

PEER REVIEWED

ISSN 2249-9059

Ruminations: The Andrean Journal of Literature

Editors:

Dr. Marie Fernandes

Principal and Head, Department of English

Dr. Shireen Vakil

Former Head, Department of English
Sophia College

Prof. Susan Lobo

Asst. Professor, Department of English

Peer Review Team

Dr. Shireen Vakil

Dr. Jayshree Palit

ST. ANDREW'S COLLEGE

St. Dominic Road, Bandra, Mumbai 400 050

Ruminations: The Andrean Journal of Literature

Vol. III

Editors:

Dr. Marie Fernandes

Principal and Head, Department of English

Dr. Shireen Vakil

Former Head, Department of English
Sophia College

Prof. Susan Lobo

Asst. Professor, Department of English

Peer Review Team

Dr. Shireen Vakil

Dr. Jayshree Palit



St. Andrew's College

St. Dominic Road, Bandra, Mumbai 400 050

© 2014. Dr. Marie Fernandes

Published: August 2014
St. Andrew's College
Bandra, Mumbai 400 050

Printed by J. Rose Enterprises
27 Surve Service Premises, Sonawala X Road,
Goregaon (E), Mumbai 400 063.

Index

Faith and Ideology in Literature	Dr. Marie Fernandes	1
The Split Personality Disorder Syndrome in Faith and Ideology	Kiran Nagarkar	5
Report of A Comparative Study of Some Indian and European Women Mystic-poets	Dr. Shireen Vakil and Principal, Dr. Sr. Ananda Amritmahal	23
Negro Spirituals: Identity and Liberation	Dr. Rajan J. Barrett	37
The role of Faith and Ideology in African Fiction for Children and Young Adults: An analysis of Achebe's Fiction for Children, Purple Hibiscus and Story for a Black Night	Prof. Kirti Y. Nakhare	45
Existential Dimensions in Anita Desai's Cry the Peacock	Mrs. Renuka Devi Jena	59
Taslina Nasreen's Poetry: Protest against Blind Faith and Ideology of Fundamentalism	Mrs. Arundhati Barde	66

Made in India: Faith and the Ideology of Mass Culture	Sucharita Sarkar	72
Women Mystics: A Comparative Study of Lalleshwari and Julian of Norwich	Meenakshi Thakur	82
The Bhakti Movement in India and the Negro Spirituals of America: A Discourse of Faith v/s. Ideology	Prof. Preeti Oza and Prof. Maria Syed	94

Faith and Ideology in Literature

Dr. Marie Fernandes

The articles in this journal deal with the central theme of Faith and Ideology in Literature. Each article is unique and so is every writer. The issue of faith and ideology is very relevant and we have articles that traverse the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe that articulate man's deepest yearning for God, his faith in Him and also the heinous crimes committed in the name of God.

Kiran Nagarkar's article "The Split Personality Disorder Syndrome in Faith and Ideology" begins by taking up Anthony Burgess's dismissal of Graham Greene's work which he referred to it as so much 'god-bothering'. He writes that it was David Lodge who exposed Burgess' canard. Of the over thirty-five novels and entertainments that Greene wrote only three or four dealt with God and the Catholic faith. These include: *The Power and the Glory*, *Heart of the Matter*, *End of the Affair*. And, he adds that those are exceptionally fine novels.

He goes on to explain that most of Europe may have ditched God but the rest of the globe has gone completely insane with god-bothering, a third of America is devoutly church-going and the Islamic countries are in the grip of a fundamentalist fever. He then goes on to discuss his novel *God's Little Soldier* which deals with fanaticism by those who take it upon themselves to defend their God and commit murder, mayhem, and genocides in His name.

He then goes on to show the disconnect or the split personality syndrome in practically every religious group – Buddhist, Jains, Christians and Muslims when dealing with issues of violence and war. These so called religions that preach peace and respect for all living things quite easily forget their religious tenets and think nothing of perpetrating the most bloody and gruesome acts of violence on their fellow human beings.

Dr. Shireen Vakil and Dr. Sr. Ananda Amritmahal compare Indian and European Women Mystic Poets - Juliana of Norwich, Hildegard of

Bingen, Janabai of Maharashtra and Mirabai of Mewar, Rajasthan. A mystic is one who seeks complete union with God. They examined their work against the backdrop of the socio-economic and politico-cultural context of their time and the norms and restrictions laid down by a powerful patriarchal society. They then made a comparative study of the four mystics, identifying recurrent themes and common concerns.

Meenakshi Thaur's article, "Women Mystics: A Comparative Study of Lalleshwari and Julian of Norwich" also deals with the subject of mysticism in poetry. She argues that both these mystics had no real intention of subverting patriarchy, but were interested only in leading a life of devotion. They simply changed the object of their devotion from husband or lover to Divine Husband or Lover. Thaur attempts to situate Lalleshwari and Julian of Norwich's verse in their social and cultural contexts and explore how their mystic experiences were circumscribed by the dominant male ideology.

As we move to the continent of America we are introduced to the "Negro Spirituals: Identity and Liberation" by Rajan J. Barrett, who examines them from the point of view of a politics of identity and resistance with the hope of liberation. In studying the Negro Spirituals, he is prompted to consider The Bible as a slave narrative. He maintains that the 'negro' was considered only for his brawn value, devoid of spirit and was tortured and humiliated beyond all measure. Besides, the productivity of his body rested with the slave owners. It is in this context that the creative retelling of 'the gospel' through the spirituals raised their broken spirits, promised them liberation and a home in heaven.

The next article deals with "The Role of Faith and Ideology in African Fiction for Children and Young Adults: An Analysis of Achebe's Fiction for children, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Story for a Black Night*" by Kirti Y. Nakhare who makes a claims that African novelists have grappled with the question of establishing an identity for themselves, in the shaping of which faith and ideology play a major role. She examines the works of Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Robert H. Locke to discover the role played by faith and ideology in the shaping of these

works for children and young adults. She also notes the dilemma faced by the protagonists in adopting certain belief systems. She also maintains that this is an attempt at examining the contribution of these works in building a unique national identity.

Renuka Jena's article, "Existential Dimensions in Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*" deals with the philosophy of Existentialism which emerged in the writings of several philosophers, prominent among whom were Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. They believed that man / woman is what he /she makes of himself / herself, he /she is not predestined by God or by society. Jena contends that Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. She reasons that in *Desai's Cry the Peacock*, Maya a hypersensitive woman who cannot cope with the practical world of her husband, is tormented by existentialist angst and feels dejected, lonely and demoralized, resulting in the ultimate catastrophe where she kills her husband out of frustration. She argues that the reader sympathizes with her helpless situation, in her struggle to lead a meaningful existence.

Arundhati Barde's paper deals with Taslima Nasreen's poetry. It centres on the basic tenets of Islamic Fundamentalism, the treatment of women under religious scriptures and Nasreen's strong protest against its ideology as revealed in her selected poems. She examines the *Qur'an* which she contends unambiguously gives men authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other. The *Qur'an* has also laid down principles regarding divorce, rape and punishment for adultery which fundamentalists or extremists strictly and blindly follow. She analyses Taslima Nasreen's poetry and her life, and holds the view that it is a strong protest against the blind followers of Islam.

Sucharita Sarkar's paper, "Made in India: Faith and the Ideology of Mass Culture," uses the lens of Culture Studies to view devotional prints in calendars, advertisements and such texts as problematic discourses of faith that merge religion, mass culture, commerce, ideology and the marketing of an 'Indian' image to 'other' or non-Indian audiences. She

claims that taken together, these objects or texts reveal the politics, shifts and resistances within and between binaries such as religion and science, tradition and modernity, coloniser and colonised, public and private, sacred and profane and Indian and Western. She quotes Theodor Adorno who critiqued the 'curse of modern mass culture', and wonders how this commoditised schema of mass culture has helped the Indian devotee to locate 'the still centre' by finding the divine in the quotidian, when in the 'Western' world, as Yeats' lamented, things have 'fallen apart'.

Finally, the joint paper presented by Preeti Oza and Maria Syed, "The Bhakti Movement in India and the Negro Spirituals of America: A Discourse of Faith v/s. Ideology", presents a parallel of two different ideologies, one in India and the other in the US which addressed the need of the marginalized to rely on religious expression in the wake of social discrimination. Dalit literature of India marks a militant protest against upper caste literature that upheld Brahmanical values. Dalit aesthetics was shaped by the Bhakti movement but it has now undergone strategic changes. In the US when the slaves faced appalling discrimination and injustice, the only solace that provided them hope and faith was the 'spirituals'. As they expressed their feelings through their 'spirituals' they gave vent to their feelings and also looked forward in hope to a better life to come.

The Split Personality Disorder Syndrome in Faith and Ideology

Kiran Nagarkar

Anthony Burgess who is remembered mainly as the author of *The Clockwork Orange* and for Stanley Kubrick's movie version of it did a fairly effective hatchet job on a fellow-writer. He dismissed Graham Greene's work by referring to it as so much god-bothering. Whatever the facts of the matter, the phrase stuck like chewing gum in the hair.

If writers are subject to ups and downs when they are alive, they are even more so after they are dead. Greene's fortunes went into decline rapidly after his demise. For the last fifteen or more years it has been fashionable to talk of Greene as passé and a fuddy-duddy. Much of the credit for this goes to Burgess's poisonous little kindness. Merely as a matter of academic interest, some years ago David Lodge wrote an article on Graham Greene in the *New York Review of Books* where he glancingly exposed Burgess' canard. Of the over thirty-five novels and entertainments that Greene wrote, only three or four dealt with God and the Catholic faith. I remember *The Power and the Glory*, *Heart of the Matter*, *End of the Affair*. And those are exceptionally fine novels.

But to come back to Anthony Burgess, what would he make of the world today? Most of Europe, though let me stress not all of it, may have ditched God but the rest of the globe has gone completely bananas (insane) with god-bothering. And however reluctant it may have been, even Europe has had to perforce come to terms with it. One third of America is neo-conservative, if not tea-party super-conservative and another third is at least devoutly church-going. As to the Islamic countries, they are in the grip of a fundamentalist fever that threatens to plunge our world into an old-testament Armageddon. The phenomenon of the *jehadis* or the holy warriors of Islam affects almost everything we or our governments do and yet there is not much of an attempt or desire on our part to get under their skin and penetrate their psyches. This is again the result, to a large extent of the supercilious dismissive attitude exemplified by Burgess

and his ilk. Indeed, if he was alive, Burgess, would have to eat his words and start god-bothering in a very big and serious fashion.

What exactly do I mean by the title of my paper, the split personality disorder syndrome or SPDS in faith and ideology? At the outset let me clarify that I am not using SPDS in any technical sense. I hope to examine the great divide between what the believers of any hue set out to achieve and what they end up realizing. Or to put it differently, my talk is a meditation on the distance between what we profess to believe in and our actions. I hope to touch upon the contradictions within the holy books and how even if the text is the same, each one of us chooses to believe what suits us. Is human hypocrisy responsible for the gap? Is it double-speak? Is it wilful blindness? Or is it what life does to our ideals and best intentions?

Perhaps it's sheer serendipity that *God's Little Soldier*, a novel I wrote some years ago, deals precisely with the subject of this seminar: Faith and Ideology. The terms are often inter-changeable for as we have seen time and again, ideologies like capitalism and communism also turn into inflexible and rabid faiths. In the greater part of this paper, I will not be talking about the benign and munificent aspects of faith but about the havoc both organized religion and ideological beliefs can unleash. I will also offer my own version of how the mystics see the world.

I started writing *God's Little Soldier* in 1998, three years before 9/11. I had been intrigued for a long time by the notion of fanaticism of one sort or other; by those who take it upon themselves to defend their God (or ideology) and commit murder, mayhem, holocausts and genocides in His name or in the name of principles or in the pursuit of some sinister idea of a super-race.

The immediate trigger for *God's Little Soldier* was an event that occurred in the year 1988. Salman Rushdie had just published *The Satanic Verses*. (As I had discovered with my very first play, *Bedtime Story*, the precondition for exercising textual censorship is that those who are hyper-critical of the book, have most likely not read the work in question). Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government was the first to ban the novel.

After India had shown the way, Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme head of the state of Iran, not a lay person but the very highest ranking religious authority in the country issued a *fatwa* to kill Rushdie, a citizen of the United Kingdom at that time. In short, to put the imprimatur of the Iranian government on a fiat to murder Rushdie for exercising what has been considered a fundamental right for over two hundred years in most democracies, the freedom of speech.

It was then that I asked myself the question ‘What kind of person would feel duty-bound to commit such a deed because of an arbitrary decree by a religious authority?’

I would like to very briefly sum up the story of GLS and then concentrate on a bizarre development fifteen months after my novel was published. And from there on move to larger questions and dilemmas. One of my very first decisions as I started working on *God’s Little Soldier* was to locate my protagonist, Zia, in an affluent liberal Muslim family instead of the two-dimensional template-notion of an Islamic extremist from a poor conservative background who has been brain-washed in a fundamentalslist madrasa where he has sat on the earthen floor rocking himself back and forth memorizing the Koran.

Zafar and Shagufta Khan have two sons, Amanat and Zia. The younger of the two, Zia is something of a mathematical prodigy. His Aunt Zubeida wants him to be a good Muslim and urges him to become an apostle of Islam without ever imagining that Zia will not only take that injunction seriously but twist and distort it as he does with everything, to its extreme. Zia is a purist. He views the world in absolute terms. There is no middle ground for him. He abhors that space which the Buddha called the Golden Mean.

When Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, Zia who was studying in Cambridge, U.K., felt duty-bound to pick up the gauntlet. Early in his search for the blasphemous author whom he referred to as Essar, Zia’s girl-friend and disciple, Vivian asked him, ‘But have you read *The Satanic Verses*?’

‘No, I have not. And I don’t intend to.’

‘How can you condemn a book without reading it?’

It is at this point that Zia crystallizes his rationale for pursuing Rushdie.

‘On whose authority do you or I take God? God is not $e=mc^2$, or the quantum theory, that you can check Him out for yourself if you are so inclined. Nor can different gods subsist side by side as Newtonian physics does with Einsteinium. God is faith and must be taken on faith. That is the essence of God.’ Zia spoke as if he was hewing the words out of stone. He was giving shape to ideas he had known in a vague and subconscious fashion but had never articulated before.

‘No Rushdie can affect Allah, nor can blasphemy or heresy touch the Almighty. Allah does not need protection from Satan but a true believer does. It is I who must defend the honour of God or else I, not God, will be defenceless against Satan. If I am to lead my people and perhaps even non-believers to Allah, then I must prove myself worthy of Him. I must vanquish Satan and protect myself and my flock.’

As it turns out Zia’s attempt to murder the author is foiled at the very last minute by his brother Amanat. From that moment Zia turns into a jihadi warrior. Zia is an idealist, one who is willing to put his life on the line for his convictions. As his name suggests, he could have been a beacon of light but things pan out rather differently. It is his older brother, Amanat who goes to the heart of the matter. ‘You are a good man,’ he tells Zia, ‘gone terribly, terribly wrong.’

After a stint as a jihadi warrior and terrorist, Zia is betrayed by his most trustworthy deputy, the Afghan, Yunus. The next avatar Zia assumes is of a Trappist monk called Luncens, high up in the mountains on the west coast of America. His conduct is exemplary and since he is good with numbers, he plays the market when the old monastery is destroyed by a storm. But soon the extremist in Lucens shows up and he leaves the monastery to take up the fight against abortions and the cause of orphans. As usual his intentions are noble. He starts Zero Orphans, an institution

which takes unwanted new-born children and once again he is able to finance his worthy activities with the money he earns on the stock exchange till one day he loses his Midas touch.

It is at this point that Zia turns to a Hindu guru, Shakta Muni, the eminence grise who has been a shadowy figure so far and is initiated into arcane Hindu practices without becoming a Hindu. Once again Zia has a new name: Tejas. Like Indira Gandhi's yoga guru, Dhirendra Bramhachari and Prime Minister Narsimha Rao's Chandraswami, Shakta Muni too is in the arms business. Thanks to the Tantrik, Zia-Lucens regains his gift and becomes a partner in the Muni's armament business.

One of the themes that the novel explores is that highly volatile quantity called idealism. In most instances, its exercise is fraught with danger. Most people forget, as Gandhiji never did, that the end does not justify the means. Zia is impatient and will use any means, however dubious, to achieve worthy goals.

Why add a new chapter a full fifteen months after the publication of GLS?

The question I had to ask myself was: Why would Zia, the holy warrior of my novel, *God's Little Soldier*, have a change of heart and convert to a different faith? I had hinted at Zia's peculiar dilemma in the English text and its German translation but it was only fifteen months after the publication of GLS that I wrote a new chapter to highlight the terrible quandary that confronts my protagonist.

This new chapter comes somewhere towards the very end (pages 561-580 of the Indian paperback edition of GLS) when the son of Zia's former deputy Yunus, the Afghan leader, Nawaaz Irfan offers Zia-Tejas a blank cheque on the condition that he supply him with nuclear weapons. As Zia opens more and more homes for 'Zero Orphans', his need for funding beomes acute. A blank cheque for over a billion dollars is no scoffing matter but for once the thought of this vast sum of radioactive money paralyzes him.

Here's a passage where the novice-master from the Trappist Abbey who's on his death-bed tries to find out why Zia felt the need to convert :

'This is your last chance to come clean, my sad, tortured friend. Why did Zia decide to become Lucens?' That's the question the novice-master poses to Lucens.

Father Paul never let go. Lucens sensed that he would hound him for an answer even after he was no more.

'One may occasionally come across Christians who have converted to Islam but I have hardly ever heard of a Muslim who has embraced Christianity. And certainly not a holy warrior like you. At least that's the received wisdom on the subject. So why did a fundamentalist like you break the mould? Was Allah not sufficient for you, Zia?'

The last three sentences were so soft and brittle, they disintegrated like mirages on hot desert sands. Lucens was not sure whether he had conjured up Father Paul's words or the priest had actually spoken.

'You shouldn't be talking so much. It's exhausting you. Would you care for a glass of water?'

'Last chance, both for you and me. Did you let Him down, Zia, or did you think it was the other way round?'

'Who?' Zia deliberately chose to be opaque in the hope that Father Paul would give the interrogation a break.

'You know well who I mean.'

Lucens realized there was no escaping a dying man. 'It was all such a long time ago, Father.'

'Yes. As long ago as this very minute since you can't ever forget what you did there. It was not Christ who beckoned you, was it, Zia? It was your unrelenting remorse and your need for forgiveness which made you come over to the Abbey.'

It maddened Lucens that this diminishing, receding monk was still trying to provoke him by calling him by his old name, Zia, even though every now and then it seemed as if he had passed out, or perhaps, even died.

‘And yet you were caught in a terrible trap. You could not forgive yourself for needing forgiveness. What greater shame could there be for an upright soldier of God who is doing what he imagines is God’s bidding and is yet crushed by the weight of the knowledge that his purported good deeds are nothing but heinous acts of the purest evil?’

Lucens was silent. The Abbot, Father Augustine, was the one who had taken him into the fold whole-heartedly. Lucens was grateful to him but he had never genuinely respected him. He was too indiscriminate in his goodness and compassion for mankind. Father Paul, on the other hand had always seen through Lucens.

‘Last chance, Zia. Unless you acknowledge the past and your role in it, you will not be at peace with yourself or with God.’

Maybe Father Paul was right. But there were things in Lucens’s past that he could not afford to think about even after he was dead.

‘The problem with stereotypes, Zia,’ Father Paul was not done with him yet, ‘is that they trap both the insider as well as the outsider. They are both its victims and yet are unable to break out of them.’ End of quotation.

As the dying monk astutely points out, Zia is unable to comprehend or explain his intense feelings of remorse. How can he possibly feel guilty when he is so passionately devoted to Allah and single-mindedly doing God’s work? After all, he’s torturing and murdering vast numbers of people to defend Allah from the unbelievers. But since Zia is convinced that he is betraying God by feeling guilty, he feels constrained to prove his fealty to the Almighty, and decides to escalate his attacks on the purported enemy and becomes even more violent.

The new chapter then is about Zia’s descent into hell and the absolution that must come from betrayal. It is perhaps the one and only time that the adult Zia slips up and shows his human side. There is a crack in his

unassailable and absolute certainties and we begin to suspect that even he is not beyond redemption.

9/11

Oddly enough 9/11 did not really affect or alter GLS in any fundamental way. Unfortunately Sri Lanka, Israel, India and numerous other countries had been victims of terrorism for decades. 9/11, however, was notable for many reasons: The impregnable fortress of America had been breached. A new and untried but highly effective and visually stunning method of creating havoc and terror had been discovered together with a monumental scale of the destruction and loss of life. And that too in the most powerful nation in the world.

