

**The Works of Two 16th Century Women  
Religious Writers Through The Lens of  
New Historicism**

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**ABSTRACT**

From American philosopher and psychologist William James to the 21<sup>st</sup> century researchers of religion and spirituality, religious investigators assert that only religious experiences can be studied and if at all, explained, whereas the existence of God cannot be brought under the systematic study. Taking the cue from them, this paper compares the works of two women religious writers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a Christian St. Teresa of Avila (1515 – 1582) from Spain and a Hindu Meera Bai (1498 – 1557) from India, in

order to investigate the socio-cultural influences of their religious expression, rather than focus on whether God influenced their works. Hence, it employs New Historicism which emphasizes that social, political, religious, and economic factors of a given society determine the literature it produces, to explore the socio-cultural underpinnings of the two chosen bodies of literary work.

**Keywords:** social cultural, new historicism, ideology, objective reconstruction, humility, mystical theology, devotional relationship, bhakti movement, inquisition.

#### I RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES, EXPRESSIONS AND NEW HISTORICISM:

William James (1842-1910) in his book (*The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 1917) says, “to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves to that order”. The idea of this order took thousands of years to establish as mankind evolved from the Hunters-Gatherers Era to the present day Knowledge Era through the Feudal and the Industrial Eras. To attain this order on earth, means to establish a socio-cultural harmony. A socio-cultural construct is governed by political and economic activities. While the new Historicism encompasses the realm of power and power transfer, which in turn are controlled by economic activities, I will confine this study to socio-cultural approach.

Society generally refers to the social world with all its structures, institutions, organizations around us, and specifically to a group of people who live within some type of bounded territory and who share a common way of life. Whereas, culture is the common way of life shared by a group of people. As a scientific term, culture refers to all the features of a society's ways of life: production, modes of dress, routine living habits, food preferences, the architecture of houses

and public building, the layout of fields and farms; and systems of education, government, law (Zehrihun Doda, 2005).

As New Historicism is an effective tool to look at a literature through a socio-cultural lens, we will define the tenets of this useful theory as enunciated by its leading advocate Greenblatt. Since it was first introduced in the 1980s, New Historicism has been a powerful vein of criticism that influenced critics and historians alike, and this new outlook on history and literature ventured not only the notion that every single person lives her own historicity and ensuing ideology with codes embedded in the society, but also the fact that objective approach to a culture in the past is impossible, as the critic, like the author, is historically bound and cannot escape the power of her culture and ideology. Text, on one hand is a collective creation that contains the needs and desires of a society, and on the other is an agent that helps reshape the society in return. Therefore, texts can be evaluated not to achieve an objective reconstruction of the past, but to understand the social energy in order to decipher the ideology of a given culture (Evrin Dogan, 2005).

Greenblat asserts that social energy is best understood through certain "abjurations" which he lists as follows:

1. There can be no appeals to genius as the sole origin of the energies of great art.
2. There can be no motiveless creation.
3. There can be no transcendent or timeless or unchanging representation.
4. There can be no autonomous artifacts.
5. There can be no expression without an origin and an object, from and for.
6. There can be no art without social energy.

7. There can be no spontaneous generation of social energy.

1. THERE CAN BE NO APPEALS TO GENIUS AS THE SOLE ORIGIN OF THE ENERGIES OF GREAT ART.

I have selected 'The Interior Castle' written by St. Teresa of Avila (1989) and Love-Devotion poems of Meerabai in order to investigate the socio-cultural influences on the writings.

St. Teresa's friend Fray Diego in his letter to Fray Luis de LeÛn notes, "This holy Mother had been desirous of obtaining some insight into the beauty of a soul in grace. Just at that time she was commanded to write a treatise on prayer, about which she knew a great deal from experience. On the eve of the festival of the Most Holy Trinity she was thinking what subject she should choose for this treatise, when God, Who disposes all things in due form and order, granted this desire of hers, and gave her a subject. He showed her a most beautiful crystal globe, made in the shape of a castle, and containing seven mansions, in the seventh and innermost of which was the King of Glory, in the greatest splendour, illumining and beautifying them all. The nearer one got to the centre, the stronger was the light; outside the palace limits everything was foul, dark and infested with toads, vipers and other venomous creatures. This was a vision which the holy Mother wished that everyone might see, for it seemed to her that no mortal seeing the beauty and splendour of grace, which sin destroys and changes into such hideousness and misery, could possibly have the temerity to offend God. It was about this vision that she told me on that day, and she spoke so freely both of this and of other things. I promised her not to repeat what she had said to anyone during her lifetime."

