MAKING MIRA:
NEGOTIATING HISTORIOGRAPHY, HYMNODY AND HISTORY

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
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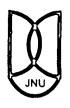
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

ANANYA DASGUPTA

DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation entitled "MAKING MIRA: NEGOTIATING HISTORIOGRAPHY, HYMNODY AND HISTORY", submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "MAKING MIRA:

NEGOTIATING HISTORIOGRAPHY, HYMNODY AND HISTORY",

submitted by ANANYA DASGUPTA, in partial fulfillment of the requirements

of the award of the degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY of the University,

is to the best of my knowledge an original work and may be placed before the

examiners of evaluation.

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Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1
Introduction

To begin at the beginning, I started my research, with the aim of historically re-constructing the notion of 'female agency' as embodied in the medieval bhakti saint Mirabai. In the initial days, I was constantly floundering, since 'Mirabai' emerges variously in various accounts and in different genres — hagiographies, histories and hymnody. Additionally, even though Mira is most well known as a poet saint, the available corpus of Mira bhajans cannot be attributed to her with any degree of certainty. The impossibility of isolating a body of poetry which can be definitively said to be composed by the historical Mirabai, has led some scholars to conjecture that the large quantity of bhajans now bearing Mira's signature grew up, in the course of time, in response to her well-known legend[1]. This precludes the possibility of wresting hymnody into a neat and coherent biographical framework, since the Mira bhajans do not belong to a discrete historical moment of production, but develop as a corpus in an extended temporality, through accretion and forgetting, in differentiated communities.

I was looking for the real Mira and her 'enacted agency'. What I had before me, in the legends preserved in the hagiographies; the verses sung in her name and the histories of her life were all instances of 'attributed agency', where she belongs to the realm of public transcription. The conflicting and often contradictory versions of her life story, that stared me in the face, further complicated the business of drawing up a straightforward and unproblematic relationship between 'enacted agency' of a historical Mira and the attributed agencies that can be gleaned from either narrative elaborations or the available corpus of Mira bhajans.

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[1] John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 131.

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Though historically she dates back to the fifteenth or perhaps sixteenth century, the oldest extant hagiographic statement concerning Mira can be found in Nabhadas' *Bhaktamal,* which is believed to be composed at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Increasingly I began to realize that the problem of reconstituting the practiced agency of a female subject from later representational forms is fraught with many dangers. The overwhelming danger in equating the two is that it overlooks the significant aspect of how narrative elaborations or other representational forms bear the sedimented histories of their own exigencies; and how they may repress or widen the enacted social agency of the historical Mira. Her agency is reflected, refracted and filtered through the representational forms and it is this, which inhibits and makes impossible the retrieving of her agency as a pristine purity, to be discovered as a lost city from the medieval past.

Mira's agency is reconstructed variously within existing scholarship. Two major studies that are the most sensitive to the impossibility of recovering an essential enacted agency of the historical Mira are Kumkum Sangari's 'Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti' and Parita Mukta's *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai.*

Sangari attempts to reconstruct Mira's agency from the existing corpus of Mira bhajans, but rather than pursue the popular base of Mira verses among common people, her work has remained confined to the available published texts. In a close analysis of the imagery in the Mira bhajans and by emphasizing the bridal imagery in them, Sangari points out how Mira's conceptualization of her relationship to Krishna as a marriage is the ironic ground of her agency. According to Sangari, ' a language which makes the patriarchal substratum of customary subjection simultaneously the matrix of agency and transcendence may achieve quite remarkable shifts of emphasis, dislocations and create new, contradictory spaces, even as it remains amenable to maintaining status quo.'[2]

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[2] Kumkum Sangari, 'Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti' in Occasional Papers on History and Society (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 1990), 51.

At one level Sangari's analysis moves close to Judith Butler's formulation of the idea of 'performativity'. This notion of performativity is an attempt to move beyond understanding the construction of gender identity as an uni-directional process of imposition and determination; by thinking of it in terms of the temporally more open space of repetition[3]. Mira's 'performativity' is not a voluntarist process of performance so much as a 'forced reiteration of norms' in the sense of a compulsory and constraining heterosexuality that implies and sustains gender identity. In Mira's performative re-iteration of the symbolic norms of marriage by re-locating them in the realm of the transcendental, the constraints of social structures are at once reproduced and partially transcended. 'The Spiritual Economy of Bhakti' remains an important work on Mirabai because it seeks to understand her agency in a more realistic manner, where the constituted character of the gendered subject in the complex web of socio-cultural relations, is the very precondition of her agency in the sense of marking the very condition of its possibility.

Though Sangari professes to avoid viewing devotional verses attributed to Mira as standing in for autobiography, she ends up doing largely what she cautions us against. In her analysis, Sangari conflates the bhajan's with an individual authorial voice in an attempt to contextualise Mira within the socio-political milieu of medieval Mewar. The process of collection and recording of the bhajans in printed anthologies is also not interrogated: they exist as if in an undifferentiated and universal manner.

In contrast to Sangari, Parita Mukta[4] locates the truest appropriation of Mirabai in the oral tales preserved about her in the collective memory of the dalit and artisanal groups in Rajasthan and Saurashtra, who use her figure as a symbol of resistance in their shared experience of repression at the hands of the feudal authority. However, Mukta's phonocentric valourisation of subaltern cultural productions as being 'truer' representations of Mira betrays a narrow culturalism. Another major drawback of her

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[3] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993)

[4] Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

study is that, though the bhajans sung by these communities are held up as a valourized sphere of agency, the inability of this agency to translate itself into an active collective political will is not explained.

Unlike Sangari and Mukta, my concerns are neither with identifying an individual 'voice', nor with privileging any one particular appropriation as the true articulation of her agency. Mira emerges differently in different genres and at different historical junctures under the exigencies of time and location. For this reason I am concerned with the multiplicity of the representations of Mira's identity and agency and the conditions of their formation.

I seek to understand how the version of the Mira story changes depending on who tells it, when, and why. For the purpose of my analysis I have chosen mainly four versions of her life — the *Bhaktamal*, a hagiographic account; Tod's version of the Mira story in his celebrated *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*; Munshi Devi Prasad's *Miranbai ka Jivan Charita* and finally a historical novel *Cuckold* authored by Kiran Nagarkar. This apart, I have also analysed both those bhajans that exist as part of oral traditions among lower and artisanal classes, and also those that appear in published anthologies.

My intention in the next chapter is to study the transformation of the Mira figure from a legendary saint to a historical figure. For this purpose, I shall look at the representations of Mira largely through three texts located at different historical junctures. Firstly, I look at the Mira story as it emerges in Bhaktamal, an early 17th century hagiography written by Nabhadas. I shall try to see how a particular hagiographic text, belonging to a devotional tradition located in unorthodoxy and rejection of brahminical teaching, constructs Mira's sainthood. Secondly, by looking at the representation of Mira in the orientalist Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (an early 19th century text) and Munshi Devi Prasad's *Miranbai ki Jivan Charita*, a late 19th century text, I intend to trace how a historiographic imagination endowed with the truth-claim of facticity negotiates with the Mira figure or appropriates it. In Nabhadas also a

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truth claim is present, but it is not one of facticity. Nabhadas' claim is that the bhaktas, bhakti, the Lord and the guru are four different names of the same thing[5]. There is also an assertion that the devotees of Hari are the most superior beings in the three worlds and the entire cosmic universe, since the devotees carry the Lord in their hearts.

In the hagiographic texts under consideration, Mira's 'sainthood' becomes centrally associated with the life of a woman who spurned family obligations in order to live out a passionate relationship with Krishna. How do we understand this deviance from prescriptive norms? The Bhagwat-gita posits devotion as compatible with one's social duty (dharma); its central dramatic point is to persuade Arjun to perform his social duty as a warrior, as an act of devotion to the Lord[6]. Devotion here cannot be conceived as an alternative to social duty. In medieval devotional movements inspired by Bhakti, a philosophy of devotion which influenced popular notions of salvation, a tension became apparent between bhakti (devotion) and dharma (duty). To this extent, a medieval bhakti saint's life is a socially legitimate pattern, which in the case of a woman bhakta inherently contradicts the normative requirements of sainthood and familial obligations. The reversal of normative Hindu patterns becomes a modular form of many women bhakta's lives. To what degree, this radicality as a trope of sainthood was a mode of appropriating transgressive lives, by upholding them as exceptions rather than the rule, we cannot ascertain.

As new notions of what constitutes the truth about Mira are established, what happens to the Mira figure as she is removed from the devotional world of Bhakti and relocated in the terrain of positive history? In our reading of the two nineteenth century texts, I will attempt to locate the politics of historical practice — what happens to the legendary saint when she becomes a subject of historiography. In this chapter we shall also try and identify the contradictions that exist between the idea of the

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[5] Bhakta, bhakti, bhagvant, guru chatur jan baper ek/ Inke pad bandan kiye, nashe vighna aneka. Bhaktamal, Chhappay 1. [N.B. In this dissertation, I have decided not to use diacritic marks, preferring to use the phonetic spellings of Hindi and other vernacular words].

[6] David Kinsley, 'Devotion as an Alternative to Marriage in the Lives of Some Hindu Women Devotees', in Jayant Lele ed. *Tradition and Modernity* (Leiden: E. J. Brill., 1981), 83.

communitarian space created when bhajans are sung in a group, and the notion of the individual historical subject, which becomes an overwhelming concern of history's pursuit of Mira.

Apart from representations of Mira in hagiographies like the Bhaktamal, in histories such as Tod's *Annals* and Devi Prasad's *Miranbai ki Jivan Charita*, and in the heterogenous body of bhajans, the continuum of representational narratives of Mira also includes the more recent generic form of the historical novel such as Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* (1997). In the third chapter I shall study the representation of the Mira figure in *Cuckold* to see how she emerges within this genre, which, even as it returns history to the cauldron of fiction, cannot completely repudiate it. As a post-colonial novel it cannot escape history as a mode of knowing and representing the past even as it re-narrativizes it. Nagarkar's intention in repudiating existing recieved representations of Mira is to displace her extant pan-Indian iconicity of a widow clad in white, "totally passive and uninteresting"[7]. How Nagarkar's novel negotiates with history, what kind of a Mira emerges from this negotiation and why, will be our concerns in Chapter 3.

The purpose of my work is not to uncover the real Mira and her praxis, or the real woman's living through of embodied potentialities. Rather, it is to investigate into the politics of making Mira by situating various kinds of discourses about her in the matrix of social practices and material conditions of their emergence. In every instance, when the Mira text is rigorously contextualized to uncover the contingent factors which shape the contours of Mira as a gendered subject, I will attempt to uncover the ideologies of gender underpinning specific contexts. The Mira figure remains central to my argument in as much as her differential construction at different points in history, and from different locations explicate the idea of gender as a historical matrix, rather than a static atemporal structure. The configuration of Mira either as a legendary saint or as a historical figure depends on the historical and social embeddedness of the representational form.

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[7] In an interview given to www.tehelka.com 23rd May 2001

Chapter 2

Mira: The Problem of Agency and Historiography

The search for Mirabai repeatedly encounters a stubborn multiplicity in the 'tellings' of her story and history. A feminist anxiety to recover women from past historical records and enter them into the gilded 'framework of liberatory schemes,'[1] may on scrutiny, reveal major pitfalls. Retrieving the 'real Mira', the well known poet saint of the fifteenth or maybe sixteenth century Rajasthan as a rebellious and independent figure, to be held up as a model notion 'of direct (feminist) agency' at the point of its emergence into self-consciousness may, besides other problems, culminate in a glorification of the pre-modern past as also pre-patriarchal or at least, less so.

Instead, this study attempts to understand 'Mira' and the notion of her agency, as it emerges in tales of her transgressions or despite their systematic suppressions, historically. In other words, the 'agency' of Mira, a woman-saint, has to be gleaned from the varied discourses, which construct her variously at different historical junctures, alongside locating the discrepancies in how she exists in plural simultaneity. The notion of agency, then, is not an ahistorical absolute; nor is it an essence to be understood, in the case of Mirabai, once and for all. As Kumkum Sangari points out, "conceptions of individual or collective transformative agency and struggle are vacuous without an accompanying understanding of their dialectical relation with determining material, epistemic, institutional and ideological structures which they both reproduce and transform".[2]

In this chapter, I am concerned with understanding the renditions of the Mira story in different discourses, hagiographies, history and hymnody (the corpus of devotional songs attributed to her), in an attempt to work out their relationship with determining structures within which patriarchy is encoded in all its complexity.

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[1] The phrase is from Kumkum Sangari, ' Consent and Agency: Aspects of Feminist Historiography', in Kiran Pawar (ed), *Women in Indian History: Social, Economic, Political and Cultural Perspectives* (Patiala and New Delhi: Vision and Venture, 1996), 25.
[2] *Ibid.*

Section 1

Making Mira: Bhakti and the Co-ordinates of Caste and Community

In Bhaktamal (1600 AD) authored by Nabhadas belonging to the Agradasi branch of the Ramanandi Sampraday[3], Mira is represented as one who cared nothing for family, honour, or shame and sang and danced fearlessly for her mountain lifting lord and lover, Girdhari. A brief sketch of the Bhaktamal account is provided below:

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Mira unraveled the fetters of family;

She sundered the chains of shame to sing

Of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.