Perhaps the most far-reaching consequence of 9/11 was that it eliminated all nuance from the discussion of extremism or terrorism. Discernment and the ability and willingness to discriminate between different causes and goals had gone out the window. And it gave a carte blanche to all the tyrannical regimes of the world to invoke the word ‘terrorism’ any time they wanted to repress dissent. Western governments starting with the U.S. used and still continue to exploit and escalate fear of terrorist attacks to justify curbing personal freedom, civil liberties and rights. But they did not stop there. Under the pretext of protecting its people, the most powerful in the world, clandestinely snooped on all its citizens through every conceivable mode of communication available starting from the internet. Everybody you wished to vilify became a terrorist. The Taliban, the Al-Qaeda, the Hamas Palestinians, the Chechens and the Tamil Tigers were clubbed together and painted with the same brush.

Zia’s religion

One of the themes of GLS is supposed to be religion. But Zia’s religion is neither Islam nor Christianity to which he converts and it certainly is not Hinduism to which he never converts. Nor is it some ideology like Marxism, the free market or rampant anarchism. Zia is consistent in one respect. His religion is extremism. Whatever the faith he embraces or the ‘ism’ he propounds, he will always take a stand at the rabid outer limit of a religious, political or ideological system.

(Perhaps all polarities are identical twins and Zia was following an honorable or dishonorable tradition depending on your point of view.

A rather horrifying aside at this point. There is sadly no dearth of ideological genocides and terrorism in recent history. Hitler, we used to think achieved almost the impossible: the murder of six million Jews, a quarter million gypsies, hundreds of thousands of Poles. And yet these numbers pale (shrink) when you think of Mao who managed to kill anywhere between 35 and 45 million of his own people during The Great Leap Forward. The political scientist, R.J. Rummel revived the term democide first used some forty years ago Theodore Abel. Rummel's definition of the word democide goes thus: 'the murder of any person or people by a government, including genocide, politicide and mass murder.' He extends his definition to include intentional or knowing reckless and depraved disregard for life as in the case of forced mass starvation.

The original estimates of the people who died during Stalin's Great Purge were in the range of 20 million. But these did not include the extensive deportation and deaths of people from the captive nations or the minorities inside the Soviet Union itself. Rummel's extensive research of the records from the Stalinist era put the figure then at 43 million. It turns out that democide was a far greater killer in the last century than all the war victims put together. The democide tally of 263 million deaths is six times higher than those killed in twentieth century wars.)

Guilt and Remorse

Does the *jehadi* warrior suffer from guilt and remorse? What an absurd idea. Aren't the two tantamount to blasphemy? How could guilt or remorse assail the holy warrior when he's doing Allah's bidding and fighting Allah's war? Sadly neither the non-Islamic nor Islamic mind is able to get away from this over-simplified and fixated way of thinking in the current climate of distrust. And that is Zia's dilemma. He dare not even admit to himself that he is choking on guilt and remorse and that he yearns for forgiveness and absolution. Instead, he believes that he is letting his God down and tries to compensate for his failings by escalating

the level of brutality. But as you perhaps know, BBC did a programme on Islamic holy warriors who had given up their chosen vocation without giving up on God and gone straight.

The disconnect: how do the Buddhists deal with violence and war?

We hear of terrorist attacks in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan almost daily. By now we are not merely blasé but think of violence as a way of life. I have, however, a confession to make at this point. There was a disconnect in my mind. I had blanked out the question of how Buddhist Sri Lanka would reconcile one of the central tenets of its religion with that of maintaining their armed forces and the murder and massacres of the Tamil Tigers and civilian Tamils. Not for a moment do I wish to underplay the atrocities committed by Prabhakaran and his Tamil Tigers. But there's no escaping the fact that the Buddhists did not see the need for squaring the one with the other. They didn't see any contradiction between the two. I guess my eyes were opened when the Venerable Athuraliye Rathana, a hardline Sinhalese Buddhist monk joined hands with Mahinda Rajapaksa, the President of Sri Lanka in going after the Tamil Tigers and civilian Tamils.

'Day by day we are weakening them (them being the Tamil Tigers) militarily.' The Buddhist monk declared. 'Talk can come later.'

'Talk can come later.' The recent murder of Muslim Rohingyas in Burma and the ghastly destruction of entire villages seems to have followed the same principle. As you may recall, Buddhist monks led a crowd of their own people in Burma a couple of years ago, dragged out Muslim youths from their homes and slaughtered them.

(Despite being brought up on a regimen of cynicism by the rampant corruption and mendacity of our polity, I had hung on to the belief that while Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and the Jews in Israel could indulge in extraordinary belicosity and barbarism, the two religions which would never permit such atrocities were Buddhism and Jainism. After all the

central tenet of both the faiths is non-violence. More so in Jainism than even Buddhism.

The case of the Jains is indeed worthy of study though they have not indulged in overt violence as far as I know. But they have set a dubious precedent in contemporary India. They have done their best to keep the co-operative societies in which they live out of bounds to Muslims and also to non-vegetarian Hindu families who wish to become members though they take care not to articulate this policy in public. This despite the fact that the Indian constitution does not permit any discrimination in the composition of a co-operative housing society. The acute animus the Jains bear against the Muslims is disturbing to say the least. They seem to forget that intolerance is but another form of violence.)

Like all of us, Buddhists too suffer from the Split Personality Disorder Syndrome. And like us most of the time they are not even aware of the contradictions within themselves. I cannot emphasize enough that regardless of what our holy texts tell us, we human beings choose, twist and rationalize what we believe in.

The True Faith

(It might be worthwhile to look at the elements that go into constructing the 'us and them' binary.) Take any religion, Christianity, Islam, Judaism or communism, it can remain in its pristine form only for a few dozen years at the most. Religions and ideologies are like amoeba. They keep dividing and sub-dividing further and further. What would Jesus or the Prophet Mohammed make of the way their religions have developed and grown; and the schisms that have divided the body of Christ or of the Prophet? Who's right and who's wrong? Each schism claims to be the true heirs of the founding father or the relevant Holy Book. And of course the members of the new denomination form a club of the chosen ones. Even after Mohammed had declared that he was the last Prophet, someone or the other has claimed to be the Mahdi, the leader of a splinter group like the Aga Khan or the Syedna or even another prophet. It's no different with ideologies like communism. Stalin, Mao or the leaders of

the different Marxist parties in India all claim to be the only true inheritors, the rest are heretics and should either be excommunicated, burnt at the stake, banished, bumped off, or forgiven if, and only if, they convert to the true path.

By the fourth century A.D. there were so many different versions of Christianity, that the Emperor Constantine called a conference of bishops who formulated the Nicene creed of 325 AD which was further modified in 381 AD to decide on an official version of the faith. Obviously many of the conflicting gospels which were later called the gnostic gospels and various branches and interpretations of Christianity which were being practiced had to be suppressed. Who is to decide which were the authentic ones and which was the true faith or Christianity?

The subject of faith and ideology is rich in contradictions and complications but I will address only two of them and that too in passing. Firstly, the split personality syndrome occurs repeatedly in the text of the Holy Books themselves. The Koran, the Old and New testaments and the Gita often give contrary messages. If according to the Gita everything is preordained, then why do we have to pretend to make choices? What matter whether Arjun refuses to shed the blood of his cousins or acquiesces to Krishna's wishes? Almost every single time the Koran mentions the name of Allah, it is followed by the epithets 'all-compassionate and all-merciful'. Yet when you read the Koran, it speaks time and again about the awful hellfire that awaits the infidels and the lengths to which Allah will go to punish them. The believer will not be troubled by these seeming internal contradictions. As a matter of fact he will see them as rational and just while the impression left in the outsider's mind is of that of witnessing the Old Testament God in his 'vengeance is mine' mode.

Secondly, the split personality disorder is far more visible and much more severe in our individual take-aways from the teachings of the holy texts. Love, forgiveness, the poor and the children are at the top of the 'Jesus agenda'. But look at the strident believers in America and other parts of the world and you realize they seem to be totally unaware of the priorities set by Jesus. On the contrary many of the American Evangelists

promote the notion that wealth is a sign that Christ approves of your single-minded pursuit of money. Pope Francis is a long overdue change in the pomp and circumstance which have marked the papal office for so long but when will the cardinals and the bishops embrace the poor and the down-trodden instead of playing politics with them? As to Hindus, they would rather buy crowns studded with diamonds and jewels worth millions of rupees for their gods rather than spend the money for their less fortunate brethren. At the remarkably beautiful Ranakpur temple in Rajasthan, the Jain priests auction the first 'abhishek' ceremony at dawn to the highest bidder. In Genesis 1: 27 we learn that God created man and woman in his own image. May be he did but looking at our behaviour and our worship of mammon, it appears as if man has decided to make God in his image and tries to buy him with money.

The Other

The internal mechanism by which we justify our behaviour is to blame the other party for our prejudices, biases and actions. 'They are the problem, not us.' How do we manage this sleight of hand. The twin culprits who relieve us of all responsibility and make us believe in our purported innocence are 1) the 'other' and 2) the phenomenon known as stereotyping.

As you well know, the term 'the other' made good sense especially in earlier times before travelling became universal through the invention of trains, cars and aeroplanes. Any stranger even from the next village was an unknown quantity. The foremost question was always, 'Does the stranger-visitor come in peace or to do harm?' He was the alien, the unknown, and the outsider. Was one to greet and welcome him or shun him? Understandably suspicion, distrust and alarm bells were the preferred option.

But something that we often forget is that any schism instantly creates 'the other'. The irony is that in such cases brothers in faith turn mortal enemies overnight. Can you imagine how many 'others' were created in the early days of Christianity. The biggest break however must have

occurred when Martin Luther broke away from Rome and the Catholic Church to found Protestantism. It is no different with the Shias and Sunnis. We in India are lucky that they are not at each other's throats but in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and in Pakistan there's zero tolerance for each other.

The 'other' is the one whom we love to hate, loath and persecute, many a time because he's our mirror image.

Stereotyping

It's curious how we nurse stereotypes and how attached we are to them and yet resent them when we are their victims. We are furious and agitated, and quite rightly so, when there's an attack on a Gurudwara in the States and Sikhs are killed. Were we just as furious when the Sikhs were massacred after Mrs. Indira Gandhi's death or the massacre of Muslims in the Gujarat or Mumbai riots? How often have we experienced racial profiling because of our colour or alien names and religion? Our first impulse at such times is to tell the U.S. or U.K. immigration officer that we're not Muslims but Sikhs or Hindus. What exactly are we trying to suggest? That it's okay for these officers to racially profile the Muslims? Isn't that precisely what so many States in U.S.A. and Islamophobic countries and peoples are doing? How then are we different from them? And this is the only question that matters. Do we want to be sentient, extremely vigilant human beings about what we say, do and believe in or do we want to be like George Bush and say 'I don't do nuance.'

We prefer to paint all those we dislike, fear or detest with the same brush. But the only way we can fight prejudice, preconceived notions of the 'other' and stereotypes is through nuance and by trying to understand where the other is coming from, what are his fears and dreams? Remember Shylock? Have we learnt nothing from his passionate call telling us that he's no different from us? When are we going to take responsibility for our own actions or inaction? When are we going to start re-examining our fundamental beliefs, our uncritical hatred of the 'other', our prejudices or stereotypes? When will we probe and question

what our teachers, parents, gurus and babas and politicians tell us? Most of all when are we going to pause and turn the spotlight on ourselves and our facile beliefs and assumptions?

Kabir in heaven

We've seen a glimpse of the negative side of organized religion and ideology. But the mystics are the best example of all that is worthwhile in faith. I am going to shift gears now and read a passage where Zia's brother Amanat re-imagines the life of Kabir as an example of how the mystics deal with the human condition and God.

We were so much better off with you dead, the weaver Kabir's disciple, Inayat told him. Your reputation would have remained intact. And we would have grown fonder of you. Nostalgia is not just selective memory, it is the reinvention of the past as it never was. We would have romanticized and idolized you. Your crass attempts at attention-seeking and your juvenile desire to shock would have become the stuff of parables and mythology. You were dead. I checked again and again. You had no pulse and you had no breath. Why did you come back?

The weaver patted Inayat's back as if to console him. Inayat shook off the Master's friendly overtures.

It was something of a surprise for me too. I was standing in the queue with thousands of others waiting at the gates for St Peter to check in the Book of Life and tot up and tally my sins and good deeds and decide whether I was to go to heaven or hell. Suddenly, there was a commotion and the doors to God's mansions opened and Michael flew out. It was an amazing sight. The painters and the sculptors have got it wrong. You can't see the angels and yet there's no mistaking them. Their wings are transparent and insubstantial as air and the beatitude on the face ... I can see that you find all this rather florid and are getting impatient, Inayat.

Like everybody else I wondered why he was in such a hurry and why he was carrying a beauteous garland of carnations, or maybe they were roses, the colour of dried blood, when low and behold, he sat down

where I was waiting and put the garland around my neck and lifted me as if I was as light as breath, and took me straight inside.

People were screaming abuses. You would think that they would behave at least after they were dead but I could also understand their anger.

Welcome Kabir, I heard a wonderfully mellifluous voice speak to me. God got off his bejewelled gold throne and embraced me. We are absolutely delighted to see you here. We must say you kept us waiting so long, we had begun to wonder whether you had given up the idea of dying altogether. I prostrated myself in front of the glorious presence. I was overawed and speechless. I couldn't believe my eyes. I mean this was the real thing, the ultimate experience.

Rise, weaver. No need for you to touch our feet. He bent down and raised me. I do apologize that you had to stand in the queue with the rest of the crowd, God said. Peter had a bout of shingles and you know what a hypochondriac he is. He still hasn't managed to update the records for the births and deaths, and of course while he was recuperating, all was chaos. I'm afraid it's no excuse but that was the reason why you were not picked up directly from earth and had to stand in the queue.

I had the depressing feeling that I was still on earth. Nothing, it seemed, had changed. If you were in with the bosses you got special treatment.

Make yourself at home, weaver. This is after all your final resting place, your heavenly abode. Ask for whatever you want, milk and honey, the best fruit in the world, absolutely any kind of cuisine you fancy, wine, women, song. Anything you need, consider it yours. Any time you feel like company, just call or drop by. It would be a pleasure to spend time with you.

It was clear that the interview was over but I must have looked puzzled, maybe even a little alarmed, for God asked me, Is anything the matter, Kabir? You look pale and not entirely happy.

Almighty Father, am I to understand that I have got admittance to heaven?

But of course. Was there any doubt about that?

I don't mean to sound ungrateful but I thought this place had some standards.

He looked at me coldly and I could feel the mercury rising. You haven't been here over a minute, he thundered, and you already have complaints.

You misunderstand me, Lord, I said hastily. I merely wanted to point out that there must be some mistake.

What mistake? His irises had narrowed like a cat's.

How should I put it? My history of misdemeanours would hardly make me eligible for heaven.

Oh, he said, and his face relaxed and a smile broke out like sunlight from a crack on a grey, oppressive day. You mean your whoring and blasphemies, your days as a brigand and a highway robber, your constant lying and your desire to shock and scandalize, anything to be sensational?

I squirmed at this litany of my misdeeds and didn't dare look up.

There's more, much more. He paused. Do you want me to go on?

No, no. I am well aware that you are omniscient, my Lord.

How could we keep you out? You are our annual gesture of forgiveness. Our token sinner and untouchable. We do not subscribe to that dubious doctrine of equal opportunity but we have to be careful about our reputation. They call you a saint down there. We don't want to disappoint your constituency, do we?

Then he turned to me and said, Besides, don't forget, as our honorific title says, we are all-merciful and compassionate.

My joy knew no bounds then. This was truly the God of love. I fell on my knees and took his hand in mine and kissed it joyously. Thank you, God. You are truly great. Then all those waiting outside, the good and the bad, the sinners and the pious, the whole and the halt, they'll all find a place in heaven, yes?

He looked at me in consternation. You must be joking. What happens to the promise I made to the chosen people? What happens to heaven and hell? What happens to the concept of dharma? If people do not respect the word and the law, all nature will be out of joint. It will be a free-for-all. The stars and planets will stray from their orbits and crash into each other, spring will follow summer and the sun will freeze us all. He looked at me indulgently then. Enough nonsense, weaver. We know that old habits die hard and you are merely trying to get a rise out of us. He clapped his hands and a hundred hour is appeared out of the blue of the sky. Someone give a glass of ambrosia to the weaver. Look after him well. He is one of our favourites.

The cup was at my lips, the elixir of life that would grant me eternal youth and bliss. And a great sadness came upon me.

Tell me that we are all chosen, Almighty God. Tell me that you'll let all your creatures into the kingdom of heaven, the worms and the weevils, the birds of prey and the sharks in the sea, the lion and the serpent, the vines and creepers, the parasitical plants and the great trees, all those who walked the straight and the narrow and the rest who fell to temptation and ate of the apple. Tell me that no one but no one will be left out of paradise. I was breathless but continued recklessly. Forgive me, Father, but otherwise send me back to where I came from, for I cannot bear the thought of a God who will leave behind a single creature of his.

You are an arrogant fool, weaver. We would urge you to think again. Do not cross swords with the Almighty. We may deal in infinities but our patience is finite.

He looked long at me as if to give me time and a second chance.

Let them all in, Lord God, I said again.

I see that your mind is made up. So be it, weaver. You are banished forever to the earth and mankind.

Now you know, Inayat why I came back from the dead. There is only one God and Her name is life. She is the only one worthy of worship. All else is irrelevant.'

Report of a Comparative Study of Some Indian and European Women Mystic-poets

**Dr. Shireen Vakil and
Principal, Dr. Sr. Ananda Amritmahal**

Aim: We had undertaken to examine the work of some women mystic poets, both Indian and European; to explore points of similarity between them; and to show how their lives and their poems reveal a sublime disregard for the rigid conventions of their time, for the norms and restrictions laid down by a heavily patriarchal society and an extremely hierarchical religious tradition.

Methodology Adopted: We began with an in-depth analysis of the writings of four women mystics, viz. Juliana of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Janabai of Maharashtra and Mirabai of Mewar, Rajasthan. These writings were examined against a backdrop of the socio-economic and politico-cultural context of the specific writers. Then we made a comparative textual and contextual study of the four, identifying recurrent themes and common concerns, as well as resonances in the poetic voices and similarities in the images and tropes employed.

Some of the questions we addressed were:

- What was the source of the empowerment that these women seem to have experienced?
- Were there specific parallels in their socio-cultural contexts that perhaps served as a catalyst for this magnificent outpouring of radical lyricism?
- Are there traces of similarities in the kind of images and symbols they use in their efforts to express the mystical experience?

The Understanding of Mysticism adopted in this study: The central fact of mysticism is an overwhelming consciousness of God and of the devotee's own soul: a consciousness which absorbs, permeates or eclipses all other centres of interest. The devotee circumvents, transcends or

ignores conventional forms and practices of religious belief, seeing them as secondary to his/her fundamental goal: the intimate union with God that is primary to mystical experience. This experience tends to be highly individualistic, and unique to each person. Yet, it is not even remotely egoistical, for mystical union presupposes that the individual self is subsumed into the all-encompassing reality, the Self that is God.

Socio-cultural Contexts:

Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179): Born the tenth child in an aristocratic family, Hildegard was a frail and delicate child, subject to frequent bouts of ill health. From an early age, she experienced mystical “visions” and was perceived to be different from the other children. This was part of the reason for her being consecrated to the Lord and being sent to a monastery at a young age.

The early Middle Ages saw the beginnings of a revival of interest in art, music and poetry, within a deeply religious context. Hildegard lived in a society that was feudal and highly hierarchical, whether in ecclesiastical or secular circles. The influence of feudal structure and the French courtly love tradition is clearly visible in the literature of the time and Hildegard’s writing also shows traces of this. At the same time, her genius and creative power have forged a unique expression of a dynamic and different sensibility/spirituality.

For Hildegard, as a woman in a religious community, and later as an abbess, the community occupied a very central position in her world. This, together with her foundational and intimate experience of God, seems to have been a source of empowerment that freed her from the normal constraints of the patriarchal and hierarchical church to which she belonged: witness her forthright letters to Pope Anastasius IV, to various European kings and religious authorities, both male and female. There is even a letter written to an ex-communicant – which must have taken great courage, since an ex-communicant by definition was meant to be shunned by all virtuous people.

Hildegard's writings span a vast range of subjects and forms. Her poetic writings, which are being considered here, show clear indications of the same freedom, power and radical transformation we have mentioned above.