While it is not up to me to investigate the hand of God in the making of this vision, the social origin of it can be traced to the sixth chapter of the fourth book of Ribera's biography of St. Teresa wherein P. JerÛnimo Gracin's manuscript reads, "Once, when I was her superior, I was talking to her about spiritual matters at Toledo, and she said to me: "Oh, how well that point is

put in the book of my life, which is at the Inquisition!" "Well," I said to her, "as we cannot get at that, why not recall what you can of it, and of other things, and write a fresh book and expound the teaching in a general way, without saying to whom the things that you describe have happened." It was in this way that I told her to write this Book of the Mansions, telling her (so as to persuade her the better) to discuss the matter with Dr. Vel·zquez, who used sometimes to hear her confessions; and he told her to do so too. Although she did as she was instructed, however, she made various objections, all of them dictated by her humility. "Why do they want me to write things?" she would ask. "Let learned men, who have studied, do the writing; I am a stupid creature and don't know what I am saying. There are more than enough books written on prayer already. For the love of God, let me get on with my spinning and go to choir and do my religious duties like the other sisters. I am not meant for writing; I have neither the health nor the wits for it." Such was the origin of the Interior Castle, one of the most celebrated books on mystical theology in existence.

**FIRST MANSIONS.** This chapter begins with a meditation on the excellence and dignity of the human soul, made as it is in the image and likeness of God: the author laments that more pains are not taken to perfect it. The souls in the First Mansions are in a state of grace, but are still very much in love with the venomous creatures outside the castle -- that is, with occasions of sin -- and need a long and searching discipline before they can make any progress. So they stay for a long time in the Mansions of Humility, in which, since the heat and light from within reach them only in a faint and diffused form, all is cold and dim.

**SECOND MANSIONS.** But all the time the soul is anxious to penetrate farther into the castle, so it seeks every opportunity of advancement -- sermons, edifying conversations, good company and so on. It is doing its utmost to put its desires into practice: these are the Mansions of the Practice of Prayer. It is not yet completely secure from the attacks of the poisonous reptiles

which infest the courtyard of the castle, but its powers of resistance are increasing. There is more warmth and light here than in the First Mansions.

**THIRD MANSIONS.** The description of these Mansions of Exemplary Life begins with stern exhortations on the dangers of trusting to one's own strength and to the virtues one has already acquired, which must still of necessity be very weak. Yet, although the soul which reaches the Third Mansions may still fall back, it has attained a high standard of virtue. Controlled by discipline and penance and disposed to performing acts of charity toward others, it has acquired prudence and discretion and orders its life well.

Its limitations are those of vision: it has not yet experienced to the full the inspiring force of love. It has not made a full selfoblation, a total self-surrender. Its love is still governed by reason, and so its progress is slow. It suffers from aridity, and is given only occasional glimpses into the Mansions beyond.

**FOURTH MANSIONS.** Here the supernatural element of the mystical life first enters: that is to say, it is no longer by its own efforts that the soul is acquiring what it gains. Henceforward the soul's part will become increasingly less and God's part increasingly greater. The graces of the Fourth Mansions, referred to as "spiritual consolations", are identified with the Prayer of Quiet, or the Second Water, in the Life. The soul is like a fountain built near its source and the water of life flows into it, not through an aqueduct, but directly from the spring. Its love is now free from servile fear: it has broken all the bonds which previously hindered its progress; it shrinks from no trials and attaches no importance to anything to do with the world. It can pass rapidly from ordinary to infused prayer and back again. It has not yet, however, received the highest gifts of the Spirit and relapses are still possible.

**FIFTH MANSIONS.** This is the state described elsewhere as the Third Water, the Spiritual Betrothal, and the Prayer of Union – that is, incipient Union. It marks a new degree of infused

contemplation and a very high one. By means of the most celebrated of all her metaphors, that of the silkworm, St. Teresa explains how far the soul can prepare itself to receive what is essentially a gift from God. She also describes the psychological conditions of this state, in which, for the first time, the faculties of the soul are "asleep". It is of short duration, but, while it lasts, the soul is completely possessed by God.

**SIXTH MANSIONS.** In the Fifth Mansions the soul is, as it were, betrothed to its future Spouse; in the Sixth, Lover and Beloved see each other for long periods at a time, and as they grow in intimacy the soul receives increasing favours, together with increasing afflictions. The afflictions which give the description of these Mansions its characteristic colour are dealt with in some detail. They may be purely exterior -- bodily sickness; misrepresentation, backbiting and persecution; undeserved praise; inexperienced, timid or over-scrupulous spiritual direction. Or they may come partly or wholly from within -- and the depression which can afflict the soul in the Sixth Mansions, says St. Teresa, is comparable only with the tortures of hell. Yet it has no desire to be freed from them except by entering the innermost Mansions of all.