Like a latter-day gopi, she showed the meaning

Of devotion in our devatated age.

She had no fear. Her impervious tongue

Intoned the triumphs of her artful Lord.

Villains thought it vile. They set out to kill her,

But not even a hair on her head was harmed,

For the poison she took turned elixir in her throat.

She cringed before none: she beat love's drum.

Mira unraveled the fetters of family;

She sundered the chains of shame to sing

Of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.[4]

From the compact lines of Nabhadas' verse, what emerges then is a radical, rebellious Mira; her devotion in active conflict with social norms is unambiguously exposed; her transgression, her defiance captured in a perpetual present. The issue of her miraculous merging with the Krishna idol, which appears in many subsequent 'tellings', is conspicuously absent from this account. [5]

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[3] See Varuni Bhatia, *The Making of Saints and Bhakti Texts* (Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2000), 13.

[4] The original text of Nabhadas' *Sri Bhaktamal* reads thus: "*sadrish gopika prem pragat kalijughin dikhayau/ nirankush ati nidar rasik-jas rasana gayau/ dushtani doy vichari mrityu ko udyam kiyau bar na banko bhayau, garal amrit jyon piyau/ bhakti nisan bjay kai, kahu te nahin laji/ lok laj kul shrinkhala taji, miran girdhar bhaji*". (*Chappay* 115).The translation is from *Songs of the Saints of India, 123.*

[5] Priyadas's eighteenth-century commentary mentions her miraculous merging into the Krishna idol. Vide *Shri Bhaktamal.*see kavitt 480.

It is important to note that Nabhadas belonged to the Dom caste (*bhangi* or sweeper caste).[6] His low caste status understandably affili:tes him with the Ramanandi Sampraday. Schomer points out that according to Vaishnava hagiography, Ramanand, who was in direct line of descent from Ramanuja of the more orthodox Shri Vaishnavism, broke away from his own guru following an irrevocable disagreement with the sects' caste exclusiveness and founded the Ramanandi order.[7] The representation of Mira in the Bhaktamal then has to be located within the context of an alternative social ontology that the formation of a separate social religious institution or sampraday inspired by Bhakti attempted to create. The Bhaktamal account of Mira additionally has to be understood in terms of the author's low caste status and its bearings on his hagiographic endeavours. Most significantly, the given account is that of a woman saint who was married into a ruling Rajput family, who refused to show respect to the *kul-devi* (clan goddess) and danced fearlessly beating the drum of devotion.[8]

Caste, sampraday and gender, then, are the three conceptual co-ordinates, which map the grid within which the Mira narrative unfolds. Since the description and regulation of gender and female sexuality are overtly or covertly linked to the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality, lives of women to a large extent can be seen to be existing at the interface between these hierarchies.[9] Nabhadas' Mira spurns 'family', the basic unit that forms the bedrock of society and is of prime importance as a site for the replication of social inequalities in terms of caste that exists therein. His Mira also spurns the 'shame' and 'honour' narratives, which are deployed through social learning and serve a similar purpose of control and management of women in preserving family, clan and caste community. Especially in

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[6] See Bh:tia 28.The issue of Nabhadas's caste is ridden with controversy. The preface of the present edition tries to locate him within the Brahminical fold. There is a strong denial of any low caste association Nabhadas might have had.

[7] Karine Schomer,'The Sant Tradition in Perspective', in Karine Schomer and W. H. Mcleod (eds), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1987) 4.

[8] See Chappay 115 in Sri Bhaktamal.

[9] See Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 'Recasting Women: An Introduction', in *idem* (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 1-26

the case of Rajput women, they surface time and again, in social practices like *'Johur'* as a fulcrum upon which such practices are predicated.[10]

In Nabhadas, the egalitarian nature he conceptualised as a defining mark of the Ramanandi Sampraday is amply reflected in the eclectic mix of core disciples he attributes to Ramanand- 'a Rajput king, a barber, a butcher, a leather worker, a Muslim weaver, a Brahmin's wife and a few high caste disciples'.[11]

Biographical anxiety about the saints' lives was not the sole impetus, which led to the growth of hagiographic literature. In most cases, the hagiographies were composed, to be recited in congregational sessions where the lives of exemplary devotees were read with the twin purposes of serving a didactic aim as well as a mode of gaining salvation by singing praises of the lord's bhaktas.[12] It may not be too farfetched therefore, to conjecture that the Bhaktamal 'telling' of the Mira story created a space around which a community, albeit within the institutional limits of sect, coalesced and took shape. Thus both in its content and in terms of the communitarian space created in this hagiographic account, a new kind of community as eclectic as the disciples of Ramanand is perhaps envisaged as an alternative to existing patriarchal hierarchies, which perpetuate themselves through the surveillance and control of women.

It would be crudely reductive to dissociate her sainthood from the very specific social and historical conditions, which contributed to the rise of the Mira figure- the momentum of Bhakti. As a social phenomena Bhakti led to devotional transformation of medieval Hinduism, to a considerable extent, as the impulse towards a personal devotional faith profoundly altered the quality and structures of religious life. The salivific values of this devotional faith, in turn liberated salvation from the exclusive preserve of men of the three upper castes. Bhakti also contributed towards the formation of separate socio-religious institutions or sampraday, which lead to a radically different notion of community association. This association based on a choice of belief, was in a sense, a break from a notion of community based on

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[10] Sreenivasan Ramya, *Gender, Literature, History and the Transformation of the Padmini Story* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Centre for Linguistic and English, Jawaharlal Nehru University, undated), 236 shows how *johur* was justified by the belief that women committing this act were driven by preservation of honour.

[11] 'The making of Saints and Bhakti texts', 24.

[12] See Karine Schomer, 'Introduction: The Sant Tradition in Perspective', in Schomer and Mcleod (eds), *The Sants*, 1-17.

social prescriptions of family, caste and sometimes even defined gender roles. Contradictions often existed even within such institutions, and, at the level of practice and social ideology, "there were varying degrees of opposition and accommodation to the orthodox traditions' insistence on the revealed status of Vedic scriptures, brahminical hegemony and observance of caste duties and restrictions"[13]. However, the Bhakti momentum definitely contributed to a certain different social milieu where Nabhadas' telling of the Mira story could survive as a description of a woman bhakta.

The caste issue which is addressed in Nabhadas, at best, tangentially, foregrounds itself as explicit in Pothipremabodhi, a work that preserves the earliest known Punjabi hagiography of Ravidas. This work composed probably towards the end of the 17th century, recounts how the enraged Brahmins challenged Ravidas' right to worship the 'salagram' when they learnt of Mira's visit to Benaras in order to seek initiation from him.[14]

In Mira's attempt to forge a relationship with Ravidas, a Chamar bhakta, an explicit rejection of socially dominant norms of pollution and untouchablility emerge. The contours of the transcendental realm of her 'devotion' then, hold in tension the dissonance that is created in the material social domain of kinship and caste structures. When a high-caste Rajput woman bhakta seeks the untouchable Ravidas as her guru, her bhakti potentially has the force of challenging the Brahminical order and transgressing normative codes of association. The material is clearly implicated in the texture of her 'devotion'.

Much debate has taken place among contemporary academicians regarding the historical probability of Ravidas' association with Mira.[15] Such debates characterized by the anxiety of 'historical probability' completely fail to address the question of how and why she has obdurately survived in the social memory of certain communities as the disciple of a low born Chamar. Mira's association with Ravidas is a claim widespread in the oral traditions of low-caste groups in Rajasthan and Saurashtra.[16] Parita Mukta in her study has recorded bhajans sung in gatherings of

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[13] *Ibid.*, 4

[14] Cited in Winand M. Callewaert and Peter G. Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas* (Delhi: Manohar, 1992), 29.

[15] Callewaert and Friedlander also mention the controversy regarding the authenticity of *pads* attributed to Mira where she refers to Raidas as her *guru*. Parasuram Chaturvedi holds a similar opinion. See Parasuram Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ki Padavali* (Prayag: Sahitya Sammelan, 1983)

[16] Parita Mukta has recorded many *bhajans* sung in this region in her *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997)

bhajniks belonging to dalit communities. One such Mira bhajan recorded by Mukta, sung by a certain Kamladasi goes like this:

I have nothing to do with caste or other divisions
Let the world do what it will
I offer you my body, mind and soul
Mira's Mohan come to the Mertni's desh

I skin animals and dye skin
My work is to dye

This dying is dear to me
Dye my soul in it
Mira's Mohan, come to the Mertni's desh. [17]

The leather dyer mentioned in the bhajan refers to Ravidas. The social tension, which reveals itself in Ravidas' apprehension in accepting Mira as a disciple, arises from the overwhelming mark of his untouchability, socially signified by his profession. The agency of Mira as it emerges from this bhajan, then potentially contains the agency of collectivities in their assertion of social worth among the leather-working communities.

If living traditions bear testimony to how Mira has survived over centuries in the memory of these low-caste groups, then is it not the historian's task to pit memory against the 'hard find' preserved in the *Ekalinga* inscription of the fifteenth century, which states in the name of *Ekalinga* (the main deity of the ruling family of Mewar) that no upper caste person should show any kind of favour or generosity to the 'Chandals', nor give them any charity? [18] Collective social memory often preserves a 'subjectivity' of Mira whose significance in social terms is understood only in relation of deviance from the prescriptive. More importantly, this collective memory stands in a specific historical relationship to the Mira figure.

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[17] This *bhajan* has been recorded by Mukta in *ibid*, 112.
[18] G. D. Sharma in *Social Life in Medieval Rajasthan, 1500 – 1800 AD* (Agra: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal 1968), 99 mentions this inscription.

Section 2

Making 'Mirabai: Her Colonial Predicament

In this section I have attempted to study in deta.l Colonel Tod's account of Mira in <u>Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan.</u> Though Tod mentions Mira only in passing and the historical details provided by him about her life, have been dismissed by most subsequent historians, an analysis of Tod's version remains significant on several counts.

Firstly, Tod's Mira is clearly embedded within a distinctive brand of Orientalist discourse, which is a productive discourse in as much as it creates new kinds of knowledge, expression and subjectivity.[19] Therefore, later projections of Mira by indigenous historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cannot fully escape from a particular discursive formation that can be called Orientalism. The disjuncture and continuities between these later accounts and Tod's, shall be explored in the next section. *Secondly,* the stark difference between the Mira who emerges from the pre-colonial hagiographies mentioned earlier and Tod's description of her, may provide an entry point in probing how a particular way of conceptualizing Mira is inextricably linked with the conceptualization of the social landscape of Rajputana that makes it susceptible to a certain kind of management by an incipient colonialism under the mantle of East India Company. *Thirdly,* as Tod's telling unfolds it will provide a clue to the existing links between indigenous elite practices and colonial power in the reconstitution of patriarchy at a certain historical juncture. Moreover this approach will try to avoid the danger of the "colonial discourse mode of entry into the politics of 'otherness', which locates the otherness of the other wholly in the colonial moment, thus, eliding the question of pre-colonial differences of consequence."[20]

Tod's Account

> Koombho Rana was also a poet but in a far more elevated strain
> than the troubador princes, his neighbours, who contended themselves
> with rehearsing their own prowess or celebrating their lady's beauty.

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[19] Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 6.
[20] *Ibid.,* 10.

He composed a tika, or appendix to the 'Divine Melodies' (footnoted Gita Govinda) in praise of Crishna.