Juliana of Norwich (1342 – 1429): Not much is known about Juliana's family or early life. However, we may safely assume that she came from a reasonably well-to-do background, since she was educated. (Though she claimed to be "unlettered" this was probably only a reference to the fact that she knew little Latin.) What we do know is that, following a severe chest infection at the age of 31½ years in 1373, she had a series of "visions" that transformed her life. Shortly after that, she withdrew from public life and enclosed herself in a single cell in St. Julian's Church, Conisford, a suburb of Norwich. In fact, one theory holds that she took the name Juliana because of her affiliation to this church. She spent the rest of her days as a true anchorite in prayer, offering spiritual advice to those who sought it.

The Hundred Years' War (1338-1453) had far-reaching consequences on the life of everyone living in Europe at this time. This war exaggerated chivalric ideals of truth and honour, furthering and refining the courtly love tradition that was already visible in Hildegard's day. (Juliana refers to Christ as her "courteous Lord".) The plague (the "Black Death") ravaged England from Aug. 1348 to the following year: in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Juliana shows great sensitivity to suffering and dying.

The Great Schism of 1377 (the scandal of two popes – one in Rome and one in Avignon) created a gross abuse of the system. The Bishop of Norwich supported Urban VI of Rome, and promised indulgences to all who fought for his cause. Juliana's writings are quietly subversive of the official Church stance. She seems to advocate universal values of love, compassion and peace over and above narrow sectarian hierarchical beliefs. Like Wycliffe and the Lollards (early Protestants groups breaking away from the Catholic Church), Juliana expresses a deep devotion to the human Jesus as opposed to the figure enshrined in the Church.

This was also a period when the primacy of Latin was being challenged and local languages were considered fit vehicles for literary expression. One of Juliana's purposes in writing was to popularise the English vernacular. While her writings are in prose, they nevertheless reveal a strong lyrical strain, because of which we have included her in our study.

Janabai (c. 1298 – 1350): Born to a low-caste Sudra family, on the banks of the Godavari, Janabai was steeped in the bhakti tradition from her birth, for her parents belonged to the Varkari sect. From the age of seven, Janabai was a servant in the household of Dama Shetty, the father of the renowned Varkari poet, Namdev. She would have been treated with kindness and would even have been allowed to participate in worship and devotion, since the Varkari tradition was an inclusive and egalitarian one. Nevertheless, the endless routine and the burden of household labour that fell to her lot would have been heavy, and we find many of her poems referring to this. At the same time, being a servant would necessarily have imposed restraints on her participation in religious functions.

The Varkari tradition was at its height during Janabai's lifetime, with Jnyaneshwar and Namdev having infused a new spirit into the sect. They had introduced many revolutionary new ideas, primarily the concept of equality of caste, creed and sex. Varkaris discarded totally the sacrificial rites and rituals, the *chaturvarna* theory and the discrimination against women and the depressed classes that were associated with Brahminical Hinduism. Women and the lower caste devotees could compose poetry in praise of Vitthoba and sing them in public: at that time, this was a feature unique to the Varkaris. The sect encouraged congregational worship, bhajans and kirtans, and frequent meetings of all the disciples/devotees, and thus animated many people with a new feeling of devotion for God and love for humanity. Having eliminated all intermediaries – guru, matha and the like – and with very simple observances required of the devotees, the Varkari movement made worship as a lived experience available to all people. This revival and popularisation of Hindu devotion is significant when we consider that this was also a period of Muslim presence in the state.

Janabai's poetry shows how women have used a dominant cultural tradition and bent it to their own ends. It is located in the domain of ordinary life, the life of the household, the life to which most women of her time were confined. The joys and tensions of this life are reflected in her poems, while at the same time, her dreams of a mystical union with Vithoba are both beacon and comfort in her hard life. Her love and longing for God serve as the conduit through which she can reach for a freedom and a power that go beyond those available to other women during that period.

Meerabai (c.1498 – 1546): As the only daughter of a Rajput noble of the house of Rathod in Rajasthan, Meera's early life was both privileged and sheltered. She was educated together with her cousin Jaymal, the future Rajput hero. When she was very little, wandering ascetics brought to the house a statuette of Krishna. The beauty of this figurine captivated her, and there is a further tradition that she became so attached to the image that her mother jokingly told her that Krishna would be her bridegroom.

In 1516, Meera was married to Prince Bhojraj of the kingdom of Mewar. Tradition holds that the marriage was never consummated, since she always considered Krishna to be her bridegroom. Be that as it may, she was still childless when her husband died some three years after the marriage. His death exposed her to the persecution of other members of his family, particularly the next Rana.

Her devotion to Krishna led her to mingle freely with other disciples, male and female, both in the palace and outside. These disciples came from various social strata, and often from the lower castes. Meera was famous/notorious for her singing and dancing before the image of Krishna in the public temples, thus transgressing the narrow parameters within which a Rajput princess was expected to live. Her royal inlaws perceived her blatant flouting of social and religious mores as an outrage: a blot upon the family honour and an insult to Rajput aristocracy.

Recurrent Themes:

One of the most commonly recurring themes in all four poets is **the presence of God in all things**. God is thus seen as being both transcendent and immanent. While this perception is fairly commonly accepted in the Hindu tradition (Isha vasyam idam sarvam – Isa Upanishad) and is therefore only to be expected in the writings of Janabai and Meerabai, it is less usual in the Christian tradition, though some Christian mystics have shared it. Consequent upon this perception is Hildegard's refusal to accept the polarisation of men and women, especially women, into "good" and "bad", or the polarisation of the self into flesh and spirit (with its implicit rejection of the former and celebration of the latter). This involves a more holistic view of the world, reconciling conventional antitheses, in which the wholeness and oneness of all creation is of central importance. Juliana too speaks of the ecstatic love of God in which his divine nature is shared by human beings, who are thus transfigured.

For all four poets, there is a You and a Me, and at the same time, there is a blurring and even a dissolution of the boundaries of the two selves. The tension between these two opposing positions overflows into the startling paradoxes that characterise mystical poetry. Meera knows that Krishna is within her, and yet she waits for him all the time.

My love,

he is here
inside

He does not leave,

he doesn't
need to arrive.

Says Meera, I gaze

at the path day and night. (pp.79-81)

Janabai expresses a similar idea:

I am steeped in your qualities, says Jani.

How long will I have to wait for you, O husband of Rakhumai? (p. 15)

Another theme that predominates in the work of all the poets we have studied is the freedom from worldly considerations of shame and honour, from conventional notions of respectability and scandal, that circumscribe women under the patriarchal dispensation. This is very apparent in the works of both Janabai and Meerabai: Janabai speaks of her pallav falling away, Meerabai speaks of her hair being loose – both these are radically subversive of the conventions of decency that govern Indian womanhood. Hildegard and Juliana, writing in a tradition that is suspicious of the “flesh”, nevertheless frequently employ sexual and erotic imagery to describe their experience of the divine. “And in the knitting and in the oneing He is our very true spouse,” asserts Juliana, and while this is in keeping with the idea of religious women being “spouses of Christ”, Hildegard’s use of the concept of the “breasts of the Church” at which we must suckle, is certainly startling.

However, the images of the Indian mystics reveal a far more radical abandonment of convention.

It is indeed remarkable that in spite of belonging within a patriarchal framework, three of these women have, at various stages of their lives, referred to God as a feminine force. Here, we do not mean references either to goddesses or the Virgin Mary. Rather, there is a distinct feminisation of a god who was traditionally and initially perceived as masculine. Juliana repeatedly speaks of “Christ our Mother,” Janabai often refers to “Vithabai”, and speaks of Vithoba’s motherly love, while Hildegard not only personifies both Wisdom and the Holy Spirit as feminine, but also writes, “Therefore the faithful...thirst for the justice of God and suck holiness from his breasts, nor could they ever have surfeit.” This cross-sexual imagery and inversion seems to lead us to a God beyond gender, not through a negation of gender-specific images but rather through a plethora of them. Only in the case of Meera, though Krishna is often represented as being gentle and nurturing, he is never referred to as being motherly or feminine in any way. Meera is the exception here, perhaps because of the rigidly patriarchal Rajput ethos, perhaps also because her relationship with the divine is almost always expressed in terms of erotic love. For the others, the gendered visions

and images succeed each other in dazzling profusion, but behind the multiplicity is a figure, neither man nor woman, but the Living Light.

We have found the above-mentioned themes of particular significance, though our study has revealed a number of other recurrent themes and concerns. Some of these are:

- The power of the Divine Name
- Praise of all the divine attributes
- Abandonment of all anxieties, all desires, all needs into the hands of the Lord
- Immense intimacy with the Lord
- Emptiness of the world without the Lord
- An intense longing for union, for a merging of the human and the divine

These will be discussed at length at a later stage.

Noteworthy Images

One of the key elements to be taken into consideration in any analysis of mystical poetry is the directness of the represented experience – an experience that is of its very nature unmediated. The straightforwardness of the imagery brought into play seems to underline this. All four poets repeatedly employ images drawn from nature, as well as from the quotidian household tasks performed by women. “Jani sweeps the floor,/ the Lord collects the dirt,/ carries it upon his head/ and casts it away.” (trans. by Vilas Sarang, in Tharu and Lalitha, 1993:83) Sometimes, it is the plenitude of nature that is invoked to convey the richness of the mystical experience; at other times, that very plenitude provides a contrast with the emptiness around while the devotee waits for the Lord. Meera says:

The spring feast of colour,
with sprinkling and laughter,
tastes like the dust.
Says Meera, I wait. (p. 61)

Nature also provides symbols central to the writings: Hildegard's cosmic egg includes a number of concentric ovals. Outermost is a ring of bright flame, followed by a layer of dark, violent fire. A star-filled region of pure ether surrounds a circle of moisture. At the centre sits a globe within which is a great mountain. As a whole, the egg represents both the majesty and the mystery of the Creator. At the same time, the different layers serve as a kind of paradigm for her own relationships – at the centre is the yolk, the source of life, and this stands for Hildegard's relationship with her creator, the essential spiritual source of her existence. This source has also been represented occasionally as a well and as a spring.

All four see God as the beloved. This is not specific to the mystic tradition. What is specific, and particularly so in the case of our four subjects is the perception of God as lover, and the confidence with which they express the conviction that God is wooing them, the intimacy of the love-relationship between themselves and God. An assumed equality between God and the devotee forms the underpinning for all the love-play that is subject matter for much of the writing. God is here humanised, and equipped, occasionally with all the paraphernalia of human existence.

The body, and bodily needs, often provide the metaphor for an expression of the yearning for the Lord that is so much a part of the mystical quest. Contemporary psychoanalysis also uses the language of longing: Lacan speaks of Desire being forever rooted in the field of the Other, and of the subject fading along a chain of desire. For the mystics, this Other is God. Sexual desire is, of course, a metaphor commonly employed by all four, but so is hunger and thirst. According to Juliana,

This is the ghostly thirst, [God's] love-longing, ... the incompleteness of his bliss, that he has us not as wholly in him as he shall have [at doomsday]...

(Beer, 1993: 142)

Less obvious images also occur:

Where has the blind man's stick got stuck?

Which forest has the doe lost herself in?

I am a dumb calf, lost, and trying to find her way home.
 What shall I do without you?
 How long can I wait with my heart in my mouth?

(Janabai, 1997: 14)

The devotee's longed-for union with the Lord finds ecstatic expression in images of sensual pleasure, of dance, of sexual consummation: Janabai loses her senses with delight at the sight of Vithoba standing, arms akimbo, on the brick. Meera sings:

The Lord held a glass in front of my heart and I'll dance.

(Futehally, 1994:47)

Hildegard amazingly speaks of consecrated virginity in sexual terms:

O Virginity, you stand in the royal bridal chamber.

O how tenderly you burn in the King's embraces...

(Newman, 1989: 223)

Other images – images of darkness and death, the serpent, the rain, the seasons, references to Hindu or Christian mythologies (as the case may be), etc. – abound. These will be analysed in detail at a later stage.

Conclusion:

All four of the women mystic poets that we have studied broke out of the boundaries of caste and class and transcended their specific socio-cultural and religious contexts, which were extremely patriarchal and hierarchical. The motive power in each case seems to have been the God-experience, which each expressed in a highly individualistic manner. This was a time when women's voices were either silenced or ignored: yet, these women spoke with a force and power that has kept their words alive to the present day, reclaiming a space and a voice within a discourse that traditionally devalorised the feminine. They have been able to appropriate a traditionally masculine/patriarchal domain to voice their special insights and perspectives. These visions and insights liberate

them from traditional social constraints, setting them free to explore and express a radical and deeply transformative intimacy with their God.

*The translations of Janabai's poetry are, except where otherwise stated, by ourselves, with the help of Prof. M.S.Malshe, Dept. of Humanities & Social Science, IIT, Bombay.

References:

Abrahams, E. M. *A Comparative Survey of Hindu, Christian and Jewish Mysticism*. Sri Sadguru Publications. Delhi. 1995.

Alston, A.J. *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*. Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1980

Beer, Frances. *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*. Boydell Press, Woodbridge, Suffolk. 1993.

Bhalerao, Indrajit. *Sant Janabai: Nivadak Abhang*. Pratibhas Prakashan. Parbhani. 1997.

Bradford, Clare M. "Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe" in *Theology Today*, vol. xxxv no. 1, April 1978. pp 152 – 158

Chitnis va Karyakarini. *Sant Janabai: Charitra va Kavya*. Anmol Prakashan. Pune. 1976.

Clementin-Ojha, Catherine. "Outside the Norms: Women Ascetics in Hindu Society." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 23, no. 18 (1988) pp. S 34-36.

Coogan, Michael D. (ed.) *World Religions*. Duncan Baird Publishers. London. 2003.

Craine, Renate. *Hildegard: Prophet of the Cosmic Christ*. Crossroad Publishing Co. New York. 1998.

_____. "Hildegard of Bingen, Spiritual Guide for the Twenty-first Century" in *Chicago Studies*, vol. 38 no. 1. Spring 1999.

Datta, Kitty Scoular. "Women, Authority and Mysticism: the Case of Dame Gertrude More (1606-33)" in *Literature and Gender*, (eds) Supriya Chaudhuri and Sajni Mukherji, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2002. pp.50 – 68.

Desai, Neera. "Women and the Bhakti Movement", in Sangari, Kumkum and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Women and Culture*, Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT University, Mumbai, 1994.

- Doshi, Dr. Saryu (ed.) *Maharashtra*. Marg Publications. Bombay. 1985.
- Fox, Matthew (ed.) *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works*, Bear and Co., Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1987.
- Futehally, Shama. (trans.) *Songs of Meera: In the Dark of the Heart*. Harper Collins. San Francisco. 1994.
- Gross, Rita. *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*. Beacon Press. Boston. 1996.
- _____. (ed.) *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*. Scholars Press. Montana. 1977.
- Heimmel, Jennifer P. "God is Our Mother": *Julian of Norwich and the Medieval Image of Christian Feminine Divinity*. Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg. Salzburg. 1982.
- Hildegard of Bingen. *Scivias*. Paulist Press. New York. 1990.
- _____. *Symphonia*. Trans. and commentary by Barbara Newman. Cornell University Press. Cornell. 1995.
- Hirshfield, Jane (ed.) *Women in Praise of the Sacred*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1995.
- Holloway, Julia Bolton. (trans.) *Julian of Norwich: Showing of Love*. Darton, Longman and Todd. Minnesota. 2003
- Jain, Devaki, and Diana Eck. *Speaking of Faith: Cross-cultural Perspectives in Women, Religion and Social Change*, Kali for Women. Delhi. 1986.
- Jantzen, Grace. *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*. Paulist Press. New York. 2000.
- _____. *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1995.
- Johnston, William. *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love*. Harper Collins. London. 1995.
- Kishwar, Madhu and Ruth Vanita (eds.) *Women Bhakta Poets*, special issue of *Manushi*, New Delhi, nos. 50-51-52, January – June 1989.
- Kishwar, Madhu and Ruth Vanita, "Poison to Nectar: the life and work of Meerabai", 1989 in Kishwar and Vanita (eds.) *Women Bhakta Poets* (see above)
- Llewelyn, Robert (ed.) *Julian, Woman of Our Day*. Twenty-third Publications. Mystic, Ct. 1987.

_____ *With Pity Not With Blame*. Darton, Longman and Todd. London. 1982.

Molinari, Paul. *Julian of Norwich: The Teachings of a Fourteenth Century English Mystic*. Catholic Book Club. London. 1959.

Newman, Barbara. *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*. University of California Press. Berkeley. 1989.

Pelphrey, Brant. *Christ our Mother: Julian of Norwich*. Darton, Longman & Todd. London. 1989.

Raghavan, V. *The Great Integrators: The Saint-Singers of India*, Publications Division, Government of India, Delhi, 1966.

Ramanujan, A.K. *Speaking of Siva*, Penguin Books, London, 1973.

Ranade, Prabha Shastri. *Maharashtra*. Publications Division, GOI, New Delhi, 1997.

Sadarangani, Neeti M. *Bhakti Poetry in Mediaeval India*. Sarup and Sons. New Delhi. 2004.

Sangari, Kumkum. "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXV, nos. 27 and 28, Bombay.

Sardar, G.B. *The Saint-Poets of Maharashtra*. trans. Kumud Mehta. Orient Longman. Delhi. 1969.

Sebastian, Joseph. *God as Feminine*. St. Paul's Seminary Publications. Tiruchirapalli. 1995.

Sharma Arvind. *Women in Indian Religions*. OUP. New Delhi. 2002.

Sharma, Krishna. *Bhakti and the Bhakta Movement*,. Munshiram Manoharlal. Delhi. 1987.

Srinivasan, Amrit. "Reform and Revival: the Devadasi and her Dance." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 20, no. 44, (1985) pp 1869-76.

Swami Ghanananda & Sir John Stewart-Wallace (eds.) *Women Saints: East and West*. Vedanta Press. Hollywood, California. 1979.

Tharu, Susie and K. Lalitha. *Women Writing in India* (vol. I). OUP. Delhi. 1993

Underhill, Evelyn. *Essentials of Mysticism*. Dutton. New York. 1960.

Upjohn, Sheila. *In Search of Julian of Norwich*. Darton, Longman & Todd. London. 1995.

Watkin, E. I. *Poets and Mystics*. Sheed and Ward. London. 1953.

Zum Brunn, Emilie & Georgette Epiney-Burgard. *Women Mystics in Mediaeval Europe*. Paragon House. New York. 1989.

Online References:

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/womenbib.html>

<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/julian.htm>

CDs and tapes:

Jalota, Anup. *Meera Bhajans*. Universal Music India Pvt. Ltd. Mumbai. 2003

Kirkby, Emma and the Gothic Voices. “...a Feather on the Breath of God...”
Abbess Hildegard von Bingen. Hyperion. England. 1985.

Padmaram and Mahesharam. *Mystic Love: Compositions of Meera*. Ninad Music and Marketing Pvt. Ltd. 1998.

Parveen, Abida. *Songs of the Mystics*. Sony Music. 2001.

Roy, Juthika. *Ghunghat ke pat khol*. The Gramophone Company of India. Calcutta. 1999.

Shankar, Pt. Ravi. *Meera*. Universal Music India Pvt. Ltd. Mumbai. 2002.

Negro Spirituals: Identity and Liberation

Dr. Rajan J. Barrett

I would like to consider 'Negro Spirituals' from the point of view of a politics of identity and resistance with the hope of liberation. St. Paul in the letter to the Romans Chapter V theorizes the trajectory from suffering to hope saying that suffering leads to endurance which in turn leads to character and finally to hope. I try to chart the journey of the Negro Spirituals in this paper according to the pattern set down by St. Paul. I will also bring in elements of sociolinguistics and social bonding as essential ingredients of the Spirituals. I hope to show that people together can change their destiny through cultural action, even when it seems hopeless to fight back.

The term 'Negro Spirituals' seems to be a paradox forcing one's attention to the fact that the Negro also has a spiritual existence. Though one is disconcerted by the term 'Negro' today, as a politically incorrect term; the marker of history and identity is carried forward by these juxtaposed words. The fact that the African-American was used for 'brawn value' and had no 'spiritual value' is an irony to say the least. It also implies that the ones who valued them as mere chattel were mercantile and had no spirituality themselves. Responding to the schema *De Fide* of the First Vatican Council, "Bishop Verot of Savannah in Georgia, USA, expressed the opinion that instead of refuting the obscure errors of German idealists it would be much more to the point to condemn the notion that Negroes have no souls." (Jedin: 1960: 205).

