

# Divine Romance in the Poetry of Meera Bai and Emily Dickinson

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From the origin of social life mankind is divided in binary opposition of male /female principle. Much has been discussed and debated

in the literary forums on two different aspects of a woman. Some women writers seem to be engaged in portraying image of woman as a new age woman who is free to satisfy her desires by all means. In contrast some writers are depicting woman as subdued & traditional who are ready to play all their roles by following all the norms set by male-dominated society. Above all these gender-discriminations there is yet another higher theme to meditate upon. Most of us fail to realize that every human being is a divine soul having no boundaries in terms of gender difference. The present paper deals with two women writers from different social, cultural, religious background belonging to entirely different time period but who have presented themselves not as a woman but as an individual soul in search of Divine Bridegroom. One of these writers is from India: a prominent signature of Indian Bhakti Movement, Meera Bai (1498-1557) and the other is Emily Dickinson from the later phase of American Transcendental Movement. These two woman poets are on the way to have a constant communion with God. Meera has treated herself as personal property of Giridhar. Several poems of Emily tie her urge for immortality directly to the marriage experience. Such illustrations show that they understand world, worldly relations and worldly boundaries but they have improvised these symbols in their mystical poems to express that the divine bridegroom has come to wed them. The poetry of Meera and Emily is not only a remembrance of the 'Parampurush' but a celebration of divine love and divine wedding.

To begin with, both Emily and Meera are committed to personalized approach to God. The natural inclination of these two women poets is to remain in constant communion with God unknown to the material world. Meera appears to have been born in circumstances that favored devotion to Krishna. Meera in her childhood became so attached to Krishna that her mother jokingly told her that Krishna would be her bridegroom. The love of Meera towards Lord Krishna resembles the love of a devoted Hindu wife. Meera was

always conscious of the presence of her Lord Krishna within her heart.

Only she, who's beloved is abroad needs to write letters:/My beloved rests ever in my heart.<sup>1</sup>

I will go direct to the court<sup>2</sup>

My very existence depends on Shyam the beloved/ He is the herb that grants me life.<sup>3</sup> Meera had assumed herself as the personal property of Giridhar. Meera worshiped God 'with form'. She is conscious of her identity and separation from God at the same time. Emily expresses the same feeling here:

I live with him-I see his face/I go no more away<sup>4</sup> (Poem 463)

While Meera describes physical features of God in the form of Lord Krishna, Emily Dickinson had embraced Christ as her chosen idol (Ishta). Plotinus described this coming together of individual soul and the universal soul, the devotee and the Lord as the veritable love, the sharp desire. In her devotional poems Meera Bai sings of her surrender to the divine and the joy which she had experienced.

My wanderings are at an end / I shall remain at Thy feet/ Thy servant forever.<sup>5</sup>

O papiha/Do not call out for the Beloved/I belong to the Beloved/ And he belongs to me alone./Who are you to call Him 'darling'?<sup>6</sup>

To look upon God as one's dearest beloved is supposed to be the most perfect, the deepest and the sweetest relationship i.e. 'Madhurya Sambandh'. In Christian Mysticism this attitude is known as spiritual marriage of the soul. Dickinson's attitude in her relationship with God differ in her numerous poems. At times she makes God seem very much like a creator and a protective father. In another poem she assumes the role of a housewife.

The Housewife in Thy low attendance contenteth me.<sup>7</sup> (Poem 697)

Emily's total surrender to the Divine Being can be viewed in these lines:

You said that I "was Great" one day

Then "Great" it be – if that please Thee

Or small –or any size at all

Nay I'm the size suit Thee-<sup>8</sup> (Poem738)

Similarly Meera conceives God in a human form :Tell me what dainty dishes please thee.<sup>9</sup>

As blissful experience in a number of poems convinces Meera Bai and Emily both that they are going to attain the illumination through the path of divine love. In the *Bhakti Sutra*(25) of Narada, love has been described as an end in itself (*phalrupa*) and not as a means to an end. Says Meera:

My darkling Beloved has come/Every limb in my body throbs with joy<sup>10</sup>

And in Emily Dickinson we have the glimpse of the same moment of ecstasy when the soul and the divine soul are going to become submerged in each other.