Koombho married a daughter of the Rathore of Mairta, the first of the clans of Marwar. Meera Bae was the most celebrated princess of her time for beauty and romantic piety. Her compositions were numerous, though better known to the worshipper of the Hindu Apollo than to the ribald bards. Some of her odes and hymns to the deity are preserved and admired. Whether she imbibed her poetic piety from her husband or whether from her he caught the sympathy, which produced the "sequel to the songs of Gita Govinda", we cannot determine. Her history is a romance, and her excess of devotion at every shrine of her favourite deity with the fair of Hind, from the Yamuna to the 'world's end' (footnoted Dwarka) gave rise to many tales of scandal. <u>Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan</u> (1821 rep . Calcutta : Rupa & Co, 1997) vol 1, 232 (Henceforth AAR-1)

How Tod arrived at this picture of Mirabai is anybody's guess. He quotes no sources for this specific description. But he mentions as sources for the history of Mewar, genealogies of the ruling family, "copies of such MSS as related to his history from the Rana's library", historical documents possessed by several chiefs. In addition to which he mentions, traditions or biographical anecdotes narrated by the Rana or his chiefs, ministers and bards.[21] Tod did not, however, come across *Mohanto Naisi ri khyata*, a seventeenth century genealogical record commissioned under Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur, or else he would have known that according to Marwari genealogical records, she was married to Rana Sanga's son Bhojraj.[22]

Current research has shown that the trail of evidence about the life of Mira gets colder, when one seeks her in the official histories of Mewar or in the genealogical accounts of her marital or natal family. Nancy Martin tells us that generally, in genealogies of ruling families women figure only as mothers to rulers or

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[21] William Crooke (ed.), *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or the Central and western Rajput States of India by Lieut. -Col. James Tod*, Vol.1. pp. 250-251. (1829-32 and 1920; rep. New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1995). [Henceforth, *AAR-2*]

[22] see Nancy Martin, 'Mirabai in the Academy and the Politics of Identity', in Mandakranta Bose (ed.). *Faces of the Feminine from Ancient, Medieval and Modern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171.

for the purpose of recording political alliance forged through the institution of marriage.[23] It is in the context of recording a political alliance through marriage that Naisi mentions Mira. Biographical anecdotes narrated by the Rana or his chiefs and bards, which find mention in Tod's acknowledged sources may be references to 'batam' or 'inspirational biographical narratives' delineating the life of an important individual belonging to a clan. Zieglar points out how such tales served the extremely significant function of educating young Rajput boys about the history of their families, lineages and clans while simultaneously inculcating in them the natures and ethics of their fathers and forefathers, thereby tutoring them to take on their future roles in society.[24] The functional importance of such batam accounts were in the way they served as indigenous elite methods of transmitting a certain sense of the past to consolidate clan and caste. Genealogies of ruling families or Vamsavalis, recorded the line of descendants in terms of association by male blood to a particular ancestor or 'vadero' who is often known to be the founder of the clan.[25]

Mira's absence then can either be accounted for, in light of the general paucity of information on women that characterized such documents or Mira is a genealogical dead-end: nowhere is there any evidence of her being provided with a historical son. Thus, for genealogical purposes of tracing lineage from the distant past, she is redundant. The silence that haunts these traditional sources may also be attributed to a deliberate absencing of Mira, a sustained erasure of her agency where her conflict with family, clan and caste (as it emerges in the bhakti traditions) are written off through the authority of official truth. In any case, the social tensions that reverberate in her 'tellings' in the oral traditions and hagiographic literature would brazenly contradict the dual purposes of inculcating Rajput values and establishing a continuum of those values by tracing an illustrious ancestry.

It may therefore seem likely, that in Tod's case, the genealogies and official records would not have yielded much information on Mira's life. As for bardic accounts, Tod himself recognizes that these were 'confined almost exclusively

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[23] see Ibid. 164.
[24] See Norman P. Zieglar, 'Marwari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', Journal of Indian Economic and Social History, vol 13 (1976), 222.
[25] Ibid.

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to the martial exploits of their heroes'.[26] Mira's exclusion from these accounts can again be explained, either by the very martial –valour-centric nature of their content or by a logical conjecture that, these bards composing under royal patronage could not have possibly provided a representation of the Mira figure in the manner of Nabhadas. Tod himself describes a sort of compact or understanding between the bard and the prince as a barter of "solid pudding against empty praise".[27] Rendering her in the way she emerges elsewhere, in her explicit rejection of family and honour of the ruling Sisodias would have meant for the bard, a forsaking of this 'solid pudding'.

Although pinpointing the exact sources for Tod's Mira may not be possible, it may be naïve to attribute his rather different telling of Mira, solely to a handicap suffered from ignorance of other sources. In any case, the sources he accessed points to the kind of history he was writing. Even though he called his work 'Annals and Antiquities' and not 'history', it inaugurated a certain new understanding of Rajasthan that was taken to be a 'definitive' and comprehensive history of the region. Frances Taft mentions how its influence as 'definitive history' continues to persist and shape Rajput attitudes, even in the twentieth century.[28]

The history of the region, in Tod, is in a way completely identified with the history of   Rajput clans alone. If he sought history mainly in the accounts of earlier bards and chroniclers, despite being at some level aware of the biases and unreliability of bardic annals there had to be reasons for it. The texture of Tod's discourse then, has to be understood in the overlaps of ideological underpinnings (the premises that run through his distinctive brand of orientalism) and the historically contingent political imperatives of the East India Company. It is within this generative matrix of the dialectic between a 'woman bhakta' and a discursive formation overlaid by political imperatives, that the redrawing of the agential capacity of the Mira figure in Tod, has to be understood.

Contextualising Tod

Tod, as is well known became the Political Agent of the Western Rajputana states at the end of 1818.At the very outset, in his dedication 'To His Most

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[26] *Lieut. Col. James Tod, Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or the Central and western Rajput States of India* (1821; rep. Calcutta: Rupa & Co, 1997), xvi [Henceforth, *AAR-1*]

[27] AAR-1,. xv.

[28] See Frances Taft, 'Honour and Alliance: Reconsidering the Mughal-Rajput Marriages', in Karine Schomer et. al., *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity*, vol II (Delhi: Manohar, for the American Institute of Indian Studies, 1994), 233.

Gracious Majesty, George the Fourth' he declared that the chief objective of this work (Annals) is to rescue the Rajput princes "by the triumph of the British arms, from the yoke of lawless oppression and restore them to their former independence which it would suit our wisest policy to grant....".[29] British intervention in Rajputana is made justifiable through the project of restoring 'former independence' to this 'ancient and interesting race'[30] of the Rajputs. Nobert Peabody analyses how the idiom of 'Romantic Nationalism' runs through this distinctive variety of orientalism. This idiom is premised on the idea that 'the highest degree of human fulfillment is achieved through the complete manifestation of one's transcendent national identity'.[31] If Tod conceptualized the Rajputs as a nation, his anxiety to 'rank nations differentially against a continuous gradient of advancement and perfection' served a specific colonialist purpose. And because Tod equated, a general historical progress of mankind with the epistemology of 'nationalism as the universal vehicle for self-realisation', East India Company's interventionist agenda could be rationalized in terms of a more advanced nation benevolently guiding 'others' along their journey towards betterment.[32] Ramya Sreenivasan in her brilliant analysis argues that Tod's assumption of the Rajputs as a 'nation' served to strengthen dominant Rajput ideology. The transcendent 'national' identity he bestowed on the ruling Rajput elite, in converging with this elite's anxiety to claim a 'purity of blood' inherited from antiquity, both re-inforced and transformed the Rajput ideology of 'purity of blood' into a notion of ethnic identity. Scholars have seen the proliferation of Rajput genealogies in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in terms of their significance in bargaining for position and power in their negotiations with the Mughal court.[33] These assertions of illustrious ancestry by the ruling lineage continued to remain significant in their negotiations with the Company that controlled access to political power.

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[29] See the dedication page, *AAR-1*

[30] Ibid.

[31] Nobert Peabody, 'Tod's Rajasthan and the Boundaries of Imperial Rule in the Nineteenth-Century India', *Modern Asian Studies* (1996), 188.

[32] Ibid. 200.

[33] See Norman P. Zieglar, 'Marwari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *Journal of Indian Economic and Social History*, vol 13 (1976), 334-5.

Tod's strategic concern in ensuring continued military support of the Rajputs for the Company, depended on, in his own words, respecting their 'established usages' and preserving the colonial motives from 'distrust'.[34] Further, in attributing the degeneration of Rajputana to the weakening of kingly authority, he perceived that the restoration of law and order in Mewar was possible only through a strengthening of the Rana's authority. Since for Tod 'the character and welfare of the States' depended on 'the sovereign', the most important clause in the 'kaulnama' provided for the restoration of lands usurped by the chiefs of the Rana while simultaneously extracting a promise from the chiefs that they would continue to perform personal service at Udaipur with the quota of troops with which they were by 'ancient custom' bound to serve.[35]

Understanding Tod's Mira

As I have mentioned earlier, Tod's version of Mira is shaped by the criss-crossing of ideological elaborations (oriental discourse) and political imperatives. The Mira that emerges in Tod's Annals is drastically different from Nabhadas' and Priyadas' hagiographic portrayals.

I shall analyze Tod's Mira in contrast to Priyadas' account of her in Bhaktirasabodhini Tika[36], not in order to assert the 'authencity' of one telling over the other, but to understand what informed the interpretative limits that colonialism imposed on the Mira story as it takes shape in The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan.

Priyadas' eighteenth century commentary on Nabhadas' Bhaktamal provides a more elaborate and detailed story of Mirabai's life. It mentions her birth in Merta; her childhood devotion to Girdhari and her unwilling marriage to the Rana of Chittor. More importantly, it mentions her refusal to bow down to the 'kul-devi' of her marital family; the tensions her devotion created among her in-laws; the Rana's attempt on her life by sending poison; his suspicions of her infidelity; her association with sadhus; an incident where a lustful sadhu makes sexual advances in the name of divine decree; her confrontation with Jiv Goswami in Vrindaban; Akbar's visit to seek

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[34] see AAR-2, vol I, 547-8. here Tod makes explicit the reason why the Company should respect the established usages of the Rajput elite.
[35] See *Rajput States and British Paramountcy*, 86.
[36] see Kavitt 471-80 in Naharidas Ji (ed.) *Sri Bhaktamal* (Vrindavan: Sri Viyogi Vishweshwar, 1959).

her 'darshan'; her leaving of Chittor followed by the adoption of a life of mendicancy and her final merger with the image of Ranchodji at Dwarka.[37]

It is interesting to note, that the only detail where Tod's version coincides with Priyadas', is in the mention of her being from Merta. This apart, the tellings are so different that they could well have been about two different women.

For instance, in Tod, Mira's devotion to 'Crishna', far from being a source of marital conflict, is almost transformed into a signifier of conjugal bliss expressed in terms of mutual sympathy for Krishna devotion. Even as she is acclaimed by Tod as the 'celebrated princess' known for her numerous 'poetic compositions', through the narrative ploy of a passing suggestion that she may have learnt her 'poetic piety' from her husband Kumbha, the agency of creative activity is displaced and re-located as emanating from the Rana. Thus, in Tod's search for Mira's historical husband, Kumbha Rana probably seemed a likely candidate by virtue of his claim to the composition of a commentary on Gita Govinda. The question of conflict between her devotional aspirations and familial responsibility and wifely duty is hereby neatly resolved in the converging devotional aims of husband and wife.

Earlier I have mentioned how, according to Tod, the regeneration of Rajputana's 'former independence' depended on the consolidation of the Rana's authority. We have also seen how the Company's intervention in Mewar sought, first and foremost to effect the recognition of the Rana's authority by his chiefs. How this radical restructuring of power relations between the King and his chiefs was directly implicated in the Company's vested interest of ensuring military support from the Rajput kingdoms has also been discussed before. It is in the light of all this, that the new contours of the Mira story are to be analysed.

As Mira emerges in Priyadas' account, her renunciation of royal wealth and status can be interpreted as embodying a challenge to the Rana's authority. Moreover, in <u>Bhaktarasbodhini Tika</u>, the strength of her devotion supersedes the might of the Rana, when despite consuming the poison (sent by the Rana), she remains unharmed. For Tod, such defiance of the Rana's authority could not be held up as exemplary. It would undermine his basic assumption that the welfare of Mewar depended on the unchallenged strength of the sovereign. Especially Mira, a Rajput

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[37] As mentioned in *Bhaktirasabodhini tika,* ⊂⊐ ⊂).

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princess, married in the ruling Sisodiya family, could not be portrayed as posing a threat to the Rana's authority.

Tod's take on the women's question in Rajput society is again remarkably different from Mill's perceptions about the state of Hindu women. According to Mill in the History of British India, "nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which Hindu's entertain for their women... They are held in extreme degradation".[38] He further concluded that the practice of segregating women sprang from an anxiety embedded in the whole of Hindu society of guarding women constantly for fear of their innate propensity towards infidelity.[39]

Tod on the contrary is engaged in a vindication of Rajput patriarchy in the face of European accusations that such seclusion and restrictions point to the oppression of women. To cite Tod: "The superficial observer who applies his own standard to the customs of all nations, laments with an affected philanthropy the degraded conditions of Hindu female, in which sentiment he would find her little disposed to join... Yet from the knowledge I do possess of the freedom, the respect, the happiness, which Rajput women enjoy, I am by no means inclined to deplore their state as one of captivity....of one thing we are certain, seclusion of females could only originate in a moderately civilized society".[40]

The Mira of the hagiographic account who transgresses the norms of seclusion, associating with sadhus and taking to the road in a life of mendicancy scarcely befits Tod's model Rajput woman who finds happiness, freedom and respect in the confines of her 'antahpur' or 'zenana'.[41]

He mentions how Mira's 'excess of devotion' at 'every shrine of her favourite deity...from the Yamuna to the world's end gave rise to many tales of scandal.' We can see how Tod locates the 'tales of scandal' precisely in the suggested transgression of the space defined by the 'antahpur'. However in Tod, this transgression is contained in an implosion where, Mira's journey to Dwarka is romanticized as a journey to the 'end of the world'. The harshness of a mendicant's life is here replaced by the idea of a journey driven by romantic piety. The slight note of discord, which betrays itself in the economic brevity used to mention the 'tales of

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[38] James Mill, History of British India (5th edn. London: James Madden, 1840), 312-3.
[39] Ibid. Also see Uma Chakravarty, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?: Orientalism, Nationalism, and A Script for the Past', in Sangari and Vaid (eds), Recasting Women, 35.
[40] AAR-2, vol II, 710.
[41] See Varsha Joshi, Polygamy and Purdah: Women and Society among Rajputs. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1995) for an interesting account of the practice of purdah in medieval Rajasthan.

scandal', also point to a tension, which is attempted to be resolved by placing her firmly in the romantic tradition. Her 'history' can then, safely become a romance, and all alternative tellings of her life be rendered as romance tales that grew up around a 'beautiful', 'celebrated' rajput princess of Mewar.