From all classical notions of 'spirit' as opposed to 'flesh' the contradictions are even greater on closer examination. (Porter: 2003:28-43). As Marx would draw on the connection and gap between the 'base' and 'superstructure' (Williams: 1991: 408-10) one can perhaps see where the spirituality of the slave owners came from. It was this feigned spirituality that got reinscribed in the flesh in what turned out to be the 'Negro Spiritual.' Perhaps the Word 'reincarnated' might be appropriate here to draw out the paradox and the re-enactment of the 'Nativity Narrative.'

'The Word' becoming flesh in the Negro Spiritual or in the lives of the 'African-American' however, is not the neat sonorous reading that is oft repeated in Churches that are aesthetically pleasing. It is the tortured body which perhaps is constantly made to remember that it is body without spirit, devoid of all elements of being human and humiliated beyond all measure. Whether it is the body of the slave or the tortured Christ it seems as if there is no difference or separation. 'Brawn value' and 'womb value' notwithstanding, the productivity of the body was limited to the turn out for material expansion, and status of the slave owners. 'The Word' as written text was denied to Negros because liberation would be possible if education was available leading to imbalance in the hegemonic structure of slavery (Douglass: 1997:50-51). It was the word as spoken which took root in the minds of the slaves over a period of time and the creative retelling of 'the gospel' (good news) in the lives of tortured bodies and broken spirits which shows how liberation can work in spite of hegemony and near totalitarianism.

'What does the Word do at a socio-cultural level?' is a question that might be worth asking. Here one has to recall the fact that 'the Word' was in an alien tongue, English, that was perhaps unintelligible to the early African-American slaves (Du Bois: 2003:182). Church music which was perhaps the Mass of Bach and other classical composers, acquired an equally unintelligible status to them. What would they have understood of four part harmony, or phrasing, or even the 'Order of the Mass' as 'Breaking of the Word' and 'Breaking of Bread'? (Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42, 2:46, 20:7). These unintelligible ingredients, got transformed into the Negro Spirituals and had the effect of uniting the slaves as fellow sufferers.

The traces of memory draw a connection to what was their African musical past (Du Bois: 2003:180-181) and the Biblical narratives spoke of liberation of slaves both physically and metaphorically. It is the metaphorical, which in being captured, confirms their humanity and spirit and defeats all those who considered their brawny productivity. The linguistic works itself out into a sociolinguistics of community that can

be consolidated by metaphor from an alien culture, religion and language. This speaks of human experience as similarity and is an assertion of the power of the literary and linguistic. This linguistic and literary bridge could be considered as celebratory over the oppressiveness of political and economic power. The Negro Spirituals in many ways confirm that such a phenomenon is possible, though it would take nearly a century and more for this to be transformed to political assertion, in historical and concrete terms. At this stage it seemed that all hope was lost just as the Biblical narrative tells of the Apostles who deny Jesus and are too afraid to even agree that they knew Him. (Matthew 26:33-35, Mark 14:29-31, Luke 22:33-34 & John 13:36-38.) The Negro Spiritual 'Old Folks at Home' or 'Swanee River' talks of going back to 'linger and die' which shows that there is no hope any more, just brutal toil and suffering and death at the end of it all. But the song also has the element of family which didn't exist for many of the slaves as they were actually treated as cattle which were bred and fed on the minimum. (Douglass: 1997: 42). Often the families were broken by slave traders and the notion of family identity was lost. (Douglass: 1997: 20).

The images of family, perhaps were not experienced but in the imagination, which held a hope out to them (Du Bois: 2003: 183-184). It is perhaps that they derived these elements from the families of the masters who seem happy as Toni Morrison shows much later in *the Bluest Eye* (Morrison: 1970). I would not like to claim memory here as one does not know exactly what the notions of family were, from where they came. (Du Bois: 2003: 182). It is important however to recall that there existed the seeming matrilineal family along with the practices of displacing and breaking up family ties by the oppressive slave owners for purposes of control. However, the proximity of the nuclear family of the white slave owner probably sought an image of family to be desired, and even if not hoped for; a kind of grafted notion of family in memory. I think one should consider that the real family did not exist as it is in the Negro spirituals; the signified is absent here and only the signifier (Derrida: 1963) asserts a past and a future which perhaps never was and may never be. Yet, the fact that such images unite and are circulated in song, reinforce a notion of being which seems absent at the present

moment. The unity to see that such an image becomes a reality is what is common, and becomes a uniting force, if not of hope, at least of endurance for the people who suffer. Going back to a mother who would never be able to recognize a child, belies the notion of family. However, the spiritual affirms that there is an earthly mother that one would like to go home to. Thus images of 'home' 'family' and 'mother' are linguistic and imagistic literary devices that not only make the song cohere, but also the slave collective whose sufferings both physical and mental are somewhere finding a commonality of experience. And the notion of enduring in spite of suffering is there behind these images and notions.

It is possibly easy to imagine that considering the Negro Spirituals as peasant songs implies the intangible union with peasants all over the world. Yet the notion of the connectivity and such links between people did not exist and in all probability were not available to the slaves at that point of time. Such organization was not permitted under slavery as any kind of unification would spell the death of slavery. However, the give away was the biblical narrative, which is a slave narrative and shows how one strives for freedom through community, anticipating Marx and unionism. The white slave owners had been insensitive, or blind, to the narrative that they were exposing the slaves to, or perhaps presumed too hard—or too easily—that 'brawn' had no spirit, that the slaves were not human and could not think. They had in fact hardened themselves to the 'Word of God' or else they would have realized how inhuman and unchristian they were. At the same moment one must realize that the Bible as a piece of literature and as a slave narrative is read creatively by the slaves even though available to them only in the spoken form. Ironically, what was written gets transformed to the oral and is transmitted through the medium of song.

The reinforcement of the tunes, which are seemingly simple, or folksy, and have perhaps the rhythm of the worker in the cotton fields, calls for a sociolinguistic reading that the phenomenon provides. The reiteration, rendering, consumption and dispersal of both images and tunes as a cohesive identitarian device of the songs, no doubt, call attention to

themselves. The songs themselves bring in a unity by being sung in unison, this is reinforced in a multilayered manner as the images, the diction, the dialect, the intonation and the suffering proclaim a shared identity. The songs also are not suicidal in nature and speak of the sufferings that have been endured by those of the past and those in the present. Any kind of allusion to suicide would be detrimental to endurance and fortitude, and the spirituals as peasant songs and slave narratives are designed to bring in fortitude, and strength. There is no possibility of striking and the momentum and rhythm of the song parallels the momentum and rhythm of physical labour. Strength is reinforced both physically and mentally by this repetition. This in ordinary terms gives rise to endurance and defines the character of people. The Negro Spiritual performing these seemingly ordinary tasks of developing an identity and character around a few songs also is cataphoric and points to a future (Nicholson: 2008:113).

The fact that there is a future for those whose was 'dark and dreary everywhere' they went, itself is a way of rewriting or rescripting of the self of a people. It is not saying only that they will die and be forgotten or consigned to the earth but that they will have a home in heaven as the Spiritual envisages in 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot.' The question of endurance, leads to a toughness of spirit and a conviction that no matter how badly they are mangled and tortured, they will not only survive but endure. It is true that from a material point of view they could see the decimation of their people. But what was important was that they considered themselves one people and had an identity, racial though it be. The Negro Spirituals fed both on their identity and into building up their identity and their aspirations about themselves.

This hammering home of images, rhythms, aspirations and dreams maintained their identity and helped in an imagining that would see them in the future as a tortured people who would be free and one some day. It was important that they thought of themselves as the chosen people and rewrote *the Bible* in their imagination to think of themselves as the Israelites who had Moses to go and tell Pharaoh to set them free as in the

spiritual ‘Go Down Moses.’ Who was Pharaoh in a democratic land? He certainly was not the President of the United States. If it is true that we live by myths, it was this mythic belief of being free which was certainly what helped them cement their identity and build on it. There was the Black English which was a creolized form of English that they used, which was also a factor that helped in their identity formation, besides their skin colour that figures so prominently in songs like ‘What Colour is God’s Skin?’ and ‘Old Black Joe.’ If we consider the material ties that bound them again we find that the black bodies, the language, and the songs were important identitarian factors that bound them together but more importantly the notion of being a political body of people who wanted freedom from slavery was an identitarian element that was not purely material and was articulated in an unseen and uncrafted manner.

It might have seemed foolish to consider them a political body when they did not even count as human beings and had no rights at all in a democracy as citizens. At the same time it was a faith that they would overcome no matter what happened because they had suffered and profited from their sufferings; they had learnt to endure, and that had built their character as a strong people who could withstand the yolk of the oppressor. One can look at this in terms of sheer human bonding and a process of coming together. The Negro Spirituals documented that process to reiterate who they were and where they were going in the journey of liberation.

One might like to consider the process linked to language. The element of Creolized Black English transformed them, their struggle and their being into a transcendental identity across space and time. It made them one with all those who suffered, endured and were liberated. This was the same language that *the Bible* used more than two thousand years before them.

I think it might be important to consider that *the Bible* as a work of literature can be read in different ways. It is indeed a marvel that in spite of not having direct access to reading, the oral mode and oral narratives

as song got implicated in the process of liberation. What is also interesting is that hermeneutics (a complex method of understanding symbolic and historical religious codes) got transmitted without training to unpaid slave labourers, who were illiterate for the most. I do not attribute this to something supernatural but to socio-political factors of human beings who are oppressed. However, the system of slavery was not foolproof, and since not every one was a slave owner, the totalizing effects were dampened. It must also be remembered that the slave owners differed in many ways from each other, and the treatment of the slaves and the reading of the Bible (Douglass: 1997:41). That some of them looked at the slaves in the way the Bible looked at the oppressed can not be ruled out. However, that the negro spirituals as peasant songs were not forbidden as a threat to those in power should perhaps be noted. The power of song which requires no advanced technology but provides a tool of unification, identity and transformation is also worth observing.

The character of the songs was linked to the character that suffering and endurance provide to the experience of the slaves. The spirituals assert faith in God and in the fact that things will change. This is a politics of hope. This hope of liberation, as we see from the songs is tied up to the notion of Heaven and freedom from the sorrows of the world in Heaven. This hope, while rooted in the experience of the African-American, transcends the bounds of personal experience and becomes an expression for all those who believe and suffer in the world, though their sufferings might not exactly be the sufferings of slavery but oppression. This is what makes the Negro Spirituals popular and perhaps an utterance of faith for those who sing it meaningfully. The repetition of the songs instills a faith in the ones who sang it.

St. Paul does not talk about faith directly but talks about a rational process of deriving something as positive as hope from suffering. He does not allude to an irrational faith in political liberation but a process of people who suffer and endure together. The notion of the individual does not really figure here, but the idea that the individual is liberated along with a group of similarly oppressed people, together. This is indeed remarkable

as it alludes to a philosophy of liberation which is a rational social process that the African-American slaves undergo.

While 'hope' and 'faith' are important Christian virtues, this paper has tried to argue that there is a rationale to faith and hope. While one looks at the notion of 'cultural resistance' and ways of resisting oppressive cultures in power, one can see that the Negro Spirituals are one such way of resisting the culture of slavery. Their faith and hope are not in the realm of fantasy but are grounded in shared action and being together against the oppressor in song.

References

- Derrida, Jacques "Différance" (tr.) Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1982, 3-27.
- Douglass, Fredrick *The Narrative of Fredrick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office No. 25, Cornhill) 1845. (New York: Signet) 1997.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes & Noble) 2003.
- Jedin, Hubert *Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church: A Historical Outline* (Freiburg: Herder, 1960) p. 205.
- Morrison, Toni *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage) 1970.
- Nicholson, Linda *Identity before Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2008.
- Porter, Roy *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (New York: Norton) 2003.
- Williams, Raymond 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory' in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* ed. Chandra Mukherji and Michael Schudson (Berkley: University of California Press) 1991.

The Role of Faith and Ideology in African Fiction for Children and Young Adults: An Analysis of Achebe's Fiction for Children, Purple Hibiscus and Story for a Black Night.

Prof. Kirti Y. Nakhare

African writers have grappled with the question of establishing an identity for themselves, in the shaping of which faith and ideology play a major role. Chinua Achebe believed that the modern African writer should teach and take responsibility in shaping the moral and social values of society. Owing to the erosion of the ethical and communal fabric due to colonization and a series of military coups in the neo-colonial regime, reinstating faith in traditional culture and belief was an essential part of the solution to the problem of identity crisis.

History in the postcolonial period was written from the perspective of the colonized struggle. One of the challenges of postcolonial literature was to suggest how to negotiate the anger, bitterness and mistakes of the colonial period. Facing these emotions and tracing the continuity from the past to the present was an essential part of the healing process.

During this period of social, economic, political and national reconstruction, the role of youth as agents of change was seen as crucial and children's books became vehicles for that message.

The Legon Seminar in Ghana in 1976, stressed on the urgency of producing books specifically for African children, written by African authors, that reflected the African ethos, experiences and world view. (Schmidt, Nancy. 'Legon Seminar on Writing and Production of Literature for Children.' *Research in African Literature* 8.3 (1977):352).

While outlining the goals for West African children's literature, Jasper A. Onuekwusi stated that 'Unity, religious tolerance and patriotism could be themes around which children's literature could be woven.' (Onuekwusi, Jasper A. 'Towards a Reasoned Poetics of Children's Fiction in West Africa.' *Emenyonu and Nnolim* 63-70.)

Ideology in Literature of Africa and the Black Diaspora:

The presence of ideology in literary texts is more pronounced in cultures that had been adversely affected by the colonial process. In fact, according to Peter Simatei

“...texts emanating from such cultures have come to be increasingly viewed as constituting sites of ideological contestations in which ideological positions are constructed to affirm or counter existing views of the world, then it is because such a function is inextricably bound with the more urgent need for self-assertion and self-definition. Hence in most literatures of Africa and the Black diaspora, ideology reveals itself as the agency which functions to subvert hegemonic positions engendered in imperialist discourses.” (Ideology in children’s Fiction: A Comparative Reading of Chinua Achebe and Ngugiwa Thiong’o- Peter T. Simatei.)

In children’s literature, ideological representation whether overt or covert was more urgent. This had to do with the objectives of children’s literature for it was generally agreed that writing for children inevitably involved an attempt to inculcate in them norms and other ethical practices which the writer assumes are upheld by society as its essential premises of cultural formation.

John Stephens has argued that:”Writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive perception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by the author and audiences. These values include contemporary morality and ethics, a sense of what is valuable in the culture’s past, and aspirations about the present and future. (Stephens, John. ‘Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction.’ New York: Longman, 1992.)”

In African fiction-adult and children’s alike, ideological construction remains the overriding concern of fictional texts. African literature attempts to create an alternative world to the one already dismembered

by European imperialism, and it does this by falsifying the ideological assumptions of colonialism.

Chinua Achebe's Fiction for Children:

Chinua Achebe envisages the same function for his writings. He has perceptively handled the theme of the conflict between ideology, faith and fate in his path breaking novel *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's vision of rehabilitating Nigerian society extends not only to adults, it also includes children. His works for children are written to reinstate African dignity.

Achebe witnessed three distinct eras of Ibo history. As a child, he lived in a community where traditional practices still flourished; as a youth, he experienced life in a colonised society; and as an adult, he reached maturity during the era of Nigerian independence.

Achebe, a product of the colonial educational system, had a problem with the literary legacy bequeathed to his society by English writers. To take a quick look at the academic history of Nigeria, it was only in 1965, that three million students were enrolled in primary schools throughout Nigeria. This led to a growing demand for reading materials rooted in African realities for African school children.

Achebe felt that before an African writer could write about contemporary issues, he had to first resolve the question of his own humanity. He emphasized the fact that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans, their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity.

The writer's duty was to help people regain their self-dignity to show in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.

Chike and the River, his first venture into children's literature, has a contemporary setting. In his novels he reveals the tenacity, adaptability and receptivity to change that seem to be characteristic of the Ibo society in general. Achebe implies that the past, however ambiguous, however

painful, must be accepted; it cannot be changed. *Chike and the River* offers Achebe's young readers an almost idyllic portrayal of independent Nigeria.

The British imposed new forms of cultural, political, and economic order upon Ibo society but they did not change the ethical framework of the society itself. While the context changed, the moral qualities remained the same; at least this is what Achebe suggests in *Chike and the River*. He side steps many issues in his novels, he makes it very clear to his young readers that the values of traditional Ibo society - hard work, perseverance, individual initiative - should continue to guide their lives in the modern setting.

Chike and the River in spite of being a children's book, doesn't have sustained and nostalgic portraits of Umuofia. In this text, the village setting is quickly displaced by the urban landscape. Unlike the characters who exist within the tightly woven fabric of family and clan, Chike is left on his own. In spite of being warned by his mother to beware of the city and stay away from the river Niger, Chike is compelled by his own curiosity to explore the streets of Onitsha and to devise a means of crossing the river.

In a series of loosely connected episodes, *Chike and the River* recounts the way in which Chike finally manages to cross the river and the adventures he encounters on both sides.

Chike's various efforts to secure the one shilling necessary to cross the river take place within a clearly defined moral framework in which Achebe upholds specific social and cultural values while condemning others.

As in traditional African narratives, individual episodes in the story often convey an explicit moral statement. The headmaster, an important character in the novel, is never treated satirically in *Chike and the River* - bas this figure often is in contemporary African literature; his stern, moralistic warning must be taken seriously. His insistence upon the values

of scrupulous honesty, dignity, and self-respect are precisely the same values Achebe himself upholds throughout the story.

Although the school setting provides a framework within which Chike and presumably Achebe's young reader - receives his moral education, he must also learn the proper code of conduct through his experiences in society.

After considering various inappropriate means of securing money, including begging and borrowing, Chike realises that it only after working to reach his goal that he can earn enough money to cross the river.

Chike's subsequent adventures on the other side of the river, his role in bringing a gang of thieves to justice, and his public recognition as a hero bring the moral framework of Achebe's story into sharp relief. Chike emerges as a hero primarily because he has upheld the values of his society. His award is a scholarship that will take him through secondary school.

In *Chike and the River*, Achebe turns away his attention from the evocation of the past and addresses himself to the present. His portrayal of post-independence Nigerian life is buoyant, optimistic and remarkably free of the tensions and conflicts that beset Ibo society in his novels. Chike is neither burdened by the conflict between traditional and modern values as are many of Achebe's modern characters, nor is he degraded by the colonial legacy. Rather he seems to represent the best qualities of a new society poised on the edge of its own destiny.

Later, Europe no longer influences the lives of his characters, and neo-colonialism continues to shape the politics and culture of the society he depicts. The breakdown of traditional values is virtually complete, and the entire society is overrun by greed and corruption.

This angst shapes the theme and tone of his second story for children, *How the Leopard got its Claws*, written in 1972, along with John Iroaganachi.

Deceptive in its simplicity, this story takes the form of a traditional African animal story. It is apparently one of the *How Stories* in African oral tradition, the underlying theme is that of betrayal, the dominant tone of anger and outrage. This story, like *The Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*, portrays with nostalgia a world that has now vanished.

The story begins with an idyllic world where animals live in harmony, guided by the kindness and wisdom of the leopard. None of the animals have sharp teeth or claws except the dog-an obvious misfit in this idyllic setup. A torrential downpour brings about a watershed (literally), when the dog is forced to seek refuge in the common hall built by all other animals; this is when he viciously attacks them and drives everyone out. Faced with the choice of remaining in the rain or accepting the new regime established by the dog, the animals choose to derecognize the leopard as their leader, driving him away with stones and taunts. The rest of the story is concerned with the leopard's revenge, who with the blacksmith's assistance procures teeth and claws and the thunder gives him a mighty roar; with these assets the leopard returns to his village and chases the dog out of the hall.

In an epilogue to the story, the dog staggers to the hunters house for sanctuary, offering his assistance to the hunter in exchange of shelter. Thus, at the end of the story, the idyllic paradise is destroyed, with the animals no longer being friends. The leopard, full of anger, eats up anyone he can lay hands on. The hunter along with the dog goes to the forest and shoots anyone from time to time. Only when the animals make peace amongst themselves will they be able to keep the hunter away.

In the context of the story the leopard's anger, pride and his revenge seem justified, yet Achebe suggests that perhaps the leopard's sense of outrage must be balanced against the greater danger that the hunter represents. Although he moralises and condemns at the conclusion of the story, clearly pointing out the perilous consequence of disunity, Achebe offers no easy solutions.

Thus it can be seen that Achebe's works for children bring about his faith in Ibo society its tenacity, adaptability and receptivity. In addition to pride in the past he reinforces the values of scrupulous honesty, dignity and self-respect - qualities that could shape children and lead the way to a peaceful and harmonious society.