Supposed that he had come to dwell

And life would all be a spring. <sup>11</sup> (Poem 232)

How to be in close communion with the Divine Bridegroom – this sublime quest occupied Emily and Meera most of the time. The poems of withdrawal and renunciation suggest that the seed of spirituality was planted and the intense urge to find the blissful possession of spiritual life was fulfilled.

So far we were discussing the response of these two poets to the blissful experience of union with God. But equally powerful poetry emerges from what may be called the dark moments of despondency felt by them in a phase of separation with the divine husband. The bond of love became stronger during separation. It is better for the devotee to feel the pangs of separation from divine than to have lower desires like gaining and losing the heart of worldly people. Separation for even a fraction of second is unbearable to the devotee. We can see the sad plight of these two women mystic poets:

Before he comes we weigh the time/'tis heavy and 'tis is light / when he departs, an emptiness is the prevailing freight.<sup>12</sup> (Poem 834)

Without the light of the Beloved/My house is dark<sup>13</sup>

While Dickinson throws a challenge at God, Meera is sober in her approach. Says Emily :

God is indeed a jealous God

He can not bear to see

That we are rather not with him

But with each other play.<sup>14</sup> (Poem1719)

Meera Bai the exalted mystic of India, was one of the finest, the purest and the loftiest example in the history of this all consuming love for God as expressed in her moving songs which became one of the tenderly cherished heritage of the

world. When Meera's mortal husband died she refused to immolate herself in the fire believing that she still had a reason to live. Meera's widowhood could only intensify her spiritual longing and devotion to her immortal bridegroom.

In a poem we find her singing immortal song of renunciation:

"Father, mother, brother or friend, I have none- Lord/ For your sake I have given up all happiness. Do not forsake me now- do not forsake me now".<sup>15</sup>

The radiant devotion, the supernal beauty of her purity, her bravery, absolute surrender and God intoxication are the rarest of the rare experience ever written in any country or in any language.

Meera looked on Divine Being as the savior, who absolved his devotees of all sins and freed them from rounds of rebirth. Finally we come to the last group of devotional poems in which the individual soul seems to be entering in to a beatific union with the divine soul.

The drop that wrestles in the sea-

Forgets her own locality

As I toward Thee.<sup>16</sup> (Poem284)

So sets its sun in Thee

What day be dark to me.<sup>17</sup> (Poem 808)

At last to be identified!

At last the lamps upon Thy side

The rest of life to see.....<sup>18</sup> (Poem 174)

The discussion of bridal poems brings forth Dickinson's total surrender to Christ as divine bridegroom.

Given in marriage unto Thee

O Thou celestial Host....

Other betrothal shall dissolve

Wedlock of will, decay –

Only the keeper of this Ring

Conquer mortality <sup>19</sup> (Poem 817)

Emily Dickinson makes the most explicit statement of her divine wedding in terms of Roman Catholic Sect. In a poem she states that she is made at midnight but with morning she hopes to be wedded and be a wife:

A wife at day break

I shall be

Sun rise- hast Thou

A flag for me<sup>20</sup> (Poem 472)

Meera also claims to be God's bride by the merit of her single minded devotion to Lord Krishna.It is interesting to note that

both Emily and Meera use symbol of marriage pertaining to their respective culture. Meera imparts that atmosphere of marriage to her poems through the *Sohag Dust* and gold, while Dickinson does it with a ring, the symbol of marriage. Meera expresses her divine wedding experience in this way:

And I have arrayed myself in bride garb  
 From head to toe  
 Fifty six crores of deities formed the bridal procession/  
 And the bridegroom was the Lord of *Braj*  
 In my dream,  
 I underwent a wedding ceremony/  
 And entered the married state<sup>21</sup>

T. H. Johnson, Emily's most leading critic has well commented about the spiritual marriage in these words:

She is wife but in no sense that could be celebrated publicly." She is involved in a state of life now best characterized by the term Calvary; she senses a difference, a transition."<sup>22</sup>

The metaphors of anguish, pain, rapture, hunger, liquor, boat, drop, lamp, sea- chariot have got a transcendental importance. These poets seemed to be passing their days and night sensing divine communion every moment.