The extent to which Tod's values colluded with that of elite Rajput patriarchy, can be understood in light of the fact that, he saw the practice of female immolation or 'Sati' as exemplifying the heroism of the Rajputani's character. 'Sati' for Tod becomes the hallmark of the tradition of exemplary 'female devotion', which could be traced back to a mythological past. In his own words, "the Sati not only makes atonement for the sins of her husband, and secures the remission of her own, but has the joyful assurance of reunion to the object whose beatitude she procures."[42]

Tod's endorsement of the patriarchal values of the Rajput elite definitely has bearing on the new configuration of the Mira narrative. In re-inscribing Mira to fit a 'paradigm' where Krishna devotion does not contradict exemplary 'female devotion' to the husband, the contours of her 'bhakti', are at least partially, being determined by the historically contingent political imperative of respecting 'established usages' of the ruling Rajput elite, in order to harness their military strength in the Company's support.

Making Mira: Manufacturing Consent Through 'Historical Practice'.

Even today, academic researches on Mira continue to be characterized by a positivist anxiety of recovering the 'Historical Mirabai'. Historians like Frances Taft, ostensibly emphasize a distinction between "the historical Mirabai on one hand and the myriad of traditional and/or popular Mira's on the other".[43] The practitioner of 'normal history' (borrowing Kuhn's older terminology for the stable paradigmatic exemplar in a discipline), then burdened by the mission of retrieving the truth about Mirabai, is confounded by the diverse nature of the sources. Where should s/he look for her- in hagiographic literature, or printed anthologies of devotional verses attributed to her, or the many more which exist unrecorded among various communities and peoples as part of their living tradition.

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[42] *AAR-2*, vol II, 737.
[43] Taft, *Elusive Historical Mirabai*, 314.

For Frances Taft, these methodological problems of accessing varied sources to arrive at one uncontestable biographical account is neatly (if naively) resolved by seeking her in the writings of 'historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century- Kaviraj Shyamal Das, Munshi Devi Prasad, Thakur Chatur Singh and Pt. Gauri Shankar Ojha', since according to her they first wrote about Mira 'in a modern historical sense'.[44] In the absence of further clarification from the author regarding what a 'modern historical sense' entails, an investigation of the phrase becomes necessary to uncover the inadequacies of such projects.

A modern historian like Munshi Devi Prasad when writing Miranbai ka jivancharita (life history) in 1898, justifies his undertaking by claiming to increase awareness about the historical Mirabai because the purpose of those who wrote bhakti literature was not historical.[45] The 'modern historical sense', then is clearly informed by a conscious distancing from bhakti traditions, while at the same time using details from them to build up a supposedly accurate biography. By claiming bhakti traditions as unreliable sources for historical reconstruction, the historian gains the legitimacy to either ignore or contradict them; still drawing on them but authorizing himself with the discretion to suppress stories or relegate some of them beyond the framework of 'historical probability' and by extension into the realm of 'untruth'. The 'modern historical sense' in addition can also be characterized by a hankering after 'facts' regarding the year of Mira's birth, marriage, death; locating her within the lineages of her marital or natal families; finding her a historical husband, thereby providing her with a chronology within the parameters of 'linear bourgeois history'.[46]

According to Barthes 'the historical discourse is a fudged up performative, in which what appears as statement (and description) is in fact no more than the signifier of the speech act as an act of authority."[47] The works of late nineteenth and early twentieth century historians of Mira who define a 'modern historical sense' are characterized by certain salient features. Firstly, they hold 'facts' as sacrosanct in a shared spirit of ideological positivism. Secondly, in holding suspect truth claims of hagiographies and 'padavalis', an 'objective history' is born through which all alternate tellings of her story can be rejected wholesale, as erroneous.

[44] Ibid.
[45] Munshi Deviprasad, Miranbai ka Jivancharita
[46] The phrase is from Mukta, Upholding the Common Life,
[47] Roland Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', in Keith Jenkins (ed.), The Postmodern History Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 122

Thirdly, the historian not only collects facts but also organizes them. And he organizes with the purpose of establishing positive meaning. The 'modern historical sense' then, despite its anxiety for objectivity and facticity becomes, like all other Mira tellings, in essence an ideological elaboration.

To quote Munshi Devi Prasad's account of Mira's life as narrated by Taft:

> He writes that Mira came from a family of Vaishnava devotees and that she took a favorite image of Girdharlal with her to Chittor after her marriage, but he mentions nothing untowardly at her marriage or any conflict with her in-laws. In fact, he suggests the possibility that she became completely absolved in her devotion only after she was widowed.[48]

Note how the portrayal of Mira as turning to God only after the death of her husband, is corroborated by the 'facts' provided by Munshi Devi Prasad. The date of her marriage is 1516 and the probable date of her husband's death between 1516-26 AD[49], imply a brief married life and early widowhood.

In Social Life in Medieval Rajasthan, G.D. Sharma describes how a Hindu widow "had to spend her whole life in devotion and observance of religious rites in the hope of reuniting with her husband in the next life."[50] The infractions of Mira's devotion are to a large extent neutralized by making her devotional life in some way consistent with Hindu or more specifically, elite Rajput practice. The hagiographic recounting (as in Priyadas) of tension with her natal family is also under total erasure. Her Krishna devotion is naturalized as learnt from her natal family of Vaishnava devotees.

A certain continuity exists in the way a late nineteenth century historian like Devi Prasad creates her as a historical subject and the re-inscription of Mira in Tod. Tod, like the orientalists Grant Duff and Cunningham, was preoccupied with foregrounding the Aryan element in articulating the Rajputs as a martial race.[51] Peabody points out that Tod's Annals and Antiquity of Rajasthan was directly implicated in the nationalist writing of the second half of the 19th century, particularly

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[48] Taft, *Elusive Historical Mirabai*, 320.
[49] Deviprasad, *Miranbai ka Jivancharita*,
[50] Sharma, *Social Life in Medieval Rajasthan*, 45.
[51] Chakravarty, *Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi*, 47.

in Bengal. Indigenous discourse though heavily borrowing from Tod, re-interpreted his story of the Rajput nation to awaken Indian resistance to the British.[52] Aggrandizing of Rajput history, to claim a supposedly 'pan-Indian' nationalism at this historical juncture was deemed necessary to celebrate masculine values of Rajput heroism and resistance to the Muslims, as Tod had done earlier for a very different purpose.

This early nationalism was also characterized, as Partha Chatterjee argues, by a reformulation of the inner domain 'bearing the essential marks of cultural identity' as distinct and disjunct from the 'outer domain' of the material. Against the 'material domain' where Western superiority had to be acknowledged, the 'inner' defined the sphere of national sovereignty. And as national tradition was recast in a Hindu 'classicized' mode, women were forced to carry the burden of this invented tradition. Further, the 'inner domain' coincided in its patriarchal reconstitution, with the domain of the family.[53] The normative 'national' woman emerged in her relation of marginality, which stems from her relegation to this 'inner sphere' where the Hindu/Nationalist male could assert complete sovereignty. Nancy Martin argues that, as the history of Rajasthan grew to be of nationalist concern the Mira story was rehabilitated by historians in Rajasthan. And this 'Historical Mira' was also being formed under the pressure of rhetoric of 'hyper masculinity, generated by nationalism.'[54]

In her essay 'Mirabai in the Academy and the Politics of Identity' an analysis of the narratives of Mira's life by historians in Rajasthan, Nancy Martin shows how Mira has been thoroughly 'rajputized' to uphold and embody Rajput ideals and values. This anxiety to wrest consent from the Mira figure has made the question of who constitutes her 'community' the site of contestation. The process of wresting consent has been facilitated by historiography. Nancy Martin, mentions how Kalyan Singh Shekhawat (1969) in telling the life of Mira politicizes her motives for leaving Chittor, in a significant way. Shekhawat suggests that since spies often entered enemy territory in the guise of holy men, Mira learnt that her actions might be endangering Chittor and chose to leave to protect the kingdom.[55]

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[52] Peabody, *Tod's Rajasthan and Boundaries of Imperial Rule*, 190.
[53] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 116-134.
[54] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*
[55] Martin, *Mirabai in Academy and Politics of Identity*, 170

The appropriation is complete; the rationale provided for her leaving of Chittor effects a significant reversal. Her action, in Shekhawat, is motivated by a duty to protect the patriarchal political feudal system of the kingdom. The Mira that emerges from Parita Mukta's fieldwork among lower caste communities in Rajasthan and Saurashtra, spurns the feudal authority of the Rana, but 'historical practice' in the name of truth, thrusts upon her the burden of protecting the very same feudal political order.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to map Mira's agency, as it is drawn and redrawn at various historical junctures in various ways. The multiple tellings of the Mira story also show her up as a contested political site, intimately related to the formation of a gendered subject. And in the formation of this gendered subject (the Mira figure) is implicated the exigencies of institutions and practices in their social and political materiality. In section 1 above., I have analysed the formation of the women saint as a gendered subject, shaped in relation to the dialectic between the co-ordinates of caste and institution (Sampraday). The fact that Mira emerges in active defiance in the mentioned hagiographic accounts is to a great extent, incident on the choice of texts. Other hagiographies, for instance Chaurasi Vaishnavo ki Varta, preserve a vitriolic diatribe against Mira. Not for a moment do I suggest that these hagiographies as pre-modern and traditional sources should be celebrated as giving complete articulation to the agency of Mira. What I have attempted in an analysis of Nabhadas' Mira is to tentatively elicit the social institution of caste in its dialectic with the alternate social ontology the sampraday seeks to create. My concern here is a specific articulation and not the glorification of hagiographies in general.

Since the mapping of feminist agency is simultaneously stumbling into the wall of its limits, understanding the Mira figure also involves uncovering the ways in which patriarchy, at specific moments of reconstitution, wrests consent from it in terms of what she represents. Additionally, the notion of 'agency', paradigmatically in the case of Mira, often does not belong to an individual alone but also to collectivities. No bhajan sung in her name bears the certitude of her authorship; the boundaries of the existing corpus of devotional songs (hymnody) are constantly shifting, through

accretion and forgetting. The corpus of Mira bhajans thus, cannot be circumscribed into the realm of individual creativity alone.

If orality is characterized by a greater possibility of re-interpretation, every time a Mira bhajan is sung among the lower and artisanal classes in Rajasthan, her agency is reborn as a figure around which a historically shared experience of repression at the hands of the patriarchal and feudal authority of the Rana can be articulated. In other words, the agency of the Mira figure derives from a sustained reinterpretation of her bhajans by certain communities and peoples. Though, this notion of agency is, at best, tentatively mapped as half-formulated in the absence of an active collective political will, its limits also point to the expanding frontiers of a 'history in specific practice'. "The past is not the same as history creates the methods and methodology of historical practice"[56] it also creates its ideology. What the professional historian predicates about the past to conceive, order and represent it, opens up the chasm between 'history in specific practice' and histories in general.

At one level, Tod onwards, 'Mira' becomes the pursuit of an individual historical 'subject' to be recovered through the ascertaining of facts about her life; her agency is made disjunct from any sense of community and negotiated completely in favor of an individual historical figure. This individualization of her agency persists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century representations. At a deeper ideological level, in conjunction with the method of factual elaboration, both in Tod and early indigenous historians of Mira, the social terrain that constitutes her community, is both displaced and reconstructed by historically contingent imperatives of the reconstitution of patriarchy. Since the patriarchal Rajput practices and values that Tod both transformed and celebrated in his Annals, were also upheld for a difficult purpose in the early nationalist phase, the Mira stories were 'honorably' negotiated as attempts were made to appropriate her within the normative of Rajput code of conduct, and by extension, community.

When the interpretative meaning-making gaze of the historian feigns neutrality under cover of "pure and simple narration of facts"[57], contesting histories embodied in collective or individual agencies, however limited, are violently excluded by 'historical practice'. The 'modern historical sense which informs a new kind of

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[56] Robert Berkhofer, 'The Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice', in Jenkins (ed), *Postmodern History Reader*, 139.
[57] Barthes, *Discourse of History*, 123.

discourse on Mirabai, that was influenced by Tod and proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and which still persists in dominant representations of Mira, defines itself by the exclusion of thousands of people whose Mira still live outside this 'history'. Many more tellings of the Mira story may have failed to survive this history's onslaught.