In Achebe's texts a high degree of fictiveness is preserved but they have a strong focus on thematic and moral significance. In *Chike and the River*, societal values appear as bottlenecks to his infantile desires, the most burning one being the desire to cross the River Niger by ferry. The narrative emphasizes conformity to societal norms as the only way to avoid punishment and trouble. But we need to acknowledge the contradictory meaning implied in the text that a his growth takes place ironically through his violation of norms which society considers sacrosanct. Conservative moral positions are therefore challenged since they reject adventure as complementary to the child's growing interest in the complexity of human interrelationships.

In *Chike and the River*, the concealment of an operative ideology is total. In his literature for children, Achebe has covered a considerable historical and ideological distance. In *Chike and the River*, one can feel Achebe's dispassionate objectivity and moral certainty, whereas anger without a political or social focus is evident in *How the Leopard got its Claws*. In *How the leopard got its Claws*, Achebe carefully manipulates the structure and symbolic meanings of traditional animal stories to achieve a powerful social and political statement. Working with the traditional West African bestiary, Achebe has conferred new meanings upon established forms. In view of his sharp criticism of post-independence African societies, particularly during the Nigerian civil war, it is clear that *How the Leopard Got Its Claws* is a political parable about modern Nigeria. The spectacle of disunity within the animal kingdom is too suggestive of the disintegration of the Nigerian federation to be merely coincidental. In such a scenario, Achebe's attitude towards restoring faith in the traditions and values of the past is imperative.

Treatment of Faith in *Story for a Black Night*:

One's faith is thoroughly put to test in the novel by former Peace Corps Volunteer Robert H. Locke (aka Clayton Bess). This is a true story about human greatness. Rooted in the facts of daily life in a home in a West African village, the writer heard it as a peace corps volunteer in Liberia. Using the folk tale structure, this story is a critique of modern day life. The seemingly simple story reflects the moral dilemma that people face.

Story for a Black Night engages the reader in moral reasoning and a discussion of the ambiguities surrounding the meaning of selfless love and good and evil.

Clayton Bess- a Peace Corps volunteer, revisited the Africa of the past riddled with Small Pox. The main protagonist in the tale is an old man of colour, Momo, who has seen transition take place in his country. He feels that there is more evil within people than outside of people today. A hint of nostalgia runs across the tale at the loss of the forests, sounds of cars, trucks passing on coal tar that have frightened the birds away from the city.

The Bible is not seen as an answer to questions but the cause of a lot of confusion. The grand-mother hates it and calls it 'evil medicine' (pg10- *Story for a Black Night*). Momo's mother stops reading it and accuses it of bringing on more confusion. She says "Africa is too confused, it is because of the book." (pg 11 *Story for a Black Night*). The story is about moral testing. It begins with Maima, a stranger (an old woman), bringing in the Pox. Maima Kiawu, her daughter in law and pox ridden grand-child enter Momo's house deceitfully.

The women enter their house at night and slink away quietly during the day leaving the pox ridden child behind. The grand-mother, on discovering the pox ridden child, wants to leave it for the leopard in the bush or Mommy Water down the river. However, Momo's mother, Hawah does not want to part with the baby. Old Ma (Momo's grandmother), was plagued by pox herself and had lost her eyesight to it. So she was aware of the ill-effects of pox and did not want her kith and kin to be

affected by it. However, Hawah stands by her decision and asks the grand-mother to take Momo and Meatta away to the town to their aunt Musu's place.

The grandmother feels that books had made Ma (Hawah) different (more humane), she could not distinguish between right and wrong.

“Ma,” she said, “you can never know. You never had book.”

“Book!” Old Ma spit. Pa sent me to school, Ma. You too. What you thought I would do there? I read, and learned. They made me different. I am different.... I don't know right anymore, and wrong. I only know I can't kill this baby.” (pg 29-30 *Story for a Black Night*)

The contrast between the two sisters is brought about when Hawah's sister, Musu reveals that she knew about these women with the pox affected child visiting their house. It was, in fact, the town - dwellers who sent these women to the village, knowingly. Later, Aunt Musu tries to atone for her sins by providing milk cans and food whenever possible.

Eventually, Momo and his mother suffer from the pox sores. They even lose their sister Meatta to the pox. However, Seatta, the stranger's child is saved, albeit with pox marks all over herself. Musu after a lot of contemplation arrives to take care of her mother, sister and nephew.

Finally the reverend's wife feels that Musu did not catch the pox as she had a deep and good heart. Hawah on the other hand had sinned, since she caught the pox! This interpretation of sin by the reverend's wife is intriguing, especially after the ordeal that Hawah had to undergo i.e. sacrificing her own daughter, and her eye, and having endured a lot of physical pain at the hands of the deadly disease.

Hawah is educated and more kind-hearted. She doesn't mind sacrificing her life and her daughter to save an unknown child ridden with pox. Faith in humanity and goodness above religious faith and belief emerges as the overriding theme of the novel. The hands that work and not the lips that pray are important!

Exposition to an Assortment of Beliefs in the *Purple Hibiscus*:

A promising writer like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, very evidently influenced by Achebe's philosophy, has handled the individualistic nature of faith in *Purple Hibiscus*. She has focussed on the strife between new and old belief systems besides the influence of numerous ideologies in the adoption of diverse strains of faith by various characters in the novel. Adichie has dextrously handled the relation between colonialism and religion.

Purple Hibiscus captures a character and a nation on the cusp of radical change. Adichie uses her own childhood experiences to inform the lives of her characters. Her main protagonist Kambili is of Igbo descent and is Catholic.

Purple Hibiscus is a story of the corruption and religious fundamentalism that grips Adichie's native country. Set in postcolonial Nigeria and told from the point of view of a child, overt political messages are held at arm's length, but they inform Kambili's coming of age.

Purple Hibiscus is about a strict, authoritarian Eugene Achike, whose strict adherence to Catholicism overshadows his paternal love. He is a fundamentalist, who has come up the hard way. He owns several factories and publishes the pro-democracy newspaper the Standard. He is praised by his priest, Father Benedict (a rigid catholic priest), and his editor, Ade Coker, for his many good works. He generously donates to his parish and his children's schools. His newspaper publishes articles that are critical of rampant government corruption. However, he believes in an inflexible variety of Catholicism that stunts the growth of his children, who are expected to lead a regimented life .

He disowns his own father and calls him a heathen. He resorts to extreme physical abuse to ensure order. A contrast is brought about by juxtaposing the character of Ifeoma, his widowed sister, against that of Eugene Achike. Ifeoma, a university professor, who although not materially well off, brings up her three children who can think and speak for themselves. She raises them with faith and intellectual curiosity.

Eugene's children love their aunt and find refuge in her middle class, yet comfortable home. It is at her place that Kambili and her brother find their voice. It is here that the seeds of rebellion are planted in the children's minds by their liberal Auntie Ifeoma.

Kambili begins to open up when she meets Father Amadi. A Nigerian-born priest, Father Amadiunlike Father Benedict is gentle and supportive. He encourages Kambili to speak her mind. Through Father Amadi, Kambili learns that it is possible to think for oneself and yet still be devout.

Kambili and Jaja learn to be more accepting in Nsukka. When their grandfather falls ill, Auntie Ifeoma brings Papa-Nnukwu to her flat. Kambili and Jaja decide not to tell Papa that they are sharing a home with a "heathen." It is here that Kambili witnesses her grandfather's morning ritual of innocence, where he offers thanks to his gods and proclaims his good deeds. She sees the beauty in this ritual and begins to understand that the difference between herself and Papa-Nnukwu is not so great. However when their father comes to know about their sharing the home with a heathen ,he punishes his children by pouring hot water over their feet for "walking into sin."

The increasing political pressure in the country is reflected in the violence at home. The office of the Standard is raided and factories are shut down for health code violations. In the meanwhile, Auntie Ifeomais fired from the University and decides to go to America to teach. Eugene Achike dies due to their mother's poisoning his tea. Jaja takes the blame for the crime and goes to prison.

The final chapter of the book takes place nearly three years later. Kambili and Mama visit a hardened Jaja in prison. However, with the leadership in Nigeria now changing again, their lawyers are confident that Jaja will be released. Though Jaja has learned to not expect a favorable outcome, Kambili is overjoyed. She dreams that she will take Jaja to America to visit Auntie Ifeoma, together they will plant orange trees in Abba, and the purple hibiscuses will bloom again.

The Purple Hibiscus deals with the coming of age. Both Kambili and Jaja come of age in *Purple Hibiscus* as a result of their experiences. Kambili's narration is striking because it can be concluded that she finds her own voice throughout this ordeal. Both Kambili and Jaja take steps towards adulthood by overcoming adversity and being exposed to new thoughts; here Aunt Ifeoma is the catalyst responsible to change their worldview. Both Kambili and Jaja are forced to reconsider their stance on their grandfather, who is looked upon as heathen, which forces Kambili to question the variety of faith endorsed by her father.

Multifaceted hues of religion and faith are handled dextrously by Adichie. Colonialism is an important force in shaping the faith of the characters in the novel. Adichie draws a contrast between Father Benedict and Father Amadi. Priest at Papa's beloved St. Agnes, Father Benedict is a white man from England who conducts his masses according to the European custom. Papa adheres to Father Benedict's style, banishing every trace of his own Nigerian heritage.

Eugene Achikeuses his faith to justify abusing his children. Religion alone is not to blame. He represents the wave of fundamentalism in Nigeria that corrupts faith. The influence of colonialism on religion which is a complex topic in Nigeria is seen as a major force in the shaping of Kambili's father's faith.

For him, colonialism is responsible for his access to higher education and grace. He is a product of a colonialist education. He was schooled by missionaries and studied in English. The wisdom he takes back to Nigeria is largely informed by those who have colonized his country. He abandons the traditions of his ancestors and chooses to speak primarily in British-accented English in public.

Father Amadi, on the other hand, is an African priest who blends Catholicism with Igbo traditions. For Father Amadi, colonialism has resulted in his faith but he sees no reason that the old and new ways can't coexist. Father Amadi represents modern Nigeria in the global world. He believes that faith is both simpler and more complex than

what Father Benedict preaches. Father Amadi is a modern African man who is culturally-conscious but influenced by the colonial history of his country. He is not a moral absolutist like Eugene Achike and his God. Religion, when wielded by someone gentle, can be a positive force, as it is in Kambili's life.

Papa-Nnukwu is a traditionalist. He follows the rituals of his ancestors and believes in a pantheistic model of religion. For Papa-Nnukwu, colonialism is an evil force that enslaved the Igbo people and eradicated his traditions. Though both his son and daughter converted to Catholicism, Papa-Nnukwu held on to his roots. When Kambili witnesses his morning ritual, she realizes that their faiths are not as different as they appear. Kambili's faith extends beyond the boundaries of one religion. She revels in the beauty of nature, her family, her prayer, and the Bible.

The individualistic nature of faith is explored in *Purple Hibiscus*. Kambili tempers her devotion with a reverence for her ancestors. Jaja and Amaka end up rejecting their faith because it is inexorably linked to Papa and colonialism, respectively.

Over the course of the novel, both Kambili and Jaja must come to terms with the lingering after-effects of colonialism in their own lives. They both adjust to life outside their father's grasp by embracing or accepting traditional ways.

In conclusion an analysis of these texts by African writers about Africa, reveal a didactic tone running through all texts. It is evident that reinstating faith in the African traditions and morals was the primary concern of writers. Achebe's fiction dealt with in this paper represents two radically different portrayals of Nigerian society. They however reflect the depth of his commitment to the belief that the novelist must also teach, holding up to his society—including its children—a mirror in which its best possibilities and deepest flaws are clearly reflected.

On the other hand, faith is treated as a matter of personal choice in *Story for a Black Night*. It is faith in goodness that forces Hawah to sacrifice

beyond her limit. Hawah's large hearted gesture makes her more appealing to Momo who describes her as: "...I can't lose the picture of her from my mind. Too beautiful, head held high, standing straight and strong, baby to her breast. Besides her, all Africa seems small." (pg 29 *Story for a Black Night*). This text also handles the impact on faith in context of the traditional versus the coloniser's religion. The main protagonist, overcome by nostalgia for the past, seems to favour the former despite its shortcomings. Adopting a middle path would be the best possible way out.

Adichie, a more contemporary writer, reflects the freedom and plurality that exists in one's choice of faith. She believes in exposing the reader to a variety of possibilities in selecting the ideology that could influence one's faith. Once this difficult choice is made, one has to abide by it in order to be at peace with oneself and the world.

References:

1. Schmidt, Nancy. Legon Seminar on Writing and Production of Literature for Children. *Research in African Literature* 8.3(1977):352.
2. Onuekwusi, Jasper A. 'Towards a Reasoned Poetics of Children's Fiction in West Africa.' *Emenyonu and Nnolim* 63-70.
3. Ideology in children's Fiction: A Comparative Reading of Chinua Achebe and NgugiwaThiong'o-Peter T.Simatei.
4. Stephens, John. *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. New York: Longman, 1992.
5. *Things Fall Apart*- Chinua Achebe-Allied Publishers Pvt Limited, 2002.
6. *Chike and the River*-Chinua Achebe -Cambridge University Press- Reprinted in 2010.
7. *Purple Hibiscus*-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie -Harper Perennial, 2007.
8. *Story for a Black Night*-Clayton Bess -Graphia ISBN 0-618-49483-9.
9. *The Novelist as a Teacher : Chinua Achebe's Literature for Children* - James Miller.

Existential Dimensions in Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*

Mrs. Renuka Devi Jena

Existentialism, a philosophical movement emerged in the writings of several nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Man's autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his exercise of will and freedom, and his experience of the absurdity and the nothingness of life are some of the existential themes, which are reflected in the writings of the exponents of existentialism. The literary works of existentialism insist on actions- including acts of will as the determining things. From this perspective, there are no meanings or structures that precede one's own existence, as one finds in organized religion. Therefore, the individual must find or create meaning for it. Albert Camus felt that meaning in life is to be found in the struggle to be true to oneself and in collaborating with society's collective efforts for peace and prosperity. Absurdity or irrationality of life and the inevitability of death constitute the unavoidable angst or agony of the human condition. Writers like Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky had also contributed greatly to the existential notions. Existentialist thought has garnered an unfair reputation for pessimism and even full-blown nihilism. However, nothing in the philosophical train of thought of existentialism dictates a negative view of humanity or reality.

Existentialism has been explored to a great extent in Indian English literature. Among Indian English novelists, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, Anjana Appachana, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai are some of the novelists who seriously concentrated on the tenets of existentialism. A study of their perspectives on existentialism provides insights into contemporary issues and themes of alienation, agony, conflict, death, quest for self identity, etc. Anita

Desai dealt with relationships between oversensitive wives and insensitive husbands and highlighted the mental sufferings and existential angst of her protagonists, mainly women characters. As observed by Singh,

Anita Desai dives deeply, darkly and silently, tries to work out the inconsistencies and dichotomies of the virgin territories of modern life style. She adds a new dimension turning inward into the realities of life and plunges into the deep depths of the human psyche to score out its mysteries, turmoil and chaos inside the mind of her characters.¹

Anita Desai's first novel, *Cy the Peacock* written in 1963 offers an interesting study from the existentialist's perspective. She exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she voices the silent miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist angst. The problem of the tragic tension between the individual and their unfavourable environment acquires the dimensions of existential angst. *Cy the Peacock* deals with Maya, the protagonist's psychological disturbances, her neurotic and intensive obsession with death. Maya, the hyper sensitive young housewife is confined in a loveless arranged marriage to a much older man, Gautama who lives only in the harsh realities of the present. Maya on the other hand is full of life, she wants to enjoy all the good things that life can offer. She loves nature, poetry, music, dance, good food and her marriage with Gautama. She prefers to live in the world of the imagination. After the death of her mother, she was brought up with great love and care by her father, like a toy princess, protected from the harsh reality of life. She remembers fondly,

I enjoyed, princess-like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of princes and regal queens.²

Maya's husband Gautama, on the contrary, is unable to relate to her world, he cannot understand her extreme sensitivity, her quest for the simple pleasures of life, to be true to herself. Gautama considers her desires as

childish and does not bother to respond to her. Maya's restlessness and anxiety is about the realization that her quest for a fulfilling life with Gautama was impossible as they were distanced by their different sensibilities and attitudes. When all efforts to get Gautama involved in her life fails and he is unresponsive to her desperate calls for intimacy, she realizes the futility of their relationship. Maya's brooding is well conveyed to the readers by Desai in her narrative,

But then he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of gold...³

Kierkegaard's philosophy of alienation states that individuals are alienated from themselves and their surroundings which are unfavourable and hostile. Philosophers like Heidegger and Sartre also discussed existential alienation. According to Sartre, we are responsible for our own actions and when we refuse to take responsibility for our actions we experience a sense of alienation. This realization leads to anxiety and anguish, which subsequently leads to alienation and loneliness. Anita Desai in *Cry the Peacock* intricately portrays the sense of loneliness and anguish in Maya's mind, her trauma of being caught in two simultaneous worlds, of past and present and her inability to reconcile to the realities of life. Desai very systematically and gradually portrays Maya's existential dilemma, her search for self-identity. The conflict between aspirations and the harsh reality of existence have a crumpling effect on Maya's inner being. Her constant quest to be true to her inner self is the cause of her suffering. She is portrayed as an anguished soul who does not grow out of her childhood world and shows little inclination to take up adult responsibilities even though she has been married for four years to Gautama, a successful and prosperous lawyer. Moreover the prediction of the albino astrologer about the death of her husband or herself in the fourth year of her marriage haunts her. It gradually gains ascendancy in her mind till it becomes an obsessive fear. Maya is afraid to share her fears with her husband and at the same time she cannot cope with the practical world of her husband and feels dejected, lonely and demoralized. Maya's

life is full of tensions, disappointments, anxieties and fears. Subsequently her mental condition deteriorates as her psychological suffering intensifies in the four years of marriage.

Anita Desai uses several symbolic incidents to convey to the readers Maya's psychic condition. Maya's inconsolable agony at the death of her pet dog and Gautama's mechanical response that he would bring her another dog clearly highlights the lack of understanding between Gautama and Maya, and brings out the disparity in their characters. Her extreme sorrow at the death of her pet dog is an indication of her hyper sensitive mind. Her husband, Gautam, on the other hand, was unable to understand the extent of the trauma in her mind. Once Maya had requested her husband to take her to see the Kathakali dancers, which he abruptly refused to do. Her great love for music is also considered inappropriate by her husband. These minor conflicts have a lasting impression on Maya's psychology. She holds her husband responsible for standing between her and her aspirations, a hindrance to the fulfillment of her desires. Maya constantly compares her father's character to that of Gautama, this further enhances her despair.

Gautama is impatient and irritated with what he considers to be her 'father fixation' and emotional cravings and Maya cannot understand his involvement in his world of work. Maya constantly compares her father's character to that of Gautama, this further enhances Maya's reminiscences of her past life, of her childhood memories that bring back to her the disturbed incidents of her life and crowd her mind and terrify her into insanity. Basically kind and genuinely fond of his wife, Gautama tries to reach out to her but fails to establish a satisfying emotional rapport because of the diversity in their view points and temperaments. Maya's present state of craving and despair as against Gautama's philosophy of aloofness and unemotional attitude brings out the conflict in Maya. Maya's interior monologue reveals Gautama's detached attitude.

Showing how little he knows of my misery, or how to comfort me. But then, he knew nothing that concerned me.... telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another

thought to me...it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me.⁴

At first glance, Maya's melancholy appears groundless in the face of her having everything that is conducive to leading a reasonably happy and comfortable life. In the usual course of things self-examination normally has a curative effect but in the mental processes of mind under neurotic stress, as it was in the case of Maya, even self-examination ends up as a flight of fancy of the zigzag path of associations and as such it cannot be called 'analysis', it serves only to churn an already agitated mind.

Anita Desai powerfully depicts the inner conflicts of her women protagonists who have been deprived of their basic rights by a male dominated society. Women in general are compelled by societal norms to project an inauthentic self image. However, the intense conflict in projecting that image leads to hopelessness and misery. Women like Maya need to assert their individual need to create a new image thus conflict is inevitable to succeed. This awareness of a new image puts women in conflicting situations. When the existential crisis is unbearable they protest, rebel against the existing power structure. Maya's present state of craving and despair as against Gautama's philosophy of aloofness and unemotional attitude brings out the conflict in Maya.