**SEVENTH MANSIONS.** Here at last the soul reaches the Spiritual Marriage. Here dwells the King -- "it may be called another Heaven": the two lighted candles join and become one, the falling rain becomes merged in the river. There is complete transformation, ineffable and perfect peace; no higher state is conceivable, save that of the Beatific Vision in the life to come.

Meerbai's family were Vaisnava, worshipers of Vishnyu (Vishnu is an incarnation of Krishna). Mira's people were Rajputs, Hindus, whose culture was a strict feudal patriarchy which stressed honor in both sexes. For men, this meant bravery in battle. For women it meant obedience and chastity. All we know of Mira's early life comes from legends. Some of these legends tell how she got a statuette of Krishna, and how she learned of her future devotional relationship to him (S. S. Mehta, 1919).

This first legend tells how a wandering ascetic visited her home when Mira was a very young girl. She was deeply attracted to a small figure of Krishna belonging to the ascetic. After the ascetic left, she pined for the statuette, even refusing to eat and drink. During this same time, the ascetic had a dream telling him to return and leave the figure with her, which he did to Mira's delight. Another legend says that once during a wedding celebration, Mira asked her mother who she would marry. Her mother pointed to the statue of Krishna and exclaimed, "There he is!"

After her mother's unfortunate early death, and the fact that her father was occupied in battle and unable to care for her, Mira was sent to live at her grand parents' palace in Medta. In 1516 at 18 years old, Mira was given in marriage to the heir apparent of the Sisodiya clan. This marriage was arranged in hopes of strengthening the political alliance between the two clans, also to strengthen the Rajput stand against increasing Muslim power. Legends tell us that Mira did the marriage rituals with her beloved statuette of Krishna before performing the same rites with her new husband, Bhorjraj. She refused to perform a puja, ceremonial worship of the family deity, Durga or Shakti the consort of Shiva. Mira also refused to consummate her marriage causing her husband to be suspicious and jealous. Once he heard laughter and talking behind the closed doors of her room. When he broke in, he found her worshipping at the altar of her Lord. Mira's marriage only lasted for three years. Her husband was killed in a battle. Mirabai refused to accept suttee on the death of her husband, explaining that her true spouse was forever Krishna.

She sings, referring to Lord Krishna as The Dark One:

Friend, without that Dark Raptor

I could not survive

Mother-in-law shrills at me,

Her daughter sneers,



The prince stumbles about in a permanent fury.

Now they've bolted my door

And mounted a guard.

But who could abandon a love

Developed through uncounted lifetimes?

The dark one is Meerbai's lord

Who else could slake her desire?

The prince mentioned in the poem is her brother-in-law, who became the head of the family after her husband's death. Thousands of love-devotion poems called Bhajans are attributed to Meerabai. As can be seen, the origin of her devotion and her poems can be traced to the circumstances surrounding her life. Her mother's death when Meerabai was only four years, her grandparents' apparent pampered upbringing of her, her devotion to the Statue of Lord Krishna from young age and her obvious longing for true love must have lead her to a strong bonding with Lord Krishna as her only resort.

## 2. THERE CAN BE NO MOTIVELESS CREATION

St. Teresa's family was Jewish. During the Inquisition and after many ignominious persecutions, the family converted to Christianity. From the age of fourteen, she was brought up in a convent so she could stay away from boys and learn moral ways of living. The leitmotif in her life ever since was a search for Holy Communion with God. She herself mentioned many times that her

mind wandered to earthly things at least up to the age of forty. The interior castle is about the journey to the pure soul from external temporal pursuits.

Meerbai lived in a time of religious turmoil. It was the height of the Bhakti movement whose saints broke away from orthodox Brahmanism. They believed in religious equality and identified themselves with the sufferings of the common people. Some scholars feel that the socio economic changes in the early medieval period provide the necessary backdrop to understand the emergence of the Bhakti movement. During the 13th and 14th centuries the demand for manufactured goods, luxuries and other handicrafted goods increased leading to a movement of artisans into the cities. The artisans were attracted to bhakti because of its ideas of equality. These groups were dissatisfied with the low status accorded to them by Brahmanical system. The movement gained support from these classes of society.

Meerabai traveled to various religious centres in North India and danced and sang her love-devotion poems. It was liked by a large population because it was novel to see a Rajput princess mixing freely with common folks. The fact that it was a time of religious fervor added to her poetic journey.