Chapter 3

Mira in Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold*: Prising Open the 'Question of Silence'

Section 1: The Historical Novel: Re-Narrativizing History As 'Realm Of Contingency'[1]

In the 'Afterword' attached at the end of <u>Cuckold</u>, a historical novel published in 1997, its author Kiran Nagarkar asserts, "The last thing I wanted to do was write a book of historical veracity. I was writing a novel, not a history." He further adds, "If despite my intentions a substantial quantum of history has inveigled into the novel, it is because both the princess and her husband lived in momentous times." The princess is Mira as a historical personage married to the son of Rana Sanga, a Sisodia ruler of sixteenth century Mewar.

That despite his intentions a considerable amount of history has inveigled into this work of fiction reveals a deep sense of subalternity of its author. A sense of subalternity that arises from the post-colonial intuition that even though history just like myth, legend, literature and chronicle, tells its most socially urgent of tales; it has been the most recent and for the last two hundred years or so, the most accepted form of telling and knowing the past. If historiography in general, has arisen from the European encounter with the unknown 'other,'[2] postcoloniality can be defined as a predicament, which bears the burden of history.

At the outset, the author lays down a premise, which I argue, becomes significant in providing certain clues to our understanding of the relationship he establishes with 'history.'

"One of the basic premises underlying this novel is that an easy colloquial currency of language will make the concerns, dilemmas, and predicaments of the Maharaj Kumar, Rana Sanga, and the others as real as anything we ourselves are caught in: a birth, a divorce, a death in our families, political intrigue, a national crisis, or a military confrontation in the life of our nation. The idea was to use

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[1] In discussing Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's fiction, Sudipta Kaviraj uses this phrase while arguing that historical novels celebrated 'history' as a realm of contingency; appropriated 'history' in accordance to the needs of the present. See 'Imaginary History' in Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India.* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998)

[2] See 'Translator's Introduction' in Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), vii.

contemporary idiom so long as the concepts we use today were available in the sixteenth century ...I was striving for immediacy rather than some academic notion of fidelity as best simulated." [Cuckold]

Crucial links are being set up here – Rajputs of sixteenth century Mewar cannot be imagined as a political community, without imagining a 'nation.' Any military confrontation then, as a natural corollary, will have to be imagined as a 'crisis' in the life of a nation-state. The conviction that the concepts we use today were available in the sixteenth century betrays presentist assumptions deeply embedded in our understanding of the pre-modern past. Repudiation of an 'academic notion of fidelity' is a dig at the historians, whose "written history acts as if it were a transparent medium, to use a linguistic analogy, between the past and the reader's mind."[3]

The objective semblance of 'history' effaces that, which the novelist will not – the investments that current time places in the past, for the purpose of its own advancement. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in the early nineteenth century Colonel Tod perceived the Rajputs as a 'nation,' degraded or fallen, precisely because British imperialism could then be recast in a paternalistic guise whose goal was to revivify a lapsed local nationality. This was the contingency of Tod's present, which in the guise of historical narrative gerrymandered the past's frontiers and identities. But while history establishes its cognitive status precisely by erasing out of existence its own realm of contingency, the author of historical fiction celebrates, against the positivist grain, history as the realm of contingency.[4]

The aim of this chapter is to tentatively map the exigencies of the present, which inform the representation of Mirabai, while recreating the turmoil and life of sixteenth century Mewar, in Kiran Nagarkar's Cuckold.

It is the impossibility of neatly separating the stories from history, biographical details from myths and legends, which grew around Mira's name, that Nagarkar celebrates, at one level, as the incomplete hold that historical narratives have on Indian lives.[5] Popular belief do not obediently follow the historian's record, re-affirming the idea that history is just one and the most recent mode of remembering the past. But the author also faces a peculiar predicament – there is a connection

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[3] Berkhofer, *Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice*, 140.
[4] Kaviraj, *Unhappy Consciousness*, 133.
[5] *Ibid.*, 133.

between historical narratives and what people believe to be true, though it is more complex than is usually believed.

By his own admission, Nagarkar's Mira is re-narrativized as an act of iconoclasm. According to him, "popular history has made her this zombie figure, head down, dressed in white, *ektara* in hand – totally passive and uninteresting."[6] His aim is to show, that this Mira is 'completely fictitious,' painted in 'monochromatic colours.' To locate where Nagarkar's iconoclasm is directed, we shall briefly try to explain the genealogy of this 'popular history', which has incarcerated the Mira, figure in the white widowhood of asceticism, as her most popular pan-Indian iconic image.

As Parita Mukta remarks, "In the twentieth century, during the creation of an independent nation-state in India, attempts were made give the message and significance of Mira a new direction."[7] The popularization of Mira as a pan-Indian figure, and her simultaneous incorporation and appropriation, firstly by artists who were closely aligned to the nationalist movement and later by commercial media, went a long way in precipitating the popular iconic representation that Nagarkar set out to demolish.

A particularly interesting incident mentioned in the eighteenth century *bhakti* text, Bhaktirasabodhini Tika,[8] that has been largely excised from subsequent historical accounts of Mira's life goes like this – a supposedly holy man tried to take advantage of Mira by telling her that Krishna had ordered him to make love to her; on hearing this Mira erects a bed in the midst of the community of devotees and says that if such was the Lord's command, there would be no shame in carrying out the act publicly. The man becomes her disciple and begs forgiveness.

Mira's subservience to Krishna paradoxically places her in a contradictory relation with patriarchal divisions of the private and the public as discrete domains, demanding different codes of behaviour. She is neither diffident nor threatened, but directly hits out against the basic structures undergirding the

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[6] In an interview given to www.tehelka.com 23rd May 2001
[7] Mukta, *Upholding Common Life*, 182.
[8] The original text of the Bhaktirasabodhini Tika goes as follows: "*Bisai kutil ek bhesh dhari sadhu liyau,kiyau youn prasang/ "mosun anga sanga kijiyai, agya mokun dai aap lal giridhari/ aho sis dhari lai, kari bhojan hun lijiyai/ santani samaj mein bichhay sej boliliyan,/ sank ab kaun ki? nisank ras bhijiyai,/ set much bhayan, vishai bhav sab gayan/ nayan panyni pai ay, mokun bhakti dan dijiyai."* Kavitt no. 478. From the *Bhaktirasabodhini* Commentary by Priyadas, in *Nabhadas's Sri Bhaktamal* (Vrindavan: Akash Press, c. 1959.

regulation of sexuality – the 'private' and the 'public' domain. In the above-mentioned account, a certain kind of sexual agency emerges, in the way she poses a challenge to normative assumptions associated with sexual practices. This agency has been held under sustained erasure in popular pan-Indian representations.

It is this issue of her sexuality that has been systematically bypassed by the overpowering and dominant iconic image of celibate widowhood, which resurfaces in Nagarkar's Cuckold. Though in a significantly different manner, it emerges, as it were, as the 'realm of contingency.'

Section 2: 'The Little Saint' in the Bhakt Paradigm: Desire and the Female Devotional Self

He bartered my heart

looted my flesh

claimed as tribute

my pleasure

took over

all of me.

I'm the woman of love

For my love, white as jasmine[9]

Riding the blue sapphire mountain

Wearing moonstone for slippers

Blowing long horns

O Siva

When shall I

Crush you on my pitcher breasts

O lord white as jasmine

When do I join you

Stripped of body's shame

And heart's modesty?[10]

The expressive mode of bhakti, often takes on a language of sensuous yearning and all-consuming passion. The devotee in relation to the deity is a desiring subject. As we see in the poetry of Mahadeviyakka (a twelfth century poet saint of the Virasaivas), quoted above, 'bhakti' gave women access to a certain language of sexual desire. The Mira bhajans too are full of passionate yearning.

"Taken up with the spiritual beauty of Krishna she yearns for a
sight or a vision (darshan) of Krishna, a spiritual consummation which
is described erotically as a sensuous union and sometimes attained

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[9] A. K Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973) 125.
[10] *Ibid.,* 136.

(Bisari gayi dukh. nirakhi piya ki sufal manorath kaam). Her love is an unquenchable thirst (taras) which holds her captive (mohi), crazes her (prem divani), drives her astray, absorbs her completely like a madness (bhakti bhay me mast dolti), makes her oblivious to all else (aakul vyakul phire rain din). She dresses in her bridal clothes, makes a bed of flowers and awaits Krishna or is seated in her bridegroom's house "arranged in finery and quite without shame". Or else, she is a woman separated from her lover sitting all night in her palace of pleasure threading tear pearls into a necklace (virhan baithi rang mahal mein, motiyan ki lar pove), her bridal bed is empty (sooni sej) or exists in another world (gagan mandal par sej piya ki). She anticipates a midnight tryst with on the bank of the river of love (aadhi raat prabhu darshan dinhe, prem nadi ke teera). She has spent a whole night waiting for her beloved (piya ke panth niharat sigri rain vihani ho).

Her chest heaves at the sound of his name (sabad sunat meri chatiya kampe), without him her body is lean and anguished (aang cheer vyakul bhaye), she longs for physical union (aang se aang lagayo) and her whole life passes in such yearning"[11].

Kumkum Sangari in a detailed analysis of Mira bhajans clearly shows how they are replete with desire and sensuous yearning.

The predominance of bridal imagery is another salient feature of the bhajans attributed to Mira — a tendency to portray herself as wed to Krishna remains a familiar theme:

> *Sister, I had a dream that I wed*
> *The lord of those who live in need*
> *Five thousand sixty thousand people came*
> *And the lord of Braj was the groom.*
> *In the dream they set up a wedding arch;*
> *In dream he grasped my hand.*
> *In dream he led me around the wedding fire*

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[11] Kumkum Sangari, 'Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti', in *Occasional Papers on History and Society* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 1990), 48-49.

And I became unshakably his bride.[12]

It is hardly surprising therefore, that Nagarkar in his portrayal of Mira chooses this theme of her being wed to two men simultaneously — to Krishna by devotion and to the Maharaj Kumar by custom, as the focal point of tension. In any case, it is a theme that remains central to a substantial amount of poetry attributed to women bhaktas. The impossibility of continuing to live in a worldly marriage , while being inwardly filled with devotional intensity for Siva, is expressed also by Mahadeviyakka:

<div style="text-align:center">

Husband inside

Love outside

I can't manage them both

This world

And the other,

Cannot marriage them both

O lord white as jasmine

I cannot hold in one hand

Both the round nut

And the long bow[13].

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This theme of twin marriages becomes crucial to the construction of Mira's sainthood – her marriage to the Maharaj Kumar as part of an institution forging political alliance between Mewar and Merta is in opposition to her marriage with Krishna (The Blue One) as an expression of willed personal association. Additionally, this theme then potentially contains the possibility of exploring Mira's devotion to the 'Flautist' (Krishna), as both a challenge and a response to the way marriage was institutionalized by a polygamous, expansive, Rajput military aristocracy and the way it regulated the relationship between men and women. To what extent is this possibility explored in Cuckold?

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[12] Parshuram Chaturvedi's *Mirabai ki Padavali,* no.27, translated by John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, in their *Songs of the Saints of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
[13] Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva,* 125.

Queen Karmavati (one of Rana Sanga's wives) gives us a glimpse of what purpose the institution of marriage served in sixteenth century Mewar, when she says by way of advocating the need for polygamy, "Marriages are political alliances. They are also a safeguard. They ensure a long line of succession..." (p ????) The statement lends itself to historical reconstruction and provides a clue to understanding polygamy as a common feature of the medieval Rajput ruling class, which served primarily two purposes. Firstly, it served the means by which military and political alliances were forged by an internally competitive ruling elite and secondly, it was aimed at ensuring a military and political need for male progeny.[14] In *Cuckold*, Mira does not fulfill the need of providing male progeny to her husband, the heir apparent of Mewar. She remains sexually unavailable to her husband, the Maharaj Kumar ,but her poetry, directed to her lover-husband 'The Blue One' (Krishna) is informed by an erotic spirit. Even though her relationship with Krishna is articulated as a marriage, it is an expression of willed servitude:

In death and in life, I'm yours, yours alone
Take me. Do what you want with me
As stone or stray dogs, as roach or rose, as fish
or fowl,
Whatever the shape of incarnation, I'm yours, yours
alone.
You are free to reject me: I will never deny you
Beware, my beloved, of the pleasures of my body
and soul
You are mine, mine alone
I'm your bride, your mistress, your slave (p. 325)

Interestingly in Cuckold, Krishna, emerges as it were, both as a military genius and a cowherd- tending philanderer. It is this second dimension of the Flautist, which the Maharaj Kumar cannot appreciate or understand. As the omniscient narrator informs us, "The endemic promiscuity of Krishna was one aspect that he (*Maharaj Kumar*) did not understand and, to tell the truth he wasn't

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[14] Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*

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particularly interested in either (p. 104)." Leelawati, the Jain finance minister Adinath Mehta's granddaughter, writes to Maharaj Kumar in a letter:

"There are, you used to tell me, two flautists. The warrior and the lover. We need to study the warrior. Instead the Princess' pursuit of her paramour has made the philanderer Blue God the paradigm of Mewar. This is sad. We are a warrior race, not a tribe of adulterers and gay blades dallying with maids in our sylvan dales. It would be timely to remind the Mewari people that the Flautist's greatest achievement is the Bhagvat Gita. It's avowed purpose to tell a warrior called Arjun to stop shilly-shallying, to take up arms and to fight the righteous battle (Pg. 562)."