Maya's love for her protective father and her rebellious brother, her inconsolable grief at the death of her pet dog are intended as indexes of her sensitive and sensuous temperament and present a natural foil to the dry intellectualism of her husband, Gautama. All the main characters in the novel have a well defined attitude to life. Maya's father was content to base his life on the fatalistic creed of acceptance. Gautama believes in detachment. Arjun thrives on 'protest' and rebellion while Maya has no such creed to lean on which could satisfy her yearning to love and be loved intensely and totally. She blames her husband for her existential problems, for her loneliness and suffering and as he prevents her from doing what she wants to do, she harbours an unconscious, unreasonable desire to kill him so that he does not interfere in her life. Her marriage to Gautama was never successful; in fact it is responsible for gradually

turning her into a psychopath as her emotional needs could not be satisfied by her husband, who was too practical.

An extremely sensitive and sensuous Maya rebels against the rationalism of Gautama, against his Vedanta philosophy of detachment. She suffers from anxiety, fear and insecurity, which leads her to insanity, violence and self destructiveness. Maya's inability to understand her husband is the main cause of her suffering. She holds Gautama responsible for. His practical approach to situations was a striking contrast to her emotional approach. Desai uses appropriate images to bring out the emotional ethos of the novel and enhance its aesthetic appeal.

The very title of the novel, *Cry the Peacock*, is an indication of the anguished mind of Maya. A clue to the irony of Maya's fate is hinted at in the title's reference to the 'cry' or the mating call of the peacock. Peacocks are generally said to fight before they mate. Desai uses this significance of life and death, their passion in the face of death symbolically in the case of Maya. Maya in a state of insanity, in a frenzied state kills her husband resulting in the ultimate catastrophe. Later, in a complete state of insanity, she explains the episode very casually thus,

And then Gautama made a mistake – his last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshiped moon, his figure an ugly, crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity. 'Gautama' I screamed in fury and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and past him, saw him fall then, pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom.⁵

Existential angst, an important theme of existentialism, includes feelings of anxiety, uneasiness, fear or agony. The causes of the angst are inexplicable, it is not related to any particular condition, and it can be generalized as the fear of meaninglessness in life. Anita Desai's writings have generated immense interest in scholars. Literary scholars have appreciated her handling of simple, everyday ordinary experiences in a manner which signifies their universal existential appeal. The portrayal

of Maya's character is so sensitive that readers sympathize with her helpless situation, in her struggle to lead a life of meaningful existence. B. Chitra's aptly comments that,

Cry The Peacock is a brilliant study of the abnormal psychology of its neurotic protagonist, Maya. She is an enigma. Her moods, observations, dilemmas and abnormalities are conveyed effectively by Desai.⁶

Anita Desai received critical acclaim both in India and abroad. The western audience appreciated Desai's insights and attention to minute details. She expresses, as observed by Naik, a 'uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the West'.⁷ In the perspective of the concerns and themes of the women writers, Anita Desai occupies a significant position. Unlike the other contemporary women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabvala or Nayantara Sehgal who focussed on the changing social scenario of Indian society, Desai took the lead in exploring the troubled sensibility of the modern women, in projecting the inner psyche of her protagonists and in bringing to the forefront the existential agony of women.

Works cited -

1. Singh, Anita. *Existential Dimensions in the Novels of Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, p 18. 2007. Print.
2. Desai, Anita. *Cry, The Peacock*, New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, p 41. 1980. Print.
3. *Ibid.*, p 14.
4. *Ibid.*, p 15.
5. *Ibid.*, p 173.
6. B, Chitra. The Enigmatic Maya in Anita Desai's Cry The Peacock, *Language in India*, 2010, p221, 2010. Print.
7. Naik, M., *K.A History of Indian English Literature*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p 243. 1992.

Taslima Nasreen's Poetry: Protest Against Blind Faith and Ideology of Fundamentalism

Mrs. Arundhati Barde

Fundamentalism in general means a strict adherence to orthodox theological doctrine. It indicates an unwavering attachment to irreducible religious beliefs. Similarly Islamic fundamentalism strictly adhered to its philosophy. Its ideological framework can be summarized as follows:

The philosophical roots of Islam emphasize Islam as a *sui generis* and have a transcendental set of beliefs which excludes the validity of all other values and concepts. It also marks the differences between the doctrinal foundations of Islam and modern philosophical currents. Consequently Islamic fundamentalism is opposed to the Enlightenment, secularism, democracy, nationalism, Marxism and relativism.

The concept of God's sovereignty is the keystone of its philosophical structure. The premises of Islamic fundamentalism are rooted in an essentialist world view whereby innate qualities and attributes apply to individuals and human societies, irrespective of time, historical change or political circumstances. Hence, an immutable substance governs human existence and determines its outward movement. According to Islamic fundamentalism, the essential nature of human beings is religious and atheism is an aberration. Throughout human history there have been only two methods of organizing human life: one that declares God to be the sole sovereign and source of legislation, and another that rejects God as a force in the universe. These two methods are irreconcilable: the first denotes Islam, the second paganism. Once human beings accept legislation to be dependent on the will of an individual, a minority or a majority, and not as the prerogative of God alone, they lapse into a type of paganism, be it a dictatorship, capitalism, theocracy or communism.

However, human history is an emanation of a doctrinal concept that is implanted by God. He designates human beings as his lieutenants on

this earth. The lieutenancy (khalifa) of a human being is to carry out the commands of God.

Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, is believed to have a direct revelation of Allah. He gave directions to him in all matters - cosmic, religion, politics, society, family, economy and duties of a believer. With these teachings, he founded the first Islamic State and led its expansion by fighting and winning over the Arabian tribes. He gave the weapon of Islamic Fundamentalism or of Absolute Faith and Belief to his followers to spread his message. The Islamic ideal has always been a conquering and proselytizing faith.

This paper focuses on the selected poems of Taslima Nasreen's poetry, hence it is essential to underscore a woman's role as conceptualized by Islam.

Qur'an, the holy book of Islam states unambiguously: "Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other" (Qur'an 4:34).

The Qur'an likens a woman to a field (tilth), to be used by a man as he wills: "Your women are a tilth for you [to cultivate], so go to your tilth as ye will" (2:223). Such a view is consistent with the teachings of the prophet Muhammad, who emphasized that women were little more than possessions of, and objects of sexual pleasure for, their husbands: "The husband is only obliged to support his wife when she gives herself to him or offers to, meaning she allows him full enjoyment of her person and does not refuse him sex at any time of the night or day."

The Qur'an instructs husbands to beat their disobedient wives: "Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property [for the support of women]". Qur'an allows men to marry up to four wives; women, by contrast, may have only one husband.

A Muslim man can divorce his wife easily, but a Muslim woman faces great obstacles when she wants a divorce from her husband.

The Islamic court system relegates women to a lowly status. According to the Qur'an, a woman's testimony is worth only half that of a man. In cases of rape, no conviction can occur in an Islamic court unless four male eye-witnesses testify to having seen the act occur. This is in keeping with a 7th-century edict issued by Muhammad. The offence of illicit sexual relations carries punishments ranging from imprisonment and flogging to death by stoning.

The property and inheritance rights of Muslim women are meager in "temporary wives"; i.e., short-term sexual companions who typically contract for a relationship that will last for three days, at which point it can be extended if the man desires.

This ideology pervades the consciousness of men and women in a predominantly Muslim society. As a result women are treated as second-class citizens who are inferior to men in terms of intelligence, morals, and faith.

Taslima Nasreen is a Bangladeshi writer who has published poems, essays, a syndicated newspaper column and novels. She has received awards from different countries of the world. She sprang to international fame when her novel, 'Shame', which depicts the Muslim persecution of Bangladesh's Hindu minority, brought forth a death threat from Islamic fundamentalists. Through her writings she has raised strong protest against the practices of Fundamentalism. This paper concentrates only on the poetry written by her.

Her writings have exposed crimes under the guise of religion, particularly the injustice and the oppression against women. Educated and illiterate women alike suffer in Muslim society under the wrath of fundamentalism. Nasreen relentlessly challenged religiously sanctioned agendas that aim to subjugate women. Nasreen is one of numerous women who are fearless and speak against intolerance and oppression

justified in it. She raised her voice against blind faith in Islamic law which stones women to death as a punishment for adultery.

Noorjahan

They have made Noorjahan stand in a hole in the courtyard.
 There she stands submerged to her waist, her head hanging.
 They're throwing stones at Noorjahan,
 Stones that are striking my body.
 I feel them on my head, forehead, chest, back,
 And I hear laughing, shouts of abuse.
 Noorjahan's fractured forehead pours out blood, mine also.
 Noorjahan's eyes have burst, mine also.
 Noorjahan's nose has been smashed, mine also.
 Noorjahan's torn breast and heart have been pierced, mine also.
 Are these stones not striking you?
 They're laughing aloud, laughing and stroking their beards.
 Even their caps, stuck to their heads, are shaking with laughter.
 They're laughing and swinging their walking sticks.
 From the quiver of their cruel eyes,
 Arrows speed to pierce her body,
 My body also.
 Are these arrows not piercing your body?

She vividly depicts the scene of punishment. She wants readers to empathize with Noorjahan as she is punished by stoning to death because of her crime. She claims humans should not allow such barbarism, humiliation, inequality, or injustice in the name of religion or culture. Culture should not or must not be used against humanity. She says everywhere women are oppressed and the source of the problem is male-devised patriarchy, religion, tradition, culture and customs. Because of blind faith, humans are suffering from bloodshed, hatred, ignorance, illiteracy, injustices and poverty.

In another poem, Self-Portrait, she doubts the concept of God and looks backs to her progress. She feels that she is divided from within. She also feels helpless to resist the discrimination that is so wide spread.

Self-Portrait

I don't believe in God,
 I look upon nature with wondering eyes.
 However much I move forward grasping the hand of progress
 Society's hindrances take hold of my sleeve
 And gradually pull me backwards.
 I wish I could walk all through the city
 In the middle of the night,
 Sitting down anywhere alone to cry.
 I don't believe in God.
 From house to house the religion mongers
 secretly divide us into castes,
 segregate the women from the human race.
 I too am divided,
 defrauded of my human rights.
 The crafty politician
 gets loud applause when he rails about class exploitation,
 But he cleverly suppresses all the terminology
 of women's exploitation.
 All those people of supposed good character, I know them.
 Throughout the world, religion has extended its eighteen talons.
 In my lone brandishing, how many of its bones can I shatter?
 How much can I rip discrimination's far-spreading net?

She claims fundamentalism is an ideology that diverts people from the path of natural development of consciousness. They do not believe in individualism, liberty of personal choice or plurality of thought. She believes in fundamental rights of human beings, in equal rights for women in every society and in constructing a society in which everybody gets a fair deal.

She asserts that the religious laws must be abolished to create a uniform civil code in which women get equality. As a medical student she is well aware of the powers of observation, experiment, analysis and reasoning. She realized nothing should be accepted as a fact without reasoning. Religious laws have become out of place and out of time. She claims no one today would defend chattel slavery in any public forum or allow it under any legal code. Thus, insistence on the continuation of practices which denigrates and oppresses women under the guise of scriptures is a hoax. For her this is the conflict between secularism and fundamentalism. It is a conflict between modernity and anti-modernism. It is the conflict between the future and the past, between the innovator and the traditional.

She has been writing against all kinds of physical and sexual violence, religious terrorism and patriarchal discrimination. She dreams of a beautiful world where no woman becomes a victim of trafficking, acid throwing, rape and sexual assault. She dreams of a tolerant world where human beings respect each other, where there would be no war, bloodshed or violence. Her pen is her weapon in her struggle for ethical humanism. She wants women to think and argue and raise their voices. They must understand the power of imagination and intelligence.

References:

1. Verma S.L.: “Advanced Political Theory”, ch.16, Rawat Publication.
2. Athalekar Mangala: “Mahapurshanchya najaretun stree” ch.4, Maneka Prakashan,Pune

Made in India: Faith and the Ideology of Mass Culture

Sucharita Sarkar

1. How Industrialisation Revolutionised Hinduism

In popular discourse, India is regarded as the land of unity (not uniformity) in diversity. The reason for the diversity is the successive waves of invasions and migrations over the centuries, which have cumulatively led to an accumulation of cultures and faiths in the subcontinent. The concept of ‘unity’ is more modern - both a colonial legacy and a nationalist ideal. However, the propagation of faith in India has always been contoured by complex issues of class, commerce, community, and nationhood. In this paper, I would like to focus on the discourse of Hindu faith in the post-industrial era through popularly circulated ephemera.

In predominantly agricultural India, industrialism was a by-product of British imperialism. The colonial encounter resulted in the ‘historic introduction of oil painting to the subcontinent’ (Mathur 5) as well as in the arrival of the printing press. Both these events are significant in the setting up of Raja Ravi Varma’s lithographic printing press in 1894.

Since the onset of the Age of Reason in the ‘Western’ world, ‘Galileo’s scientific revolution and Darwin’s theory of evolution seemed to put science and religion forever into warring camps – one waving the banner of faith, the other marching to the certainty of fact’ (Cimino and Lattin 41). This led to the crisis of faith after the Industrial Revolution, when ‘things fall apart’ and the ‘centre cannot hold’, as W.B. Yeats lamented in *Byzantium*. Inclusive, decentralized Hindu theology ‘does not think...in such binary terms’ and this may have helped to avert or cope with such a crisis (Desai 142). The ambivalence that is seen in ‘the absence of a pronounced heaven/hell narrative’ also led Hinduism to see science, and especially technology (here, of the printing press), not as a rival to religion, but as an ally (Desai 142).

Raja Ravi Varma, often called the Father of Indian Calendar Art, not only used European styles of oil-painting to depict Indian religious or mythological figures, his Ravi Varma Press used Western techniques of lithography to circulate prints developed from his oil paintings amongst the devout masses of Hindus. This started a deluge of Hindu 'bazaar' art – which included both calendars and framing pictures - manufactured at lithography and, later, offset printing presses around the country - which 'vernacularized capitalism' and harnessed mass culture and mass production for and through indigenous religious, cultural and even nationalistic discourses (Jain 38).

Ravi Varma and other print shops such as Chitrashala Press and S.S. Brijbasi & Sons brought lithograph and oleograph prints to new heights in quality and distribution. Celebrating gods, maharajahs, native beauties and national heroes, the prints played a role in arousing Indian identity during the colonial period (Winata and Darmon 8).

2. The Irony of Mass Hindu Iconography

Culture theorist Theodor Adorno noted, 'The more the system of merchandising culture is expanded, the more it tends also to assimilate the serious art of the past by adapting this art to the system's own requirements' (160). This is what Raja Ravi Varma did, basing his chromolithograph prints (low art) on his own acclaimed oil paintings (high art). Many of the devotional prints flooding the market thereafter followed the Ravi Varma template, while some deviated, especially in annually printed calendars which targeted local and regional markets. For instance, in the images of the Goddess Saraswati printed by S. Murugakani, the brass lamps flanking the idol 'indicate that this design is specifically aimed at the South Indian market' (Jain 33).

Adorno critiqued the schema of mass culture for its ‘unproblematic, cliché-like characterization’, and because ‘the repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance’ (160). But it is this very repetitiveness of devotional prints that gives them the power of reassurance – like the repetitive consolatory power of prayer - since the devotee/receiver is looking for exactly this kind of unchanging certainty from these religious images/texts.

A calendar is by nature temporary, embedding the mass consumer ideology of ‘use and throw’ disposability. Ironically, the religious image depicted on it becomes more than ephemera, and the devotee often keeps out-of-date calendars hanging on his walls, often piling one on top of another, because of the notion of permanence encoded in the icon. Often, too, these images are framed in an attempt to transfer permanence to what are, essentially, ephemera. When things around him are ‘falling apart’, these religious ephemera offer the devotee the steadfast consolation of the ‘still centre’.

3. The Metamorphosis from Ephemera to Eternity

How does a transient image make this transition to a reassuring, timeless icon? Adorno comments, ‘Mass media consist of various layers of meanings superimposed on one another, all of which contribute to the effect’ (164). Studying these images as texts, we find a ‘heritage of polymorphic meaning’ accumulated within, and how these overt and hidden meanings are absorbed by the receiver’s conscious and subconscious mind to create a complex response of spiritual reassurance and desire for acquisition (Adorno 164).

The devotional calendar or print starts its journey as commodity, sold on pavement shops. Competing with other similar commodities, the colourful glossiness is an important attribute to gain consumer desirability. The consumer is initially a purchaser, literally ‘shopping for faith’. The image is selected after comparison and deliberation, often on the basis of surface-appeal and affordability. Once the image occupies

pride of place on the wall, (often decorated with garlands and incense-sticks), it is transformed from ephemera to icon, by the rituals of faith, just as the consumer is transformed from buyer to devotee. The monetary value of the image is superseded by spiritual value as object of faith. This shift from ephemera to eternity requires a 'willing suspension of disbelief': a 'leap of faith' that is easy to critique but almost impossible to challenge, so unshakeable is the spiritual faith of most believers.

Founded on multiple sources, Hinduism absorbs all contraries, being both monotheistic and polytheistic. The many divine manifestations are related to the formless One Supreme Being (*nirguna brahman*) as spokes are to the wheel. Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik decodes the metaphysical meanings in the Hindu calendar image/texts using the Hindu paradigm of the divine having many forms (*saguna brahman*, 'the absolute with qualities'). The images in Hindu calendar art are mostly taken from the three major cults of Hinduism - the worship of Shiva, Vishnu and the Great Goddess – as they appear in ancient paintings, sculptures and temple architecture (Blurton). Yet these cults are not separate categories, but fluid narratives that often intersect and co-exist. For instance, in the image of Krishna as *Vishwarupa* or *Viratswarupa* or cosmic form, the apparently fantastic multiple-armed, many-headed image incorporates the all-inclusive, expansive, Hindu idea of God: 'God is all things. He is in all things. He is outside all things. He is She... the human, the subhuman, the superhuman – all are God' (Pattanaik *7 Secrets* 55). By incorporating the devotee (in this case, Arjuna) in the narrative, the receiver becomes part of the divinity: 'We are the observers who create the observation that is life... We and our world are the same. This is *Advaita* or non-duality of being' ((Pattanaik *7 Secrets* 55). The inclusion of the devotee/receiver in the image-narrative also dissolves the logical boundaries between past and present, tradition and modernity, transforming the profane into the sacred, the material commodity (here, calendar) into religious icon and ideology. 'Reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication', distribution and circulation (Adorno 63).

On closer reading, the surface-gloss of popular Hindu iconography reveals a wealth of details developed from centuries of tradition. These details function both as metonyms, explaining the part as whole, and also as metaphors, explicating the material in terms of the spiritual/theological. For instance, in the image-narrative of the Vaishno Devi Shrine, the umbrella is a 'symbol of reverence and awe', whereas the three rocks represent the 'three aspects of the Goddess: she enlightens (Saraswati), enriches (Lakshmi) and empowers (Durga)' (Pattanaik 7 *Secrets* 116). The devotee worshipping these images may not always be critically decoding the multi-layered symbolism, but then faith has always operated in the realm of intuition and belief rather than reasoning.

Unquestioning acceptance is central to the reception of both mass culture and popular religions. Wisdom may come to those who delve deep into religious philosophy, but consolation comes from the unresisting faith of the common man, the 'non-intellectual'. The popularity of Hindu iconography in its many ephemeral forms is a testimony both to its easy availability and ease of reception/acceptance. Jain notes that a tiny place like Sivakasi (known as mini-Japan or kutty-Japan) has over 373 printing presses which 'bear the major weight (over 60%) of print production in the subcontinent' (39). Starting with the stone lithographic press of Nadar Press Limited in 1928, the business of religion in Sivakasi flourished with the import of offset machines from East Germany, and the devotional prints manufactured there were distributed in markets across India and even abroad (Jain 40 - 46).

4. Writing Back to the Centre

Art critics have marginalised and devalued Hindu calendar art as disposable, kitsch and low culture, part of the 'feminization of mass culture' that nineteenth century modernism objected to (Mathur 130). Yet the circulation and reception of these images in local and global markets is a problematic phenomenon that merges religion, mass culture, propaganda, ideology and the marketing of an 'image' of India to the 'other' or non-Indian audiences. The alien-ness of Hindu polytheism from a Judeo-Christian monotheistic perspective as well as the vivid

banality of Indian/Hindu religious ephemera has increasingly aroused the curiosity of the Western gaze, leading to ‘the renewed and spectacular visibility of India in the West, a phenomenon dubbed “Indo Chic” by *The New York Times*’ (Mathur 166).

Because of their exotic, mystical appeal, Hindu calendar art and other religious objects/signs (the yogic ‘*Om*’ chant and the *rudraksh*, for instance) have gained global – albeit niche – popularity, especially since the onset of the ‘crisis of faith’. Restless ‘Westerners’ shop for faith, moving from ‘denominational doctrine’ to ‘experiential elements of religion and spirituality’ (Cimino and Lattin 18). This reflects a growing tendency ‘to mix elements of different traditions into new hybrid forms...as seekers separated from their religious heritage search out new expressions of faith’, like the ISCKON movement (called the *Hare Krishna* cult) (Cimino and Lattin 26). This may be read as another instance of reverse colonization, of the faith of the empire writing back.

