Madeleine Slade’s (Mira Behn’s) fellowship in India was with personalities who played significant roles in shaping the political destiny of the country. She was the one who carried Mahatma Gandhi’s Quit India Resolution in 1942 to Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad, the then Congress President. She was assigned also the task of clarifying Gandhi’s political stand regarding his draft of the Resolution to Congress Working Committee members including Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Vallabhbai Patel, Acharya Kripalani and Sarojini Naidu. She accompanied Gandhi to the Round Table Conference in 1931, and she was with him when he met Mussolini in Italy. Her apostolic stature, however, owes to her total dedication to Gandhi and his ideas. Like Vinoba Bhave’s, Mira Behn’s was a saintly presence in the politically charged atmosphere during the Freedom Movement.

Madeleine’s own account of her childhood hints, in a number of ways, at the saintly poise that she was to strike later in her life. She appears to have been naturally inclined to asceticism. Daughter of an admiral, she displayed an aversion to worldly things. “I did not care much for toys and as for dolls I could not bear them”, (Slade 12) she says; it never “occurred” to her to “beg or cry for the rich things” (Slade 14) that the
others were eating at the dining table. When in her teens, "the life of social functions and formalities" did not appeal to her. From her early childhood, she says she "enjoyed solitude". Her grandmother, out of concern for a lonely child, arranges for other children to play with her. Mira Behn’s "definite recollection" of her own reaction is of "being upset with the plan" (Slade 12). 'Solitude', not 'loneliness' is the word Mira Behn uses to describe her childhood state.

A very important aspect of her autobiography, The Spirit’s Pilgrimage, is that it reveals her, right from her childhood, as one who is life-oriented rather than human-oriented:

From the beginning, I had a feeling of fellowship with the trees and plants. There were some trees for which I had special affection and some I was not very fond of, but one and all were for me personalities. Later on, as a young girl, I can remember throwing my arms around trees and embracing them, and to this day that feeling remains. (Slade 12)

She used to be taken out by her nurse on either of the two walks of about “a mile out and a mile back”, one of them toward the town and the other “up’e lane”. When
asked which of these roads she would like to take, the child “invariably” chose the “walk up’e lane”:

That way there was a pond with swans, a farmyard, then fields, and a coppice full of primroses in the spring. Who would want to go along the high road toward ugly, smelly, human habitations when such joys lay ‘up’e lane.’? (Italics added, Slade 14)

Another incident pictures her alarmed grandmother and aunt shrieking at the sudden appearance of a spider. The butler pops a tumbler over the creature, then slides a stiff paper underneath and then walks out with the captive. The child Madeleine watches this with “immense interest and admiration”. According to her narration, she then and there “made a mental note of this excellent way of dealing with such a situation” (Slade 15). “Excellent way” it is, for the creature is dealt without causing it any hurt. What exactly she means by ‘mental note’ is interestingly revealed in a later episode. This relates to her stay in a cottage in Sevagram. She does not bother about the two snakes that are “regular inhabitants” of her building, for they “kept to themselves”. But having “three times experienced the intense and prolonged pain” (Slade 224) of scorpion stings, she deals with them by catching them with a pair of tongs, and transferring them
to an old tin, and releasing them next morning at a “distant hedge” (Slade 224). The scorpions are of various sizes and she is often puzzled by the disappearance of little ones from the tins, till she sees one morning the tail of a smaller scorpion sticking out of the mouth of a bigger one. From then on she puts the “little ones” (Slade 224) in a separate bottle. During her stay in that cottage, she recounts that she caught fifty two scorpions in all. The significance of the ‘mental note’ she made as a child shows itself in the way she deals with scorpions years later.