Leelawati's Krishna is a symbol of praxis; an embodiment of the Rajput warrior ethic. Mira's *bhakti*, by contrast, is directed at the Krishna who indulges in 'aimless' loveplay or '*lila.*' In this sense, it is an obverse of the ethic embodied in the warrior Krishna and the pragmatic causality of his actions. The Krishna of this 'aimless' loveplay is the one to whom the '*gopis*' are tied in an illicit liaison (*parakiya*), in relationships that trespass conjugal fidelity. His relationships with the *gopis* may be non-procreative, disinterested in maintaining social order and, in a significant divergence from conjugal relations, can exist in and for itself – 'not as a fruit of action, but as action itself.'[15] In a sharp contrast to the regulation of sexual desire within the primarily procreative purposiveness of conjugal relationships and in an inversion of the norm of Rajput polygamy, which while regulating female sexual desire, allow men access to a potentially unlimited number of women, the semantics of Mira's desire bursts forth in an 'excess.'

The Maharaj Kumar is taken aback by the passionate intensity of Mira's voice; her love is not a private emotion even though it is intensely personal. It is the disruptive voice of female desire which stubbornly resists being contained in the 'private' – 'no half measures, no private spaces, no room for equivocations. It bared all in public. It exposed itself without the common courtesies of concealment and dissembling that are essential for the smooth running of the society (p. 128).'

In Nagarkar's rendition, Mira's poetry takes on a bold, unabashed quality, the sexual imagery is explicit and direct:

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[15] Sangari, Kumkum, *Mirabai and Spiritual Economy of Bhakti*, 34

I'll slither and slide inside and over you, twist and

cling to your limbs

I'll be your masseuse, the black rain healing

unguent

body on body, breast on breast, tongue coiled with

tongue

We'll tie a knot that can never be untied

We'll intertwine into a double helix

Weave vein, artery and capillary into an inseparable

plait (p. 130)

<u>Cuckold</u> posits Mira as a desiring subject. Earlier we have seen how the available corpus of Mira *bhajans* is also replete with a language of desire. Even though this desire is often articulated within a metaphor of marriage to Krishna, it is an alternative to marriage as a socio-political institution, an institution of containment structured by modes of surveillance, hierarchically organized gender spaces and ideologically buttressed by the spiritual and material benefits of preserving '*suhaag.*' But the idea of celibacy that has congealed around the Mira figure in popular imagination, to a great extent, neutralizes the element of desire in her *bhajans*.

Nagarkar riles against the popular and widely circulated iconography of Mira – clad in white, portrayed as a widow. Such representations serve to manufacture an imagination of the female devotional self as sexually passive. The prescriptive modalities of upper caste widowhood ensure celibacy as a necessary pre-condition for renunciation and austerity.[16] In the case of Mirabai, the popular iconography projects an image where control over sensuous gratification is at once, a logical extension of widowhood and the pre-condition of her sainthood. In Bankey Bihari's 'Bhakt Mira' for instance, her celibacy becomes her claim to higher moral authority – "There she stood adamant in her virgin glory."[17] It is indeed, this image of the celibate woman-saint of popular imagination that allows her access to a certain language of desire. This is the central paradox. The language of sexual desire is

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[16] See section 135 in Rev. P. Percival (ed.), *Manava Dharma Shastra or the Institutes of Manu*, trans. G. C. Horton, 1863.

[17] Bankey Bihari, *Bhakt Mira* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1961), 38. It is this version of the story that became the basis for the retelling of Mira's story in the popular *Amar Chitra Katha* illustrated series.

accorded legitimacy only when it can be safely confined to the realm of the transcendental; when a rupture is successfully effected between the material site of the woman-saint's body and the language of her expressive mode (*bhajans*).

How does Nagarkar subvert the dominant iconographic representation of the pan-Indian Mira? In Cuckold, Mira (Green Eyes or Little Saint) never ever appears in white; she dresses in vibrant colours – sometimes her skirt is a 'red blur,' at other times her 'odhanis, ghagras and cholis' are in 'shades of green.' With equal ease she can carry off a 'garish yellow,' a 'tinselly brown,' a 'pink chunni,' or a blouse coloured like 'first grass (p. 169 and 548).' But the boldest act of the novelist's claim to iconoclasm in his representation of Mirabai, is in his breaking the idea of celibacy with which her sainthood has been long associated. Here, the language of sexual desire is not securely disjunct from a celibate body – Mira is articulated as a desiring subject both in language and in bodily practices. In other words, it is not just the desire of the female devotional voice, but also the desire of the female body, which is foregrounded.

How are we to interpret the unconventional portrayal of Mira's sexuality in the novel? How do we construe the agency (as a subject of desire), which Nagarkar attributes to the Mira figure? Without hastily giving into the temptation of interpreting this sexual agency as laudable, with what degree of caution do we approach the notion of this agency?

As a narrative elaboration, the representation of the Mira figure in the novel should be studied in terms of the contradictions that emerge; the consensualities that are generated and the precise nature of the combination of power and subjection attributed to her. In addition, the narrative itself needs to be evaluated in the whole range of material factors and circumstances of its own socio-economic milieu.

In the subsequent section, we shall analyze the precise texture of Maharaj Kumar's subjectivity. I shall argue that his character is informed by a new construct of masculinity. Since Mira emerges, as it were, in response to this invented masculine subjectivity, it becomes imperative to study her husband's character in greater detail.

At one level, the novel performs the function of the historical reconstruction, by insinuating the manner in which marriage was institutionalized in the sixteenth century Rajput ruling families as a means of political alliance with other ruling families. But the experiences of Mira's marital life becomes different, because

the Maharaj Kumar's masculinity is created in a manner distinctly different from historically preserved typologies of what constitutes medieval Rajput manhood.

Our larger aim will be to see, to what extent the representation of Mira as a desiring subject, is overdetermined by the 'politics of male conferral'[18] which becomes symptomatic of the exigencies of the author's present.

2.1 The Novelist's 'Chosen One': Creating a New Masculine Subjectivity

Nagarkar takes the basic material of the historians record but constructs out of it something entirely his own. He cannot, in most cases, falsify historical events but by placing fictional narratives in their midst, he can seek to displace their meaning. The protagonist of the novel is not Mira but her husband, a footnote character in history. Why does the novelist select as its protagonist, a character whose features are underdetermined by history? Precisely because this makes possible a fictional play of incidents, which weave in and out of the known tracks of historical record. In a technique common to writers of historical fiction, 'it is the factual sparseness of the record which is utilized, exploiting the softness of evidence, so the counter-factuals of fiction do not appear contrived.'[19] The author uses the character of Maharaj Kumar to probe and use counter-factuals, 'to extend those lines in the tree of eventuation which were not followed up, to explore the peculiar terrain of history's non-actualised possibilities.'[20]

At one level, historical reconstructions may proceed by way of provisionally eliciting structures through the aggregation of events, actions and practices. At another level, the cognitive grid of a social terrain is infinitely more complex than the sum of elicited structures.[21] What the novelist injects into the socio-political terrain of medieval Mewar, is a subjectively valid underlife of emotions and events, for which there may be no decisive evidence. Against known historical records, artistic sovereignty legislates with impunity, Maharaj Kumar is the

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[18] The phrase I have used is Kumkum Sangari's. To understand the notion of indirect agency through which patriarchies generate consensualities, see Sangari's essay 'Consent, Agency and the Rhetoric of Incitement', in her *Politics of the Possible: Essay on Gender, History, Narratives, Colonial English* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999), 380.

[19] Kaviraj, *Unhappy Consciousness*, 133

[20] *ibid.*, 131

[21] See Kumkum Sangari, 'Consent and Agency: Aspects of Feminist Historiography' in Pawar (ed.), *Women in Indian History*, 25.

protagonist of history. To a great extent, the plenitude of historical events is informed by his subjectivity. He is the 'I' speaking a history – coloured, refracted and reflected by the subjectivity of this implied author. The Maharaj Kumar's subjectivity effects a crucial bending of the actuals in the direction of the plausible.

The Maharaj Kumar and his experience of manhood is arguably the basic theme of the novel. We may recall how the histories of medieval Rajasthan were rehabilitated by an emergent nationalism in Bengal, to interpret and celebrate a martial masculinity in order to counter colonial allegations of effeminacy. The thematic centrality of manhood in a novel written in the nineties, about medieval Rajasthan, also seems to preserve a certain continuity ,in the pursuit of an always elusive ideal of masculinity that has animated some of the central events of history. Though 'Rajput valour' and its attendant idea of 'manliness' remain intact (in the character of Rana Sanga for instance) as a precipitate of history; as the residual presence of typologies which dictate our relations to what we construe to be our past,[22] Maharaj Kumar's masculinity is invented out of the cauldron of fiction and becomes symptomatic, I shall argue, of the contingent terrain of the author's present.

But our concern is not the Maharaj Kumar, it is the renarrativization of Mira in the novel. He remains significant primarily because a redefined masculinity would also indicate a reconfiguration of the gendered organization of power within marriage. And since Mira emerges in the novel, largely through a lens focused on her conjugal life, she also emerges in the way she does, in response to an invented masculinity.

Even a casual reader of the novel will be struck by how characteristically modern impulses inform the character of Mira's husband. He is, in too many ways, ostensibly un-medieval. In other words, his subjectivity is articulated, all the while maintaining a critical distance with what the historians construe as medieval Rajput masculinity. For instance, despite the fact that Mira (or 'Greeneyes' as she is referred to in the novel) refuses to fulfill a crucial marital obligation, by remaining sexually unavailable to Maharaj Kumar; he resists surprisingly and stubbornly, the idea of a second marriage. *"Even the most conjugally happy of princes marry several wives. Look at your father. He loves me dearly but he knows his duty. Marriages are political alliances. They are also a safeguard. They ensure a long line*

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[22] For further discussion on history's relationship to the present, see the 'Translator's Introduction' in de Certeau, *Writing of History,* xvi

of succession and they prevent any queen from getting too big for her shoes," says the Maharaj Kumar's second mother, Queen Karnavati, by way of chiding him, after he has turned down the many proposals she has brought him.

His monogamous impulse becomes surprisingly consistent with contemporary Hindu marriage law. I make this point precisely to illustrate, how the legal-juridical discourses of the modern nation-state inform a re-invented masculinity in the characterization of Mira's husband. Though the Maharaj Kumar eventually complies with a second marriage, he remains psychologically averse to it.

In Nagarkar's conceptualization of the Maharaj Kumar, the citizen subject of the modern nation –state constantly strains against the subject of the medieval Rajput polity. This point, I presume needs further clarification. Let us for a moment go back to the premise, which the author had laid down at the outset—his aim of making intelligible the political vicissitudes of sixteenth century Mewar in terms of the ups and downs in the 'life of our nation'. Does this not point toward another post-colonial predicament ? –the predicament of an imagination which sees 'the universalization of the nation-state as the most desirable form of political community'[23] This would imply, by extension, the impossibility of imagining a subjectivity without conferring on him the status of a citizen-subject, who is at the same time " the obedient subject of the law (including conscience) and the elementary term or the constitutive element of liberal democratic polity."[24] The Maharaj Kumar's aversion to polygamy ensures his status as a citizen-subject, at least in his psychological subjection to the legal (national) state. Even though in practice, he succumbs to the pre-modern Rajput institution of polygamy; the author is successful in endowing him with a modern sensibility.

This apart, he also plans a treatise written on a sustained study of retreat in war, again a strangely modern and unRajput thing to do. He is consistently critical of the Rajput code of honourable warfare and their glorification of death in the battlefield to prove their valour. In his own words:

> "The options of doubt and fear and retreat are unthinkable
>
> because these areas in our minds have been sealed off. In truth,
>
> there are no options at all. There is no discrimination or

[23] Dipesh Chakravarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the Indian Past?', in Padmini Mongia, ed., 240.
[24] Susie Tharu, 'Citizenship and Its Discontents' in Mary John and Janaki Nair (eds.), *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 223.

willingness in our valour. It is blind, headlong and unflinching because we don't know any other way of reacting in a confrontation". [pg. 58]

We see him evolve into a mature general with unconventional methods – ruses, strategic retreats, feints, pretences and so on; they win him wars and the readers admiration but earns him the ire of his own community. They brand him a 'coward', an unscrupulous violator of the Rajput code of conduct. Even after he returns from the Idar campaign, having successfully defeated the Gujarat armies, his victory is not celebrated. He has flouted the Rajput code of warfare and this is interpreted by his people as the "loss of manhood for the Rajput forces." (p.232)

For Nagarkar, the Maharaj Kumar embodies as new ethic of male heroism; he is misunderstood precisely because he is ahead of his times. He is posited as a man alright, and more heroic precisely because more 'modern'. He does not eschew war, he merely extends its scope to its logical extreme. Additionally, his modernity also finds expression in his developmental impulse — the sewage system and the hygiene of Chittor remain his pet obsessions. His manhood and heroism emerge in its conflict with the 'masculinity', which remains as a residual presence of 'typologies' from the many pages of history. It is this attribution of a modern masculine subjectivity in the characterization of Maharaj Kumar, that resists an interpretation of Mira's agency within the domain of conjugality, which can be mechanically read off by tentatively eliciting structures in recreating a medieval Rajput social terrain.

