti poets. The poet defies the chauvinistic assumption over intrinsic superiority, stipulated as per class-based hierarchy, to the people who hail from the lower level of the hierarchy by choosing “Ravidas” a man from a caste perceived lower than hers as her “Guru”. The individualistic nature of this rebellious act often label the Neo-feminists as objects of criticism and reduces them to the position of being a “feminist” due to their “own blindness to political solidarity and social inequality among women” as Hurley points out in her essay. However, one of the most integral roles of this “individualistic dialogue” is to not only convey the personal struggle but also the discussion of dialectics that give rise to the struggle which inspires the writer to create the dialogue.

The decision of the creator (be it the writer’s focus on a particular character or the poet’s on themselves) to focus on oneself does not necessarily mean that they are refraining from discussing the social struggles in their entirety. For example, Mirabai’s poetry has a particular objective of achieving enlightenment but she still manages to talk about the hostility faced by the women in the domestic settings of Indian households of medieval Rajasthani homes. Be it the religious persecution or the structural construct of honor/shame, doing away with the binaries created by the castist and classist milieu.

Mirabai introduces sensuality in her poetry, performing it as the “feminine” (the standards being that of medieval India) with the display of some yearning and submissiveness. The discourse that erupts from the poetic metaphors pose a challenge to the expected idealized eroticism masked under the naivety and play of being innocent and pure.

While she makes these musings public, sings them in front of crowds and dances while she does so, she creates a dialogue that collides with the societal expectations of honor and shame in the society of her times. With this, her poetry becomes one of the voices of the female struggle and rejoice as she becomes an archivist (of the women in her circumstance) situated across the pre-existing archives of the voices of that era which are predominantly masculine irrespective of it being theological, cultural or simply historical.

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