5. From Icon to Kitsch

Blurring of boundaries is intrinsic to Hinduism, for instance, between the worshipper and the worshipped. Hanuman is a devotee of Rama (who is an incarnation of Vishnu worshipped as a god). Again, Hanuman is also a deity who is worshipped in temples and on calendars. Such border-crossings make it easier for Hindus to accept uncritically the blurring of intent between calendar as religious icon and calendar as commercial advertisement. The inevitable worshipping of Ganesha and Lakshmi idols in homes and business establishments is proof that in the Hindu mindset, religion and commerce can exist without conflict or scepticism.

In these transactions between religion and commerce, between spiritual discourse and mass culture, the lines between sacred and profane shift in other ways, too. Not only does the profane take on the attributes of the sacred, the sacred is sometimes divested of its spiritual connotations, to become merely a commodity. One of the most famous instances of such a crossover would be the early twentieth-century print advertisement

for Pears soap that used the image of the lotus-seated Mother Goddess to sell soap that was ‘pure as the lotus’.

As Jain notes, the devotional prints of Sivakasi have been reproduced on ‘CDs, postcards, diaries...wrapping paper, coffee table books, jeans, handbags, lunchboxes, even underwear, and – it is rumoured – toilet seat covers’ (46). We may add other commodities like matchbox covers, fridge magnets and coasters to the growing list. In the flourishing market for Indian kitsch, especially those having a religious motif, the ‘curse of mass culture’ has denuded the religious tradition of centuries and has commoditised the icons of faith to serve the needs of consumerism. The ideology of mass culture has levelled artistic value and spiritual value with material value. The commodity which was transformed into an icon by the power of faith has once again metamorphosed into kitsch because of the power of commerce. Adorno observes, ‘The commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear’ (61). The commodity which was transformed into an icon by the power of faith has once again metamorphosed into kitsch because of the power of commerce.

6. Faith in the Internet Age

But then again, there is another side of the story. Just as the old technologies of mass production, like the printing press, have helped in disseminating Hindu religious images and texts among all sections of the population, and just as the very abundance of these images in the mass-market have somewhat devalued their spiritual quotient, the new technologies of mass communication have led to a revival of spiritual awareness, at least among the privileged classes. The Internet today is an indispensable aid in the dissemination of faith. Interestingly, the devotional prints of the past are re-circulated virtually via the Internet, as in the ‘celestial screen-savers from *www.ePrarthana.com*’ (Jain 46).

The Times of India, India’s largest print newspaper, brings out a weekly supplement called *The Speaking Tree* promoting the concept of ‘wellness’, which includes spiritual and material well-being. The online

blog version, *speakingtree.in*, is advertised as a site where one can ‘Find happiness right here, right now’. The features often include analyses of current affairs from a spiritual perspective. For instance, cricketer Sreesanth’s spot-fixing scandal becomes a dissertation on how money corrupts and how to ‘counter corruption with the five C’s: Connectedness, Courage, Cosmology, Compassion and Commitment’ (Pereira and Singh 1), while the Uttarakhand flood tragedy leads to ruminations on how we reap what we sow (Bhagwati 1). Such texts, along with columns on healthy eating, life-skills advice, astrological predictions, nuggets of information about ‘Sacred Objects’ from various religions, combine to provide ‘intelligent and informed coverage of religion – if only it makes good business sense’ (Cimino and Lattin 148). The overt thrust of *The Speaking Tree* discourses is to raise awareness of spirituality without discrimination among religions – so as to offer the readers various paths to consolation and salvation.

The desire to find salvation through a personally-chosen route has led seekers to the internet, which literally delivers spirituality to our fingertips. Cimino and Lattin comment, ‘In the new millennium, peace may finally come to science and religion’ (42). Again, we see science becoming an ally, a tool for circulating religion. ‘Prayer, instruction and fellowship are all found in the cathedrals of cyberspace’ (Cimono and Lattin 113). There is a clear linkage of purpose and reception between the faith on the walls and the faith on the phone/PC screensaver. Just as the quotidian calendar art offers a daily glimpse of the divine, spiritual websites and SMS-es give the devotee ‘Your Daily Dose of Spirituality’ (*speakingtree.in*). The plethora of choices available to the receiver is also a pragmatic advantage of Hindu polytheism.

[Polytheism] is found in cultures with a clearly stratified social and/or political hierarchy.... Different divinities, like different bureaucrats, have different powers. One then approaches and propitiates the being with the requisite power to fulfil his or her needs or desires. Additionally, one can choose to focus exclusively on a divinity who appeals to one’s own personality (Lamb).

The Speaking Tree website homepage has links to Meditation, Self-Improvement, Philosophy, Faith & Rituals, Pilgrimage, Science of Spirituality, Mysticism, God & I, Wellness, as well as apps for mobile phones. Websites like *spiritualgurusofindia.blogspot.in* and *indiaspirituality.blogspot.in/* act as a platform for sharing quotes and teachings by spiritual gurus and visual images. In this way, the devotional images and texts are circulated and repeated endlessly via the internet, transcending boundaries of space and time, 'repetitions whose perpetual sameness always expresses an identical meaning' (Adorno 93). As with the religious ephemera, this very sameness, coupled with Internet and mobile phones' ease of access, is crucial to the steadfastness and security that faith offers.

The interlinked, cross-referential, spiritual discourse on the Internet can be read as a metaphor for the circle of Brahma, 'because Hindus see the world as being timeless, fetterless, boundless, cyclical and infinite (Pattanaik *Myth* 1). The Internet's virtual reality is paradigmatic of the Hindu concept of *Maya* (illusion/delusion), while the proliferation of narratives across this virtual world is reminiscent of the Protean *Shatarupa*, 'she of the myriad forms' (Pattanaik *Myth* 159). The ideology of mass culture is based on endless repetition, which is a parallel of the 330 million gods in the Hindu pantheon, who are 'countless forms by which the divine makes itself accessible to the human mind' (Pattanaik *7 Secrets* 5), as well the countless choices open to the devotee who is shopping/surfing for faith. The blurring of binaries such as religion/science, tradition/modernity, sacred/profane, art/commerce, and Indian/Western that started with the Ravi Varma Press has continued and expanded in the Internet age to include other dichotomies like real/virtual, virtual/spiritual and private/public.

These apparently fluid shifts within the objects/texts created by the merging of mass culture and faith has its own problematic - one of the side-effects being a confusion of values. Chetan Bhagat comments, 'Indian society has spent a long time living with a muddled set of values,' for example, in our rampant overlooking of corruption. Yet he hopes for a 'values clarification, especially for the new generation' (4-5.) While

that is the ideal, we may begin with values clarification at the individual level as each seeker follows his own path from the plethora of options available to him/her in this unfixed, post-modern, internet-connected age, and also with affirmative action at the social level, where the many vehicles of religion come together in a harmony of values to fight against corruption, divisiveness and other ills for a better world.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *The Culture Industry*. New York: Routledge, 2001 (first published 1991). Print.
- Bhagat, Chetan. *What Young India Wants*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2012. Print.
- Bhagawati, Sadhvi. "Overwhelmed by Ma Ganga". *The Speaking Tree*. Mumbai: 30 June 2013, 1. Print.
- Blurton, Richard. T. *Hindu Art*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993. Print.
- Cimino, Richard, and Don Lattin. *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millenium*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998. Print.
- Desai, Santosh. *Mother Pious Lady: Making Sense of Everyday India*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010. Print.
- Indiaspirituality.blogspot.in*. 2013. Web. 14 July 2013.
- Jain, Kajri. *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. Print.
- Lamb, Ramdass. "Polytheism and Monotheism: A Hindu Perspective". *Huffingtonpost.com* 31 March 2011. Web. 15 July 2013.
- Mathur, Saloni. *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011. Print.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *7 Secrets from Hindu Calendar Art*. Chennai: Westland Ltd., 2009. Print.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Myth = Mithya*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Pereira, Oswald and Reena Singh. "No Game for Gentlemen". *The Speaking Tree*. Mumbai: 26 May 2013, 1. Print.
- Speakingtree.in*. 2013. Web. 14 July 2013.
- Spiritualgurusofindia.blogspot.in*. 2013. Web. 14 July 2013
- Winata, Kalim, and Reed Darmon. *Made in India*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008. Print.

Women Mystics: A Comparative Study of Lalleshwari and Julian of Norwich

Meenakshi Thakur

Faith and mysticism – two supra rational modes of experience – are fundamental in unfolding the profound experience of enlightenment. In contemporary religious thoughts and tendencies, it has become important and reasonable to understand the relationship between faith and mysticism. Professor James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* says “that personal religious experience has its roots in mystical states of consciousness” (379). He also says that “faith-state and mystical-state are practically convertible terms” (424). Herrmann, on the other hand, refuses the notion of similarity of mystic-state and faith-state. It seems that the absoluteness of these judgments requires some modification. The total exclusion of mysticism from religion leads to the impoverishments of faith but on the other hand, the overvaluation of ecstasy and trance states which characterize mysticism has been one of the great controversies of the religious life as evident from the history of Christianity. There is definitely a need for the reconstruction of the connotation of these concepts if their real intellectual worth is to be understood and to avoid any injustice to important religious interests.

The question of mysticism is not simply related to the intense psychological experiences, but it is also a way of defining and delimiting authority. Thus the question of who counts as a mystic holds political importance. From the early days of the Christian church, they have restricted the mysteries of God to the confinements of the Church, as any knowledge outside its confines can threaten the authority of the church. In the present time, the relationship between power and mysticism is more or less the same as it was in the old and medieval periods. If we believe the experience of mysticism, it serves as a basis for the knowledge related to the nature and existence of God, and this knowledge if acknowledged and established, leads to an authoritative position. If we see mysticism as private and subjective, then its authority is limited to

religion only. And mystical experience, if viewed from the perspective of gender as immanent to women and as private and subjective, then domesticity acts as a common thread between spirituality and women. This confinement to domesticity reinforces the role of women as spiritual nurturers of humanity. In the classical period, the supremacy of males in the domain of mysticism was shown by designating learned or enlightened women as “honorary males” (Miles 53-77) as an influence of Plato. In the succeeding ages too, mysticism has largely remained the domain of men. The necessary tool of gaining knowledge, that is, education was not provided to women. Indeed there were some exceptional cases, but in them too, the authority conferred by knowledge was not extended to women. The emergence of a large number of women visionaries in the high and late middle ages throughout the European continent marked their authority as spiritual teachers.

In the modern world, women and mysticism were rendered as private and personal and thus had no role to play in politics. Women take care of the household not only physically but spiritually, as both of them share the same premises. Moreover, the ‘ineffability’ of the mystical experience refers to its inexpressibility which is quite compatible with the silencing of women in the social world. The qualities of ineffability and subjectivity attached to the mystical experience as inexpressible and non communicable in everyday language and life, and out of the arena of politics, is a manipulation to justify the domestication and silencing of women.

Since it is evident that the definition and control over the concept of mysticism has largely been exercised by powerful patriarchy, religious history provides proof that there have been women who were not simply passive victims. There are exemplary women who went against the grain and have depicted their mystical experiences at length with creativity and fluency, and have established their mark in the history of mysticism. While living in a male dominant society and internalizing the rules set by men for women, these women through their lives and writings have provided live examples of their integrity and their knowledge. And it is

clear that to some extent, their strength and insight is related to their gender.

The intended feminist study tries to bring out the differences and similarities between mysticism and feminism and the interrelationship of these two disciplines. Mysticism has always been defined in terms of its essential nature and an experience across culture, religion and gender. To associate mystical with feminism raises concerns about whether women are identified with a “common core” experience that is assumed to be universal, but in fact ignores or suppresses gender disparities. Another concern of feminists is about the qualities associated with mysticism such as passivity, selflessness, silence and absence of desire which assign normative expectations to women’s behavior and thus added to their oppression.

Various feminist scholars hold a positive view of mysticism despite its being a male domain since the early ages. It has played a vital role in the lives of women in every culture and religion across centuries. Dorothee Soelle stresses the subjective element of mysticism and the personal experience of the Divine and the help it can provide to women in stepping outside the site of subjugation due to patriarchal violence. Deidre Green points towards a commonality between mysticism and feminism as both of these disciplines lead towards a transformation in women’s roles, expectations and abilities. Ursula King focuses on women’s qualities like patience in adversity and successful handling of suffering as the source of mystical foundation of women’s compassion and wisdom. These feminists consider mysticism as intrinsic to feminism as it fulfills women spiritually with dignity.

An exploration of the two female mystic poets – Julian of Norwich and Lalleshwari reveals the importance and role of faith and mysticism in the lives of women. These female mystics belong to an environment which had a total aversion to women’s lives and rights and these women, in such an environment challenged the alleged patriarchal control and supremacy more than one in ways. Julian of Norwich was a fourteen century English anchoress and also one of the important Christian

mystics. Little is known about her personal life except through her writings. She chose the life of solitude within the doctrines of the church and there have been speculations that perhaps she was an unmarried lay woman who lost her husband and children in the plague epidemic rampant at the time. She lived during a period of social and political turmoil and came to be known as one of the great mystics and theologians of her time. In 1373, during a severe illness, she had a series of intense visions of Jesus Christ. Immediately followed *The Short Text*, a narration of visions. Then came *The Long Text* which was a theological exploration of the meaning of the visions. Her major work *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love* is based on these visions. Her theology is optimistic and expresses faith, hope and God's love in terms of joy and compassion rather than law and duty.

Julian's views were atypical but considering that she had little impact as a woman and an anchoress, local authorities did not pay heed or challenge her theology and authority. Her theology mainly deals with her view of sin, her belief in God's love refuting His wrath, and her belief in Christ as mother. Julian's faith in God as mother was controversial as some scholars believed that it was metaphorical rather than literal, while others like F. Beer held the opposite view and believed that it was literal rather than metaphorical; that Christ is not like a mother, He is literally the mother (152). She drew a commonality between a mother's role and the role of God, and believed that the mother-child relationship is the only earthly relationship which comes closest to the relationship one can have with Jesus. She writes metaphorically of Jesus in connection with conception, nursing, labor and upbringing. Her positive attitude and faith is revealed in her book *Revelations of Divine Love* through her most famous lines which she claimed to be said to her by God Himself, "... All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" (27).

These medieval mystics through their mystical experiences serve as mediators between God and human beings, a position held earlier by the community priest. Julian and other female mystics through their writings challenged not only the authority of the clergy but also the dogmas of

the Church. These women in the process of recording their mystical revelations successfully asserted themselves in the ecclesiastical and literary community.

Julian vividly describes her two central visions, the passion of Christ and Christ as mother, and illuminates the veracity and sanctity of her experiences. Julian's thorough attention to Christ's withering, drying and disintegrating body mimics the medieval Christian's worship of Christ's dismembered body (Bynum 5). Julian follows this traditional medieval worship by graphically describing the drying, sagging and decaying of each limb of Christ:

For I understood that the great grievous harshness of the nails had caused the wounds to gape open on account of tenderness of the sweet hands and sweet feet. The body sagged ... because of the piercing and scraping of his head and binding of the crown all baked with dry blood (451).

Julian uses the above image to establish the plausibility of her mystical visions and articulates her authority by illustrating her closeness to the highly worshipped "sweet hands and sweet feet" of Christ. Julian especially affords great detail to the wounds and limbs of Christ, a fact which connects her to the tradition of ecstatic images of Christ's blood prevalent in medieval mystical expression. She establishes the medieval beliefs that "blood is ecstasy" to assert her greater religious authority (Bynum 25). Julian had witnessed the passion of the Christ; she had seen the drying of his blood; she had seen the disintegration of his body; she had experienced ecstasy. Julian not only envisions the Passion but also participates as one of the Christ's mourners and thus asserts her authority through the link she establishes with the Divine.

Julian formulates the second image of Christ as mother but within the confines of the Church:

Thus he sustains us within him in love and labor, up to the full term when he would suffer the sharpest thorns and most grievous

pains that ever were or shall be, and he died at the last. And when he had finished, and had borne us to bliss, yet none of this would state his marvelous love (445).

Her imagery follows a style of what Carl Jung terms “extraversion” in which the author “sets the subject below the object, whereby the object receives the predominant values” (qtd. in Stone 30). Julian depicts Christ as superior to herself but her exclusive experience and visions of Christ and their writing asserts her role as a female ecclesiastical authority. Julian maintained her status as a wise and pious anchoress and a spiritually pure virgin in her writings as well as in the Christian community. Her position as an anchoress refined her visions and provided her credibility among her peers. Though an illiterate, Julian actively participated in the text’s composition and its construction through the stylus of the scribe. Through her craftsmanship and analytical tone, Julian removes herself from the text and “thus suggests, not that we should read her book because she is a holy woman, but that her book might be used as a guide to the holy” (Staley Johnson 833). She asserts her religious wisdom through her literary authority.

The other mystic woman under study, Lalleshwari is an offspring of the Bhakti Movement in India and belonged to fourteenth century Kashmir. Bhakti Movement, the greatest religious and spiritual movement of India greatly influenced the world through its enriching devotional literature, music and art. It also revived the spiritual essence which started getting obscured due to unnecessary rituals and artificial social boundaries. Some famous female mystics of the Bhakti Movement are Andal or Aandaal (10th century), Dasimayya (10th century), Akkamahadevi (12th century), Avvaiyar or Auvaiyar (13th century), Janabai (13th century), Lalleshwari (14th century), Meerabai (16th century), Bhinabai (17th century). These mystic women fought for women’s rights and tried to subvert gender roles at a time when this concept was not even formulated. Mysticism granted these women a break from generally revered virtues like beauty, modesty and gentleness. Mysticism helped these women to exercise complete freedom in every sense including the refusal of any attempt of being controlled by the other sex. In most cases, marriage and especially

husband was perceived as an obstacle in the path of devotion. These women needed to resist not only the physical attractions of man but his interference and his desire to control also.

Lalleshwari also fondly called Goddess Lalla, Lal Ded, Mother Lalla, Lalla Arifa was born in the mid-fourteenth century to a Brahmin family at Pandrethan near Srinagar during the reign of King Ala-ud-Din. She was married at a young age in a family at Pampore and suffered the common fate of womanhood after marriage. She was ill-treated and ill-fed by her mother-in-law.

She endured all this patiently and was an embodiment of self-denial, patience and self-discipline. From the beginning, she showed an inclination away from the mundane and the cruel treatment of her in-laws further propelled her to enter the life of renunciation, when she found her guru in Sidh Srikanth. Lalleshwari was a Shaivite mistress yogini and she worshipped the Divine as Nirankar, formless, limitless, boundless, timeless, non-conceivable and non-existent. For her God is absolute, infinite and omnipresent. She had realized God in a vacuum, in a nothingness which was inside her. Lalleshwari was a profound Shaivite philosopher, deep thinker, thought-provoking creative saint poet and artist and a great contributor to the Kashmiri language. She tried to seek self-consciousness by delving deep into her inner-self which revealed the ultimate truth to her, and which has reached us through her profound and inspiring words of wisdom. They delight our minds with inseparable ecstasy. Lalleshwari continues to survive through four-liners known as 'vaakh' (from Sanskrit Vakya meaning a sentence), and these are the medium of her thoughts, experiences and her attainment. These are sung at the beginning of every Raga or 'Muqam' of the local classical music called 'Sufiana Kalam' (literally, words of a Mystic). She is equally respected by the Hindus and Muslims of the valley. The Kashmiri language is full of her sayings. It is claimed that she died at an advanced age in Bijbehara but she remains alive in her sayings. She only kept the company of sadhus and Pi:rs. She would go around naked and claimed that she had yet to encounter a man. She was illiterate but was wise. In

her sayings or 'vaakhs,' she has dealt with everything from life, yoga, God to dharma and a:tma.

The period during the mid fourteen century laid the religious and moral foundations of Kashmir; the people of the valley were subjected to the influence of Islam. The concept of the medieval reformers or Mystics evolved out of this close contact between the two religions and their influence on each other. And it was during this time of religious upheaval that mystics like Lalleshwari and others provided a new approach to religion embracing all creeds and castes, appealing to the 'heart' rather than the 'head'. The mission of her life was to guide her countrymen, and women and did it effectively. Her life and sayings exemplify the tradition of love and tolerance and helped in moulding the character of her people.