2.2 Mira's consent: in collaboration with patriarchy

The author's deployment of the Mira figure to legitimize his invented 'manly heroism', in consonance with the need of creating the modern man (citizen-subject), assumes added significance.

Let us hold to close scrutiny the moment in the narrative, which marks a jerky transformation in Mira's characterization. When the Maharaj Kumar returns to Chittor, victorious after the successful Idar campaign, only to be greeted by threats of lynching by his people who are angered by his 'dishonourable' methods of warfare, it is Mira who strategically saves him. The Maharaj Kumar is grateful to his wife for

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single handedly averting, what he calls 'the clash of the populace' with the prince's army; 'the most dangerous and shameful crisis in the history of Mewar' [pg. ?]

If Mira's sainthood and its attendant popularity among the common masses, is strategically harnessed for the purpose of maintenance of the prestige of the Rajput state and status quo; it is also a wifely duty undertaken to protect her 'suhaag'. My specific emphasis on this moment of the narrative, is to understand how it wrests consent from the Mira figure; generates a moment when she invests in patriarchal values (by way of defending a re-defined ethic of male heroism), practices and arrangements (where she intervenes to preserve status-quo), and assumes their obligations. This however is not the only instance, there are other moments in the narrative, which attribute to Mira the role of a military advisor to Rana Sanga and the expertise of state craft in advising her husband. These instances generate a peculiar contradiction — she is uncaring of her husband, but anxious to protect his military prestige; she flouts 'family honour' by dancing in public gaze but seems fully aware and involved in matters of organizing the Mewar army against Mahmud Khalji of Malwa (pg. 423). Her social agency emerges in a fairly contradictory fashion, as both complicit and transgressive.

There are moments in the narrative, which seem to completely and I assume deliberately, atrophy any possibility of feminist agency in the phenomenon of her sainthood. Indeed, the Little Saint assumes a surrogate patriarchal role in relation to Sugandha (Maharaj Kumar's second wife). Sugandha's failed love affair with the Maharaj Kumar's step brother Vikramaditya leads her into excruciating agony and despair. Mira further accentuates her loneliness. The implied author, Maharaj Kumar informs us:

> "Sugandha's break with Vikram and the consequent rapprochement
> between her and me rekindled the antipathy in Greeneyes. And since
> Greeneyes cut Sugandha dead or ignored her, the other woman in the
> seraglio made it a point to ostracize her too. Who after all, could risk
> the Little Saint's displeasure now?" (pg. 538)

Mira emerges, as it were, not only as a jealous wife but also as one, who actively participates in the daily recreation of inequality within the zenana (the site of women's socialization). Her sainthood is interpreted as a degree of access to power and influence whereby she can wield her influence to produce tension ,divide

women within the zenana ,and prevent them from forming stable collectivities. Mira is portrayed, not only as dictating Sugandha's ostracization, she goes as far as to cast aspersions on her pregnancy. The Maharaj Kumar informs the reader, "She (Mira) let it be known that there was no guaranteeing that even Vikramaditya was the father of the child in Sugandha's womb. Who, after all, was to know how widely my second wife had spread her infidelity?' It seems rather strange that a woman who flaunts her own fidelity should rebuke another for the same.

The phenomenon of her sainthood meets a strange fate in Nagarkar's fiction. The royalty sponsors the enlargement of the temple complex where she worships (pg.394). The Maharaj Kumar reveals:

"my wife sings and dances at six every evening now and the prayer meetings are often attended by none other than His Majesty. Plans are afoot to enlarge both the temple complex and compound to hold fifty thousand people. Marble lattices wrought with workmanship that's comparable to the exquisite silver jewelry that Chittor is so famous for, now screen the billowing storms my wife's skirt generate for the Blue One.

Frankly, Chittor has little reason to complain. The pilgrim and tourist traffic in the citadel has gone up by a husband and fifty percent since we got back from Kumbhalgarh and showes no sign of abating...My wife as the finance ministry was discovering, is not just a rare and living treasure, she is Chittor's biggest economic asset." (pg. 394)

Not only does Mira's devotion thrive under state patronage, the state too thrives on the economic benefits her sainthood brings. Her worship is also presented as a routine spectacle in which even the ruler, Rana Sanga participates. Her devotion, in Nagarkar's fiction, does not seem to articulate an antithesis to Rajput Dharma and polity; it is tied instead to Mewar's economy and is actively supported by the Rana. This goes against the accepted lore about her life, where the Rana emerges as a central figure responsible for her persecution. The Rana as an embodiment of feudal and patriarchal authority features as her persecutor in the hagiographic accounts (e.g. Bhaktarasabodhini Tika) as well as in the numerous bhajans sung in her

name[25]. Any revolutionary potential that can be embodied by the Mira figure is to a large extent elided and she remains, in Cuckold, throughout in a relationship of complicity with the state.

In order to understand, how the novelist generates consent from the attributed agency of her sainthood, it is important to understand the Mira figure as it emerges, in the full range of complicities and extracted compensations from patriarchy and the state.

2.3 'The Act' of Representation: A Sexual Economy of Violence and Desire

In Cuckold, as I have mentioned before, Mira remains sexually unavailable to her husband. Her stubborn refusal to consummate the marriage reveals a moment of great tension in the narrative. This is how the experience of her wedding night is described:

'Please,' she whispered, 'I'm spoken for.'

What did she mean? Hadn't they got married today? Wasn't she his bride and virgin? He pinned her hands back, scooped her legs up from the ground, snapped the string of the ghagra open and half tore it pulling it down. 'We are man and wife, man and wife,' he was trying to persuade her as much as himself of the fact of their marriage. She said it again. 'I'm betrothed to someone else.'

He crashed into her. She was tight and unyielding. He guided his member with his hand and slammed into her. Again and again. And again. She was crying. He had broken the barrier and gone through clean. He drew back and lunged all the way in. He had found his rhythm. Plunge, retract, out. Plunge, retract, out. She was limp, he went on maniacally. He missed the downward stroke by a fraction and hit the flat of her thigh. He withdrew and lunged again.

He was aghast when he saw his penis. It was broken. There was a jet of blood flowing out of it. It burst forth in spurts. Her choli, sari,

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[25] For instance in Bhajan no.D, in Bankey Bihari's *Bhakta Mira* runs as follows, "*sanp pitayo rana bhejyo,/mira hath diyo jaye/ nhay dhoy jab dekhan lagi/ saligram gayi paye/ jahar ka pyala rana bhejyo/ amrit diyo banaye / nhay dhoy ghoy jal pivan lagi/ amar ho gayi jaye/ sool sej rana ne bheji/ biyo mira suvay/ sanjh bhai mira sovan lagi/ mano phul bichay/ mira ke prabhu sada sadai/ rakho vigan hataye/ bhakti bhyav me mast dolti/ girdhar pe bali jaye*"

ghagra, bed, everything was wet and red. She couldn't take her eyes off his member. He looked at her in terror. He didn't know how to stop the flow of blood. There was sweat on his brows, he felt weak and yet the blood kept welling up. He knew he was going to die. He held his member down with his hands but they were so wet, it kept slipping. She pulled her chunni from under her head and wrapped it rapidly around his penis and held it up so that its mouth was pointing towards the ceiling of the room. After a couple of minutes, the spasms of blood subsided but she continued to hold it gently till he fell asleep.(Pg. 45 & 46)

We must read in the nuances in this description, how the narrative poses, blurs and resolves social deviance. In Mira's refusal to allow her husband access to her body, one can read a denial of normative wifely obligations. But the description generates a peculiar economy. At one level, it poses a potentially unsettling challenge in her refusal to fulfill an obligation that remains central to defining sexual norm within marriage. But the deviance posed is at once sought to be blurred and resolved. The narrative of marital rape at once posits masculine desire and its satiation within marriage, in a logic of power and authority and a will to control and possess the woman's body. Mira's consent to be a victim, enduring violence as an aspect of conjugal good faith, points to an index of the naturalization of the norms of masculine sexuality.

I'll focus on another instance in the novel, to explicate this economy of transgression and complicity within which the Mira figure remains trapped. The Maharaj Kumar is angered when he receives reports about his wife dancing before the idol of the 'Blue One' (Krishna), in full public gaze:

'Did you? Did you actually dance?'

'I don't remember.'

My foot slammed into her face. It was not the hardest blows but it knocked her down. The lota rolled over several times before it clattered to a halt. Her lower lip was cut open, the blood had stained her blouse, the water from the lota had wet the back of her petticoat. She took my foot in her hands again, disengaged the shoe

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and brought my toe to her left eye first and then let it touch her right eye. I was her lord and master and she would not do me out of acts of obeisance. She did not ask why or wherefore, nor look aggrieved or wipe the blood from her lip. She was unconcerned whether I kicked her again or not. (p 11 and 12)

The little saint's desire for the 'Blue One' is expressed as a transgression, in the irretrievable public exposure of her body. Queen Karmavati describes to the Maharaj Kumar how, as his 'nautch girl' wife danced ecstatically, the men gazed at her billowing petticoat from under the latticed balustrade of the temple. The above quoted description extracts a peculiar economy from the transgression implied in her performance. It simultaneously plays out Mira as a consensual subject who succumbs to the hierarchy obtained within marriage. She is both transgressive and complicit; deviant but nurturing. The description also evinces a stoicism in her endurance of violence, and this stoicism serves to inform her saintliness as a pure and simple expression of her spiritual being. Attempts are constantly being made to resolve the tension, between her willed marriage to Krishna and her customary marriage to the Maharaj Kumar.

One night the Maharaj Kumar paints his body indigo, wears pitambara,, picks up a flute and goes to the 'Little Saint' in disguise. She is convinced that her lover, the 'Flautist' has come to unite with her, she engages her impersonating husband in Raslila or aimless love play; they make love, but in ecstacy she calls out him 'Krishna Kanhiya'. The Maharaj Kumar is shattered. The omniscient narrator reveals to the reader, how the Maharaj's despair reverberates with a crisis of masculinity: 'Surely, he had told himself a thousand times, his wife new it was all make believe. One of these days he was going to take off his mask, no more indigo, no more silk pitambar, just his naked flesh and they would cohabit as husband and wife. And yet on the night of his second wedding when had suddenly called him by the god's name, he felt as if she had mutilated and dismembered him. He might as well have joined the ranks of eunuchs......'(p 565-66)

The crisis of masculinity clearly reveals that intercourse is the context in which both the Maharaj's conjugal relationship and his maleness assume form, coherence and significance. More interestingly, a third person narrator, and not the Maharaj himself convey this crisis. This narrative strategy seems to be predicated on

the premise that masculinity is so intimately linked with notions of self-hood, that the trauma of emasculation is not translatable into the public self-representation of adult male subjectivity. Even as the Maharaj Kumar takes upon himself the unlikely role as the fulfiller of the Flautist's erotic dimension, the driving impulse behind his impersonation remains the desire to co-habit with the little saint, not as lovers but as husband and wife. When he surrenders his identity as her 'husband', it is only a temporary and strategic ploy to reclaim his rightful status as her husband forever.

When these strategies of impersonation are thwarted, the Maharaj Kumar – as – Krishna leaves the Little Saint, never to return with Indigo paint on his body again. The Little Saint who has been oblivious of his pretences, his convinced of her union with her lover-husband, the Flautist. She formalizes her marriage with the Flautist's idol, proclaiming 'worship me', 'there's as much of the divine in me as in you.'(p 565) The devotee and the deity has become one. It is hard not to be tempted by the surface attraction of such egalitarian images.

Even as the iconic status of Mira as a celibate saint is undermined, how is the potentially unsettling sexualisation of the woman as an actively desiring subject, accommodated and contained within a more familiar sexual norm? At one level the author ensures that, even as Mira actively participates in consensual hetero sexual intercourse, she remains well within the parameters of the social relation defined by conjugality. The man impersonating as the Blue One is after all, her husband . Their union is represented in a heightened poetic aesthetic:

> 'Spring was in the air and her flesh broke out imperceptibly into tendrils that grew into vines. They entwined themselves around her arms and breasts and spread out over her thighs and calves and toes. And all the while, tiny green leaves stirred and essayed forth. And shyly, ever slowly, yellow and red buds crept out and almost soundlessly popped open. He stretched a finger to touch flower and leaf. Before he knew it, the green had leapt over and entwined itself around his hand and drew him to the creeper-woman. Nothing, he knew then could break them asunder.' (p496).