The ecstasy and bliss of beholding God face to face is so perfect that the sense of mortal life is obliterated in a moment.

In poem no 646 Emily ponders the security divine love would bring:

I think to live may be a bliss  
 In an utter state of dispassion Emily summed up:  
 When we've ceased to care  
 The gift is given<sup>23</sup> (Poem 1706)

Such a poet was Emily Dickinson whose life transforming vision of eternity will never cease to illumine her readers.

The desired end of this paper is to bring to light the ecstatic experience of these two poets, when they have reached the highest spiritual state known as 'Tadatmya Bhav' – being at one with God.

It was my one glory

Let it be

Remembered

I was owned of Thee.....<sup>24</sup> (Poem 1028)

Meera was born to be immortal – her desperate call of her divine lover was heard far and wide like the haunting mysterious cry of the *Papiha*.

Their coming to this world was a preparation for her ultimate union, their final fusion with the '*chir sunder*'.

The spark of divine love had been ignited. It is not for us to know at which point of time and space their romance begin with the most romantic of all Beings, who had manifest himself on earth and who was the total Bliss, the Supreme Truth and the Eternal Husband. Meera had wed herself to Prince of all princes, the king of this universe. Meera is as if the eternal Radha eagerly waiting her Madhav with imperishable certainty. Meera lived as a rebel after her wedding with prince Bhoj.

No duty, no worship, no love was greater than this pure divine love of Meera for her Giridhar Gopal. Meera's spirit soared higher and higher seeking liberation.

Emily Dickinson and Meera are in search of their divine husband without whom their life had no meaning. Meera's voice spoke only one word *Krishna* her heart knows only one beat, her ears listen only one tune, her eyes wish to have only the glimpse of *Krishna*. Drunk with the nectar of pure love she sang and danced with ecstasy. Blessed was Meera's life, her pure love and her devotion. It is not an ordinary story of a woman loving a mortal lover and suffering the pangs of separation on an earthly plane of experience. Indeed it is immortal, eternal and divine life led by women who became one with the Lord of time and space. This immortal story has to be rewritten in another country and another clime. The story of divine love continues – it is immortal. This divine romance does not come easily in one's life. This romance with Lord starts in other lives and other world.

The subject matter of the poetry of Emily and Meera is the inner world of mystical realization. These two women poets have devoted their poetic life in mystic realizations. Their poetry may be labeled as 'songs of the soul'. Through the writing of poems addressed to the divine lover, these two women poets were able to have a rich spiritual life in spite of the solitary condition of their outer life. Divine love takes these poets to the pinnacle of mystical achievement. These poetical expressions and critical analysis can not reveal the perfect state of mystical experience of the divine romance but at least, they serve as pointers to the other seekers of Truth to ponder over the mystical experience. On and further on, to the endless end the seeker of divine love will voyage forever getting enlightened by such illuminated poets. These two women poets have enriched the tradition of inwardness in poetry. The purpose of this paper is incomplete till the period our own insight will be opened.

Looking at these example of women mystic poets, their attainments, experiences and realization on the highest level of religious experience, the entire women folk could be proud. Women mystics are only a few among the many mystic who lived in various regions of the world, in different period of time and poured out their God – oriented devotional lyrics. At this point may safely conclude that the poetry of Emily

Dickinson and Meera Bai has the great capacity to transform and elevate our own lives.

In the light of this paper we can see that divine love is a vital aspect of women, which expresses love for the Supreme. Journey of every soul ends to reach at that level and rest there forever. The path of divine love is very difficult to move on, because in this one has to lose all one's worldly desires and senses. This is the reason that in women discourse or in discussion on images of women by women writers, generally we don't touch this aspect of women. I am privileged to share my views on this dignified and selfless side of women in front of all readers .

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