Lalleshwari, instead of becoming a victim of circumstances, became a Subject Woman or an Empowered Woman and brought about a cultural, linguistic, social and religious revolution through her mystic poetry. A perusal of her poetry indicates that she conversed with learned men and scholars of her time on an equal footing without the reserve of a woman. The language of her poetry is not elitist Brahmnical, rather it is drawn from the world of domesticity, mainly a women's domain. In this process, she gives voice to the women. As one of her popular vaakh goes:

With thread untwisted my boat I tow through the sea,
Would the Lord heed and ferry me across?
Water seeps through my bowls of unbaked clay,
Oh how my heart longs to go back home! (qtd. in Toshkhani, 25)

The metaphors are drawn from the life of a boatman and the potter, and the climax voices the cry of an unhappy woman caught in a bad marriage who wants to return home. The use of a woman's voice to express the mystic quest and abstract concepts is striking. In her vaakhs, she has also refuted the patriarchal authority of the Guru, a figure highly revered by the mystic. She placed a stronger faith on her inner self, on her own mind along with the faith on God. She emerged as an individual voice unfettered by norms, rituals, obeisance or conventions. She has defied

the patriarchal hold and transcended gender effortlessly without being aware of the prevalent gender factor or having any feeling of regret for not being able to fulfill her wishes because of her femininity. She never accepted the secondary dependent status allotted to women within the confines of Shiva rituals, and dominates the scene as Subject. Her mysticism broadened her insight to emerge as a powerful voice who acted as a torch-bearer for all those men and women who wish to rise above the dualities and hypocrisies of religion. For her, the body acts as a vehicle to carry the spirit rather than to emphasize the difference of gender.

She also controverts serious and highly philosophical male discourse through her choice of vocabulary which she derives from the world around herself: from the potter, weaver, carpenter, blacksmith, and other unprivileged classes, and uses metaphors from their lives to present the highest philosophical truth and the subtle concept of Trikaśāstra, the essence of which she realized through intensely disciplined Shaivite practices. On the one hand, Lalleshwari gave new life to Kashmiri Shaivistic spiritual tradition, and on the other hand, she brought it close to approach of common individuals by articulating its tenets in the language of the common people, thus making it an effective tool not only for individual emancipation but also for social unification.

Thus whether we consider the Christian Mysticism of the Medieval period or Mysticism of the Bhakti movement, it is apparent that it may assume different forms, but the basic essence of mysticism remains the same; there lies a common thread in which beads from multitudinous places, communities and cultures are linked to form a beautiful necklace.

An intense longing for a union with God drives the lives and texts of these women mystics. Their deeper attention towards a spiritual life enabled them to become a body of wisdom and their texts reveal their journey towards the highest states of enlightened consciousness and its pains and illuminations along the way. The contemplative processes and comprehensive understanding of the operation on the inner life of sin and suffering paved the way for them from oppression to freedom and

from human love to Divine love. An analysis of the social, cultural, theological and literacy background of these women mystics leads to the conclusion that their mystic insights compelled them to write their visions actively. They achieved an inward and outward integrity of action by rendering their visions to the outer world through their texts. Their verses explicitly illuminate five essential qualities of women's mysticism – longing and love, great determination, inner monastic heart, spiritual detachment, and the annihilated self.

In the countries around the world, the sanctity of women's lives and their holiness is deliberately desecrated by males in the majority of cases to torture, humiliate and neglect the experiences of God's presence and revelations in females. Women's human rights are an essential component of reducing global violence against women, especially the "spiritual rights" of women which are meant to protect the rights of women's souls. Spiritual awakening gives a dignified edge to the life and identity of a woman and a specific category of spiritual rights further this cause within the confines of a social set up. Thus a feminist exploration of these mystic women poets is not only a literary, spiritual or psychological exercise; it is essentially a social one.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Beer, F. *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*. UK: Boydell Press, 1992. Print.
- Bynum, Caroline. "Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety." *Bulletion of German Historical Institute* 30 (2002): 3-36. Print.
- Dhar, K. N. "Lalleshwari – An Apostle of Human Values." *Saints and Sages of Kashmir*. Ed. T. N. Dhar 'Kundan'. New Delhi: APH, 2004. Print.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religion Experience*. Glasgow: Collins, 1960. Print.
- Jantzen, Grace M. "Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics." *Feminist Philosophy of Religion* 9.4 (Autumn 1994): 186-206. Print.
- Julian of Norwich. "An anchoress of England" *The Writing of Medieval Women: An Anthology*. Ed. Marcelle Thiebaux. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994. 441-466. Print.

- . *Revelations of Divine Love*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998. Print.
- . *Showings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978. Print.
- Kaul, Jayalal. *Lal Ded*. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1973. Print.
- Kaul, R. N. *Kashmir's Mystic Poetess Lalla Ded alias Lalla Arifa*. New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1999. Print.
- Kundan, K. N. Dhar. "Lalleshwari – An Apostle of Human Values." *Saints and Sages of Kashmir*. Ed. T. N. Dhar Kundan. New Delhi: APH, 2004. Print.
- Lyman, Eugene W. "Faith and Mysticism." *The American Journal of Theology* 8.3 (Jul 1904): 502-535. Print.
- Miles, Margaret. *The Image and Practice of Holiness: A Critique of the Classic Manuals of Devotion*. London: SCM Press, 1988. Print.
- Parimoo, B. N. *The Ascent of Self: A Reinterpretation of the Mystical Poetry of Lalla Ded*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987. Print.
- Staley Johnson, Lynn. "The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe." *Speculum* 66(1991): 820-38. Print.
- Stone, Robert. *Middle English Prose Style: Margery Kemp and Julian of Norwich*. The Hague: Mouton & Co. N. V., Publishers, 1970. Print.
- Thiebaux, Marcelle, Ed. *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1994. Print.
- Toshkhani, S. S., Ed. *Lal Ded: The Great Kashmiri Saint Poetess*. New Delhi: A. P. H. Publishing Corporation, 2000. Print.
- Tynan, Jenna. "The anchoress and the self-proclaimed prophet: medieval female writers in ecclesiastical society." *Discoveries* 9 (2008) 91-101. Print.
- "Julian of Norwich." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 17 Aug. 2013. Web. 18 Aug. 2013.

The Bhakti Movement in India and the Negro Spirituals of America: A Discourse of Faith v/s. Ideology.

Prof. Preeti Oza and Prof. Maria Syed

All over the world now a days people are discussing the problems of marginalized groups -their social, ethnic, economic and cultural problems. Marginality with all aspects is indeed a major problem to be reckoned with in the world.

By and large, most of the marginalized groups constitute minorities-religious, ethnic, linguistic or otherwise- in different countries. There are sub-cultures in the main stream cultures or religions. Invariably they are impoverished people constituting o minority groups. They suffer from economic, social or political impoverishment and find themselves estranged from this main stream.

Their marginality may vary in degree, extent or intensity. Most countries and cultures have empowered groups at one pole and impoverished groups at the other and between the two, there are graded levels of power and poverty. The empowered people enjoy greater degree of freedom, social status and security of life. The impoverished people are not free from fear, insecurity and injustice.

The form and nature of marginality depends upon the degree of impoverishment-economic, social or cultural. Marginality based upon caste, creed, religion or race is a kind of disability or affliction.

The Dalit Movement can be called as a collective agitation of Dalits against the exploitation both in the form of class, caste, creed, cultural and social exploitation in society. This exploitation is due to the discrimination followed by age old caste hierarchical tradition in t Hindu society. This hierarchy has been the cause for oppression of dalits in each and every sphere of society since centuries. It has subjected the Dalits to poverty and humiliation. The Dalit movement is a struggle that

tries to counter attack the socio –cultural hegemony of the upper castes. It is a movement of the masses that craves for justice through the speeches, literary works, dramas, songs, cultural organisations and all the other possible measurers. So it can be called as a movement which has been led by Dalits to seek equality with all other castes of the Hindu society.

Dalit as a concept and as an issue has been treated differently throughout history. Some prominent isms which tried to attach themselves are Marxism and Gandhianism. Indian Marxism has always seen the Dalit problem in terms of land and agrarian relationships. It basically defines Dalit as landless labourer. But land and economic reasoning are just not enough to arrive at a holistic understanding of the Dalit problem.

The word “Dalit” takes an interesting turn when the British in the Government of India Act 1935 used its English translation as ‘Depressed classes’ to mean downtrodden people of India who were hitherto referred as ‘Harijan’ by Mahatma Gandhi.

But Dr.Ambedkar sensed the multiple nuances of the word and gave it a more respectable identity by calling them ‘Dalit’. In the post-Ambedkar era, it became a part of political activism and got a new found awareness which is stressed to the extreme inclusiveness to all those depressed people who are the historical victims of both class and caste exploitation.

The second approach, the Gandhian approach, looks at the Dalit problem as a problem of value structure. The roots of this approach are in the Bhakti movement. In recent times, this approach has been the most powerful and relevant to understand.

The term bhakti is defined as “devotion” or passionate love for the Divine. Moksha or liberation from rebirth was not in the following of rules, regulations or societal ordering, it was through simple devotion to the Divine. Within the movement at large, useful distinctions have been made by contemporary scholars between those poet saints who composed verses extolling God with attributes or form, namely, “saguna” bhaktas, and those extolling God without and beyond all attributes or form, “nirguna.”

The imagery of bhakti poetry is grounded in the everyday, familiar language of ordinary people. Women bhaktas wrote of the obstacles of home, family tensions, the absent husband, meaningless household chores, and restrictions of married life, including their status as married women. In many cases, they rejected traditional women's roles and societal norms by leaving husbands and homes altogether, choosing to become wandering bhaktas; in some instances they formed communities with other poet-saints. Their new caste status and even masculinity were understood as barriers to liberation, in essence a rejection of the hierarchy laid out by the Law Books of the Classical Period. focus was utter devotion and worship of their Divine Husbands.

The Bhakti reformers preached against ritualism, sacrifices, and unnecessary religious rites, equality of all men and superiority of none. In this way the Brahmins received a great set-back to their superiority. The ideas of unity of Godhead and brotherhood of man greatly appealed to the low caste, among the Hindus and consequently they began to embrace Islam with a rapid speed. The Bhakti reformers adopted the common language of the people and preached in it instead of preaching either in Sanskrit or in Persian.

In this way a great impetus was given to the development of the vernaculars. Most of the Bhakti reformers laid a great emphasis on the equality of all the religions and preached the principle of co-existence. As a result of their teachings much of the bitterness between the Hindus and the Muslims was removed. The Hindus began to worship Muslim saints and the Muslims began to show respect for the Hindu Gods.

Though opposition to untouchability and the demand for basic rights for Dalits had existed earlier, they attained great strength during the Bhakti period. The Bhakti Movement with its emphasis on spirituality struck at the roots of untouchability, which is the sanction granted by Hinduism. The Bhakti Movement preceded the modern Dalit Movement by around 600 years.

It was a reaction to Orthodox Hinduism, which caused unnecessary apprehension in the minds of caste Hindus and compelled them to rethink

over the religious orthodoxy. These provided the means to protest against orthodox Hinduism for future generations of Dalits. The same currents of thought of Bhakti, armed upsurges, and conversions were rejuvenated in the shape of new waves respectively of sanskritization.

Maharashtra or the land of the Marathas produced a large number of saints, but those born between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries are famous in its social and cultural history. Among these Maratha saints, the names of Sant Dnyaneshwar, Namdeo, Eknath, Tukaram and Ramdas are the most prominent. Kabir made the most earnest efforts to create a spirit of harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism was another great preacher of the Bhakti message. Vallabhacharya of South India and Mira Bai of Rajasthan were some other prominent exponents of the Bhakti cult in the medieval period. All these Bhakti reformers preached the principles of brotherhood of all men and emphasized the equality of all religions.

“The Negro spirituals are...the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas”. (Jefferson Cleveland and William McClain, *A Historical Account of the Negro Spirituals*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1981.)

One of the first critics to pay attention to the Negro spirituals was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who called Negro spirituals as “a startling flower growing in dark soil.” (*Afro- American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, Edited by Richard A Long, Eugenia W Collier, Eleventh Printing, 1997). The flower that Higginson talks about is indeed hybrid as it grew in Africa and America but has its own uniqueness and beauty. The writings produced by Negroes seem to possess originality, artistic conception and are truly universal in its appeal. Yet these poets were considered as American products as they had sprung from the American soil.

Of the vast avenue of literature produced by the African Americans, one very significant branch was the “Spirituals”. Spirituals or slave songs are religious, generally Christian, songs that were created by enslaved

African people in the United States. The term first appeared in “Slave Songs of The United States” in 1867. These songs were spontaneously composed when these slaves met at the camp meeting during the “Second Awakening” and sang the songs without the hymnbooks. The “spirituals” are more than just religious songs, for in them the Negro sounded the depths and were relevant to their condition. With the slave songs the Negroes not only gave America folksongs, but a mass of noble music. In the preface of “The books of the American Negro Spirituals” James Weldon and J. Rosemond Johnson states “Although the spirituals have been overwhelmingly accredited to the negro as his own, original creation, nevertheless, there have been one or two critics who have denied that they were original either with the Negro or in themselves and a considerable number of people have eagerly accepted this view.” However, they further state, “Indeed it can be traced, ultimately to a prejudiced attitude of mind, to an unwillingness to concede the creation of much pure beauty to a people they wish to feel absolutely inferior”. In general these compositions were concerned with how to live life with the Spirit of God. It was full of hope and faith that God will not leave the slave in this condition all their lives. Though their condition was hopeless, their faith in God never died out. These songs were often sung outside Churches; they were used to express personal feelings and were used to cheer one another. So, these songs often had secret messages, which only a Christian Slave would understand and reflected the personal relationship of the slave with his God.

While using simple language the words were coded. For example, a “home” is a safe place where everyone can live free. So, a “home” can mean Heaven, but it covertly meant a sweet and free country, a heaven for slaves. The terms used to refer to a fugitive running to a free country were riding a “chariot” or a “train”. The Negro spirituals “The Gospel Train” and “Swing low, sweet chariot” which directly refer to the Underground Railroad, an informal organization who helped many slaves to flee. Thus, they expressed faith and endurance of longing for freedom. It is evident that the opening lines of “Go Down, Moses,”

When Israel was in Egypt's land:

Let my people go,
Oppress'd so hard they could not stand,
Let my People go.
Go down, Moses,
'Way down in Egypt land;
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

The Israel in the song refers to the African American, and Egypt and Pharaoh refers to the White slave masters. The Moses of the song stands as a symbol for the activities of the abolitionist Harriet Tubman who was called the Moses of her people. The repetition, "Go down, Moses" could refer to Tubman's repeated trips from the North back down to the South to guide more people to freedom. Thus, the poem is beyond the events described in the Books of Exodus in the Old Testament. The refrain "Let my people go" refers to the efforts of Tubman to free the slaves and also the personal desire of the slaves to live a free life.

Yet another well-known and often quoted Negro spiritual is the The Balm in Gilead which has an interesting covert meaning.

Here is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.

If you can't preach like Peter,
If you can't pray like Paul,
Just tell the love of Jesus,
And say He died for all.

The “balm in Gilead” is from the Old Testament but here it refers to the New Testament. In the Old Testament The balm of Gilead does not cure the sinner, but according to the New Testament anyone who comes to Jesus will be healed. It refers to salvation through Jesus Christ. Gilead is a balm which is believed to have healing powers and could heal the original sinners (the Israelites). The lyrics is a mingling of hope and anguish, with faith as the core, and strength to face all trials and tribulations. The haunting beauty of the lyrics is a reminder of people who suffered great injustice and terrible exploitation. But the lyrics talk about God who is bigger than anything else who had sacrificed his life for others. Utmost faith is shown in God who shall do nothing wrong with the slave and “heal the sin sick sol”, in this case the white masters, and shall free them from any kind of bondage. If nothing, the lyrics echoes that a Christian who feels the Spirit must share the faith and “preach”, like Peter and Paul, which the slaves are doing through their songs. Thus, the song does show a lot of faith in God and hope to see a better tomorrow.

Some Negro spirituals such as “The Gospel Train” and “Swing low, sweet chariot” talk about the efforts made by informal organization that helped them to flee from the chains of exploitation.

Swing low, sweet chariot
 Coming for to carry me home
 Swing low, sweet chariot
 Coming for to carry me home
 If you get there before I do
 Coming for to carry me home
 Tell all my friends, I’m coming too
 Coming for to carry me home

Passed down orally from generations to generations, the song ostensibly enunciated slaves’ hopes and expressed comfort to be found only in the heavenly home. The “chariot” in the song refers to the Underground Railroad which will lead them to “home”. The reference to home for the Negroes meant any place where they can be free, where they can practise

their will and therefore, is heavenly for them. Apparently the coded message of the spiritual, according to many critics, was that Tubman will be arriving soon to carry them with her and will lead them on the path of freedom.

Some spirituals did a lot more than offer a promise of eventual redemption; it also offered specific strategies and even maps needed to escape. For example, “Wade in the Water” taught runaway slaves how to throw off the bloodhounds sent to track them down. “Follow the Drinking Gourd” provided slaves with an elaborate coded map that would lead them to the North and freedom: the refrain told them to keep their eye on the Big Dipper (the drinking gourd) as the stars marking the edge of its cup pointed to Polaris, the North Star; the line, “The river ends between two hills,” taught runaways that, by following the Tombigbee River through Mississippi, they would reach the twin-coned Woodall Mountain; from there they would see “another river on the other side,” the Tennessee River, which would lead them to Illinois and freedom.

“Follow the Drinking Gourd” was a song created by enslaved African Americans. The song was actually a code of directions explaining how to escape from the southern slave states. The code told people who understood it when to leave, where to travel, and how far to go on each part of the journey. Each lyric has a specific meaning. “The drinking gourd” was the Big Dipper, a constellation that points the way to the North. The “old man” and “peg foot” was someone from the Underground Railroad who met escaping slaves at the Ohio River. “When the sun comes back and the first quail calls” meant to begin the journey in the winter. Enslaved people passed the directions along by singing this song to each other.

Dr. Isaac Watts was an English Minister who had published Hymns and Spiritual Songs in 1707 and The Psalm of David in 1717. It is believed that the slaves in the post 1800’s adopted the hymns of Dr Watts. Dr. Watts “When I Can read My Title Clear” is one of his highly recommended hymns. According to Charles Colcock Jones : “One great advantage in teaching them (slaves) good psalms and hymns, is that

they are thereby induced to lay aside the extravagant and nonsensical chants, and catches and hallelujah songs of their own composing". Thus, a sense of rhythm and tune came into picture and were sung in tune, melody, and tempo and with a certain pitch. James Weldon and J Rosamond also observe about rhythm and music in Negro spirituals: "Spirituals possess the fundamental characteristic of African music. They have striking rhythmic quality, and show a marked similarity to African songs"

In the 1900's the Negro spirituals, passed down through the oral tradition were continued to be sung and new gospel songs were also created. However, one witnesses a shift in the subject matter of the spirituals of this era. This was the era when the Civil Rights Movement took place and the Negroes were now in a better position. The songs were religious and not only dealt with praising the God but also talks about the personal improvement, the feeling of brotherhood, social problems and the community life. For the struggle for Civil Rights, spirituals like "We shall overcome", "Oh Freedom" and "This Little Light of Mine" were immensely used to be sung. Sometimes, the songs were also secular in nature.

References:

1. Ghosh G.K., Ghosh Shukla, 'Dalit Women', A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1997.
2. ElenorZilliot, 'From Untouchable to Dalit', New Delhi, Manohar Prakashan, 1992,
3. Barbara R. Joshi, ed., 'Untouchables: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement, New Delhi, Selected Book Service Syndicate, 1986,
4. BaburaoBagul, 'Dalit Literature is but Human Literature' in Dangle, ed., 'Poisoned Bread', Bombay, Orient Longman,19192
5. Zelliot Eleanor, 'From Untouchable to Dalit: essays on the Ambedkar Movement, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2010
6. Rai Amodkumar, 'Dalit Literature: Origin, Nature, Definition and Scope', Creative Books, New Delhi, 2009.
7. Zelliot and Puneekar, 2005. Untouchable Saints:An Indian Phenomenon. New Delhi : Manohar.

8. Jefferson Cleveland and William McClain, *A Historical Account of the Negro Spirituals*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981.
9. James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Books of the American Negro Spirituals*, The Viking Press Inc., 1926.
10. Edited Richard A Long and Eugenia W Collier, *Afro- American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, Eleventh Press 1997.
11. Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
12. www.negrospirituals.com
13. www.authentichistory.com/1600-1859/3-spirituals/
14. www.theatlantic.com/post/docs/issues/1867jun/spirit.htm