Is there an ideological dimension to this aesthetic of heterosexual pleasure, whereby masculine desire has to be displayed in full expectation of consent and reciprocity? Does it also mark a moment in the narrative, where the conflict

between her marriage to Krishna and her marriage to the Maharaj Kumar; her self projection as a subject of desire in relation to Krishna and her consent to the hierarchy obtained within her marriage to the Maharaj Kumar, is sought to be resolved? I will attempt to answer these questions in the next section.

In Cuckold, the Maharaj Kumar goes to fight the might of Babur's army; the Rajputs are defeated in the battle of Khanua; Vikramaditya chooses this opportunity to poison his father and elder brother. Maharaj Kumer escapes the poison, but what ensues thereafter is not stated with any degree of finality. Multiple versions are put forth, in the form of many stories floating around about the manner of his disappearance. But the one that became a legend, is concerned with the Flautist's temple in Baswa. The Maharaj Kumar had thought of finally defeating his rival, the Flautist by beheading his exquisite idol. Just as he raised his sword and was about to strike:

> 'It was then that the Flautist embraced the Maharaja Kumar. Terror
> and astonishment struck the six men. One minute the Maharaj Kumar
> was there, the next he had become invisible. Had they been dreaming ?
> There was just the end of Maharaj Kumar's turban, the kesariya bana,
> showing outside the lower left edge of the Flautist's chest. ' (602-3)

In complete inversion of the popular legend of Mira's merging into the Krishna idol, it is the Maharaj Kumar who becomes one with Krishna- not Krishna the warrior, but the Flautist in his erotic dimension. What could this new mythification signify? What male anxiety impels this mythification, described in the text under consideration? The Maharaj Kumar, who in his manhood, had been systematically rejecting the erotic dimension of Krishna, is finally made to reconcile with it.

Section 3: Making Mira in the 90's: Agency? Or the Political Economy of Desire?

How are we to understand, the representation of Mira's sexuality as it emerges in Cuckcold,, in its peculiar economy of desire and violence? If history is re-interpreted as a realm of contingency ,it may useful to confront the possibility that such a representation of female sexuality might tell us more about the fears and fantasies of its male creator. This could perhaps be a possible entry point, into the

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seemingly intractable and unanalyzable problem we encounter in the text — while all other forms of radical social agency is excluded from the Mira figure, what might explain the seemingly greater sexual agency (as a subject of desire) of Mira in the latter part of the novel, where representations of her sexuality are marked by her active consent and absence of violence?

Is it possible to draw links between the heightened aesthetic of conjugal heterosexual pleasure, which characterizes the moment of union between the Little Saint and her husband in the text, and the contingencies of the author's present with its evolving economies of sexual desire. As the historical novel celebrates history as a realm of contingency, the new unconventional representation of Mira's sexuality, invites a reading in terms of the exigencies of the present.

In this section, I shall attempt to locate, the semantic accretions of the descriptions of sexuality in Cuckold, published in 1997, within the globalising 1990s and its 'evolving economies of sexuality'[26]

In context of globalising trends, Mary John in her interrogation of contemporary formations of female sexuality in India identifies an emerging visual ideology (especially in the media) foregrounding a conjugal, erotic sexuality. This emerging trend ,where an eroticisation of marriage relationships is increasingly becoming a dominant image, may be seen in terms of an attempted resolution of a more conflicted situation. According to Mary John, the first and in many ways the central image which marks a rupture and points to a sudden transformation in the 'sexual economy' of a post liberalization India is the image promoted by the Kamasutra condom advertisement, appended with the sensational text 'For Your Pleasure'. This image remains significant in 'signaling a new public legitimation in the form of consensual, mutual, safe and private heterosexual pleasure (heterosexual intercourse to be precise}, in a style not witnessed before'.[27] These images are directed to a new addressee — a new urban middle class.

By way of explaining this new public legitimacy being accorded to representations of private intimacy, she suggests a likely hypothesis. Even though the basis of this hypothesis is largely impressionistic and anecdotal, it remains relevant as

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[26] It refers to the material site where issues of sexuality are contested and played out. Mary E. John and Janaki Nair, 'Introduction: A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India', in John and Nair (eds.), Question of Silence, 14-5.

[27] Mary E. John, 'Globalization, Sexuality and the Visual Field: Issues and Non-issues for Cultural Critique', in ibid., 377

a political mode of conceptualizing 'sexual economies', and emphasise the materiality of the sites where sexual desire is not merely repressed but also simultaneously and variously aroused, blocked and violated.

In the context of globalisation, which marks a new phase of capitalist development, a new urban middle class woman, is being recruited as a 'consuming subject' in a vastly expanding global and local market. To a certain degree, the contingency of this role as a consuming subject in the global market (of consumer products) requires the sexualisation of a certain section of women as actively desiring subjects. And as more and more women respond to the demands of a new globalising culture, the urban metropolitan middle class is witnessing an unprecedented strain on the institution of marriage. To cite Mary John again, "there is ample evidence that an increasing number of women, especially from the professional groups, are not getting married, are prepared to leave their husbands, or have other relationships outside marriage."[28] In light of all this, the images projecting fulfilling and intimate conjugality may be indicative of fresh contracts that are possibly being drawn up between the state ("in it's retreat from productive economic functions; mediating actively between the nation and international capital") and the new masculine middle class citizen. As an anxiety grips the contemporary urban middle class, the tensions resulting from the strains on the institution of marriage and the sexualization of women as actively desiring consumers produced through modes of incitement in the global market economy are sought to be resolved. Mary John raises an important question, "could it be, therefore that contemporary middle class society is witnessing a mismatch of sorts, a mismatch that cannot be acknowledged but must be publicly denied by images promising sexual mutuality if not egalitarianism"[29].

I am willing to risk a rather tentative and perhaps tenuous argument. We must confront the possibility that the representation of sexuality in Nagarkar's novel, may well be symptomatic of tensions, anxieties, fears and fantasies of the male creator located within a certain milieu defined by a suddenly transformed emergent 'sexual economy'. The new masculinity of the Maharaj Kumar, as eminently modern but also displaying a unabashed passion for his wife, sometimes in an almost anti-macho and vulnerable mode, seems to invite an analogue in the new middle class masculine citizen. A fantasy of eroticisation of marriage is constantly played out in

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[28] *Ibid.*, 3
[29] *Ibid.*, 386.

the text and finds culmination in the novel's ending. The Maharaj Kumar becomes one with the Flautist, the husband finally becomes the lover-husband — a new mythification consonant with emergent needs.

As the institution of marriage is increasingly coming under stress (a situation analogous to the tension in the marital relationship central to the text), the impulse underlying the heightened aesthetic of conjugal sexuality in the novel, may well be the anxious projection of "a desirable middle class masculinity beholding itself in the mirror of a desiring reciprocal femininity"[30]

Conclusion:

I am trying to suggest the possibility that, the question of Mira's sexuality, 'a question of silence' is being prised open by the author writing in the nineties, only to be rearticulated in ways, that are symptomatic of the anxieties and fantasies generated by an emergent 'sexual economy' that affects an urban middle class of the author's present.

It may therefore be misleading, to hurriedly read the author's iconoclasm in breaking the idea of celibacy, which has been inextricably associated with the Mira figure, as an expression of a feminist impulse. What appears to be an act of iconoclasm, may in reality be, little more than a symptom of a certain political economy of desire.

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[30] *Ibid.,* .

Chapter 4

Conclusion

> *The historic convent of the Clarissan nuns, which had been turned into a hospital a century earlier, was to be sold, and a five-star hotel built in its place. The gradual collapse of the roof had left its beautiful chapel exposed to the abbesses and other eminent personages were still buried there. The first step was to empty the crypts, transfer the remains to anyone who claimed them and bury the rest in a common grave.*
>
> *I was surprised by the crudeness of the procedure. Laborers opened the tombs with pickaxes and hoes, took out the rotting coffins, which broke apart with the simple act of moving them, and separated bones from the jumble of dust, shreds of clothing and desiccated hair...*
>
> *The surprise lay in the third niche of the high altar, on the side where the Gospels were kept. The stone shattered at the first low of the pickaxe and a stream of living hair the intense color of copper spilled out of the crypt. The foreman, with the help of laborers, attempted to uncover all the hair, and the more of it they brought out, the longer and more abundant it seemed, until at last the final strands appeared still attached to the skull of a young girl. Nothing else remained in the niche except a few small scattered bones, and on the dressed stone eaten away by saltpeter only a given name with no surnames was legible: SIERVA MARÍA DE TODOS LOS ÁNGELES. Spread out on the floor, the splendid hair measured twenty-two meters, eleven centimeters.*
>
> *The impassive foreman explained that human hair grew a centimeter a month after death, and twenty-two meters seemed a good average of two hundred years. I, on the other hand, did not think it so trivial a matter, for when I was a boy my grandmother had told me the legend of a little twelve-year-old marquise with hair that trailed behind her like a bridal train, who had died of rabies caused by a dog bite and was venerated in the towns along the Caribbean coast for the many miracles she had performed.*

<div align="right">

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ
Of Love and other Demons.

</div>

Sierva María's hair is a metaphor — like human hair, legends around some lives continue to grow after death. These lives do not perish with death, they remain alive as events which congeal into metaphors, and metaphors which congeal in memory.

Stories proliferate around a life, in several strands that remain separate, strands that also keep knotting, overlapping, entwining, and growing in different directions. Often the only connectedness is in the name of the individual around whom they grow. Mirabai is such a name.

The diverse forms of discursivity within which the life and agency of Mira unfold and reconfigure, where her subjectivity is constantly made, unmade and re-made, however, do not call for a naïve celebration of plurality. Since patriarchies operate through relations of production and labour and also through various kinds of

discourses, the material and the discursive are mutually implicated. And it is this relation that I have sought to work out in my dissertation.

The transgressive excess of Mira, where it appears, cannot be simply valourized as the sphere of 'power' reserved for women in pre-modern or traditional societies. Even as we retain and strengthen the impulse towards a constructive critique of modernity and its violence (in this case in relation to women), seeking alternate spaces within tradition (what constitutes this is itself contestable) may amount to a capitulative tendency of replacing one oppressive relation with another.

My aim has not been to restore women to history. As we see in the case of Mira, some women are writ large in history, but this writing may well be an appropriation that serves to manufacture consensual patterns. The task then, is to restore history to women. This has been my effort throughout this work. In locating how the material and the discursive are linked in representing Mira, my intention has been to historicize the representations and throw light on their larger political implications.

The 'real Mira' as the embodied subject who lived in medieval Rajasthan remains the woman as a subaltern, who cannot speak. Her legacy has been variously transmitted and appropriated. A close study of the precise nature of this transmission and appropriation is necessary because it might reveal more about the contingencies of making Mira in regulating and stabilizing gender norms, than about Mira herself.

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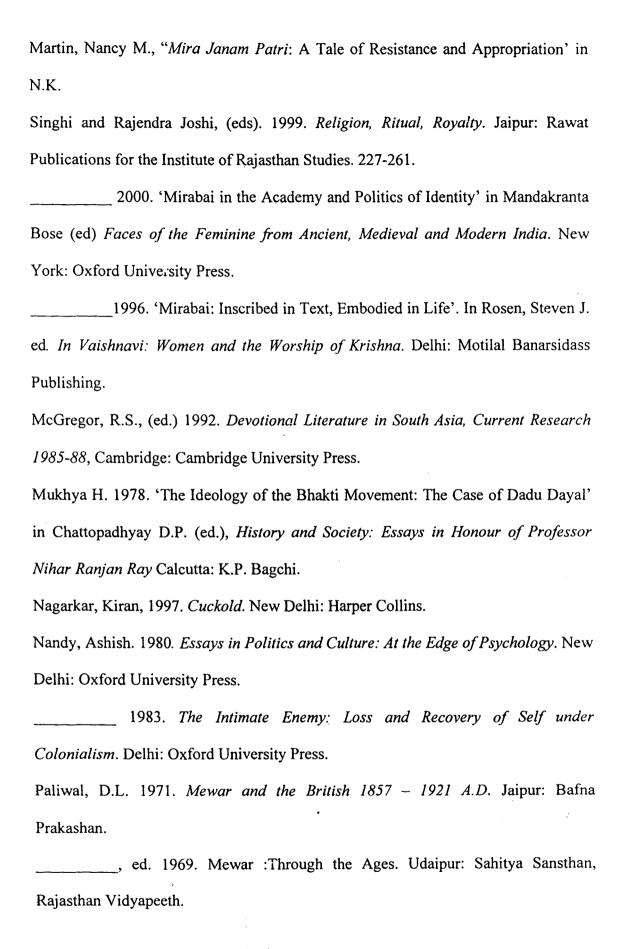
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