### 3. THERE CAN BE NO TRANSCENDENT OR TIMELESS OR UNCHANGING REPRESENTATION.

Both works under study relate to a strong devotion to God and a desire to reach that state of holy communion with God, which apparently should point to a transcendent, timeless and unchanging representation. But a closer scrutiny can reveal that The Interior Castle and Meerabai's Bhajans are reflective of the times they lived in and hence resonate more with the prevailing social mores. A repertoire of ideas as represented in these two literary works have undergone sea change in the

subsequent years. Morality and women's dependence on men and the idea that men are saviours of women stands upended today.

#### 4. THERE CAN BE NO AUTONOMOUS ARTIFACTS.

St. Teresa begins her first chapter of the Fourth Mansion in *The Interior Castle*:

BEFORE I begin to speak of the fourth Mansions, it is most necessary that I should do what I have already done -- namely, commend myself to the Holy Spirit, and beg Him from this point onward to speak for me, so that you may understand what I shall say about the Mansions still to be treated. For we now begin to touch the supernatural and this is most difficult to explain unless His Majesty takes it in hand, as He did when I described as much as I understood of the subject, about fourteen years ago. Although I think I have now a little more light upon these favours which the Lord grants to some souls, it is a different thing to know how to explain them. May His Majesty undertake this if there is any advantage to be gained from its being done, but not otherwise.

While both Christianity and Hinduism believe in sin against God and the commensurate punishment, the idea of moral and religious life is a recent phenomenon in the history of man's 2,00,000 years of history. The ideas that God guides us and leads are agreeable to more than three-fourths of human population. Nonetheless, these ideas are a continuation of principles and tenets of social life passed down from generations.

Mearabi sings:

I will fasten the bells of his love to my feet

And dance in front of Giridhar

Dancing and dancing I will please His eyes

My love is an ancient one

My love is the only truth

I do not care about social norms

Nor do I keep my family's honour

I cannot forget, even for a moment,

The beauty of my lover.

I am dyed in Hari's colour

#### 5. THERE CAN BE NO EXPRESSION WITHOUT AN ORIGIN AND AN OBJECT, FROM AND FOR

The different levels of the mansion by St. Teresa and the burning love for Lord Krishna have their origins in their childhood. St. Teresa's father sent her away to the convent when he found her alone with a male cousin. He was worried about her moral life and so put her in a monastery where she might learn Christian ways of living. And learn, she did, so much so that one of the most famous religious treatise *The Interior Castle* is all about developing a pure soul.

Once when a marriage procession was going on, Meerabai asked her mother where her husband was. To which, her mother replied that she already had her husband in her statue of Lord Krishna.

#### 6. THERE CAN BE NO ART WITHOUT SOCIAL ENERGY

According to Greenblatt, social energy circulated in early modern England. His concept of social energy is similar to Foucault's concept of "power" which existed as "power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, wonder, desire, anxiety, religious awe, free-floating intensities of

experience". However, unlike Foucault, Greenblatt does not exclude the market in his theory. As During puts it, for Greenblatt, "...social energy, itself the expression of an expansionist, mercantile society, circulates into the theatre simultaneously through social (especially economic) and rhetorical channels, which continually displace the intensities through which energy is experienced".

As discussed earlier, during St. Teresa's time, Inquisition was at its peak in Spain and so was Bhakthi Movement in India. These created an atmosphere of religious turmoil and fervor. The population was gripped by these new waves of religious activities of which, the underlying factor were economy and power. Religion has always been used to sustain political power and political power is ultimately about controlling economic resources.

#### 7. THERE CAN BE NO SPONTANEOUS GENERATION OF SOCIAL ENERGY

Bhakthi movement as well the rise of the Protestants and the resultant Inquisition were the outcomes of religious orthodoxy that preceded them. In India, Bhkathi arose against the Brahminical orthodoxy and division of society based on caste system that held various economic strata of people rigidly. In Europe, the Christian priesthood usurped all the powers to themselves so much so that even rulers were under the control of the Papacy. While common people were reeling under poverty, the priesthood lived in an abundant luxury. This paved the way to the birth and rise of the Protestants, which in turn lead to the Inquisition. As we can see, in a way, the products of St. Teresa as well a s of Meerabai were the result of the social energies prevailed in their time.

#### CONCLUSION

A literary work can be studied under various lenses and a multiple approach only enhances of the richness of the reading literature. In my endeavour, I tried to look at though the lens of socio-

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cultural prism and I believe the use of New Historism towards that end had been worthwhile and the same has shed sufficient light on the literature under study.

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