The Spirit’s Pilgrimage at various places fascinatingly establishes Mira Behn’s life-centredness. She devotes quite a few pages towards the end of her narrative to the way she ran the big cattle schemes that the UP Government started. The forest she chooses near Hrishikesh for one of these schemes is described thus:

The wild beauty of those great forests, and their wealth of animals and birds, stirred in me new strength. There is a vast vitality in untrammeled Nature which communicates itself to those who live with her. And this was the first time I had come to live in a real jungle. Here were tigers, leopards, sambar ... spotted deer, hog deer, wild pigs, jackals, foxes and numbers of smaller animals, while
every now and then there would come visiting herds of wild elephants. The birds were equally numerous, from peacocks and eagles to tiny tits, and also water birds of all kinds. (Slade 277)

She names this 'Ashram', 'Pashulok' (Animal World). Gandhi calls her Pashulok a 'magnificent idea', and 'poetic'. She lives in Nature in the midst of both wild and domestic animals. Her interest in cattle schemes and Animal Husbandry in Free India must be seen in the light of the life-centredness that the present thesis speaks of and not with reference to human-centred interests. The 'human-centred' attitude would make the animals, especially cattle, exist for the material benefit of humans. But Mira Behn’s concept of Pashulok grants equal status to humans and other creatures; it allows for a harmonious existence of animals and humans in Nature. She explains the objective of Pashulok Seva Mandal thus:

To develop an area or areas where men and animals combine with Nature in the formation of a decentralized society demonstrative of Bapu’s ideals for World Peace, where man in his own village will, along with his cattle, be self-sufficient, healthy and happy. (Italics added, Slade 300)
A telling illustration of the point that is just made about life-centredness is seen in an event that takes place during her stay in Sevagram. One evening a big toad made his appearance, drawn by the insects who had collected around the lantern. Hop, hop, hop, he came right up close, his golden eyes gleaming at the sight of so much of food. Having sat himself fair and square in a strategic position, he proceeded to flick out his tongue whenever an unwary insect came within his reach. And the reach of his elastic tongue was something I had never imagined. Having discovered this easy way of dining, he made it a regular habit, turning up without fail every evening. (Slade 223)

She is for a time curious to know where he [toad] disappeared during daytime. After some ‘hunting’ she discovers him “squeezed behind a stone in the cemented corner of the kitchen where vessels used to be washed.” (Slade 223); and she makes a comfortable dwelling place for him with two bricks and a stone. He “accepted these attentions as a matter of course” (Slade 223). When Bapu (Gandhi) visits her next, she proudly brings the toad out to show off his beautiful golden eyes. This also he [toad] accepted quite naturally. Squatting between
my two hands, with just his head showing, he gazed calmly at Bapu, who was so pleased with him that, whenever he brought any visitors along on his walks, he would say, ‘You must bring out your pet toad’. (Slade 223-24)

After a while, she notices a couple of more toads of smaller size. Gradually their number keeps increasing till she counts forty! That is when she thinks they must go elsewhere. “Hardening” her heart, she puts them into a tin and deposits them across a neighbouring field. Next morning she is surprised to see that they are back. ‘Hardening’ her heart again, she deposits them “several fields away by a nice little stream.” But she has not assessed their capacity to surprise her, for they are once again with her the next morning. The toad’s claim prevails:

So I said, ‘Very well, then we had better all live together’.

And we did. (Slade 223)

The episode is here dealt with in detail to note the extensive space Mira Behn, even in the midst of intense political activity, devotes to impress the co-existence of humans with other creatures. She does not use the word ‘ecology’ anywhere, but her concerns are ecological, in the sense they are life-oriented and not merely human-
centred. In recent years, Ramachandra Guha is one of the few who recognise Mira Behn as an initiator of environmental concerns in modern India: “Mira Behn ... drew the attention of the public and the policy makers to the intimate links between the Himalayan deforestation, soil erosion and floods” (Guha 229). In her autobiography episodes devoted to her interaction with animals/birds are many indeed, but they could escape the attention of readers who are likely to pay greater attention to numerous sections in the book which describe her interactions with great personalities such as Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, Motilal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, Vinobha Bhave, Kastur Ba, Gandhi and others. In quite a few passages, birds sit on her and ‘talk to her’ in a manner; peacocks shed their shyness to dance for her. Her life in the Himalayan forests and in various ashrams establish her as Thoreau’s spiritual kin. Consider the way she makes herself friends with the maina birds in Sabarmati Ashram:

But a little friend came to my room to cheer me up. He was a maina ... After he had looked in at my door several times, I persuaded him to come right in and pick up kishmish (currants) which I threw on the floor for him. Next I held out the kishmish in my fingers, and before long he took them quite bravely.
Then one day when he flew into the room he chose to land on my head. I immediately handed him up some kishmish, and from that day I insisted that he should sit on my head if he wanted to be fed. He at once caught on the idea, and several times a day would bob up and down twittering away until I attended to him. After this had gone on for some time he turned up one morning with another little maina, evidently his wife. He did not fly onto my head but stood in front of me on the floor where I was sitting, and introduced her. She was very shy and stepped back when I offered her kishmish. However, she henceforth came everyday with her husband, and soon ventured to take the fruit from my fingers. Though he sat on my head as usual each time, she never dared attempt this, though I tried to persuade her. I now noticed that they no longer ate the kishmish themselves but, collecting them in their beaks, would fly across the garden. This went on regularly for some time, and then one morning they appeared with three little youngsters, and all five of them stood around in a semicircle on the floor in front of me demanding ‘kishmish, kishmish!’ They were still coming regularly to my room when I left the Ashram to rejoin Bapu at Borsad. (Slade 128-29)
One has to just read this alongside the chapter “Winter Animals” in Thoreau’s *Walden* to see her kinship with Thoreau. The life-centredness of Thoreau gets revealed in his fellowship with other creatures. In the chapter (from *Walden*) mentioned, he also describes how sparrows alighted on his shoulders when he hoed beans. With what pride does Thoreau say that his Walden—dwelling is in accordance with *Harivamsha*: “‘An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning’! Such was not my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbour to birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them” (Thoreau, 57-58). It is also tempting to compare Thoreau’s dwelling by Walden Pond with Mira Behn’s in Sabarmati Ashram. First, the description of Thoreau’s house:

I have ... a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen long, and eight-feet posts, with a garret and a closet, a large window on each side, two trap doors, one door at the end and a brick fire place opposite. (Thoreau, 32)

And now to see the hut constructed according to Mira Behn’s directions:

I ... measured out seven feet by five feet with a little side alcove for stores. ... The materials used were wood and bamboo, the center stems of date
palm leaves, mud plaster and tiles for the roof. (Slade 197)

Mira Behn’s interest in cattle-schemes has its origin in her childhood, when she had, stealthily of course, learnt from the cowman, to milk cows. The loving care and attention to the horses she rides, when managing the Pashulok Ashram derive from her passion for horse-riding in her childhood.

Life-centredness is an important facet of the Gandhi-Mira Behn relationship as her self-narration makes it evident. The Spirit’s Pilgrimage brings out Gandhi’s friendship and concern, when even in jail, with animals. When in jail in 1932 for instance, “Bapu never failed to report [to Mira] about his four-footed companions (the cats)”. In a letter dated Dec 12, 1932 Bapu humorously writes from jail (to her) about cats:

Our cats have suffered disgrace. The mother has been found helping herself to foods without permission and during night dirtying our carpets and papers. Vallabhbai has therefore cut off the food supply. Thus interdining has stopped. What other ordinances Vallabhbai will promulgate, I do not know. Ordinance rule is the order of the day even for poor kitty! (Slade 171).
The life-centredness, in the case of a lesser spirit (than Mira Behn’s) could have become crudely ‘supernatural’. Mira Behn reports an experience she had with Lloyd George, the Leader of the Labour Party in England. Taking Mira to the drawing room, he had shown her the sofa where Gandhi had sat. Then, he proceeded to relate how a little cat had come to his house a day or two before Bapu’s visit. ‘She seemed to be someone’s pet cat; he said, because she had on a collar, so I tried to persuade her to go away. But she absolutely refused. Then on the evening when Mr. Gandhi arrived, she went straight to him, as he sat down on that sofa, and settled herself in his lap where she remained till he got up to leave. And what do you think! The next morning she had gone and I have never seen her again’. (Slade 185)

There are other places in this self-narration where a pupil in blind adoration could have elevated Gandhi to superhuman status. A snake charmer who visits Gandhi in Wardha unexpectedly places a snake on Bapu’s shoulder. “It at once coiled itself round his neck, but Bapu sat motionless with a slightly wry smile, until the man removed it” (Slade 193). Again, at a time when Gandhi is in Wardha hospital for some treatment, she recounts the visit of another snake charmer, with ‘modern’ education.
This man unpredictably lets several snakes loose on Bapu’s bed.

One of them was a wonderfully beautiful creature of many colors, with sky-blue and orange predominant. As the visitor let it loose he remarked that it was an exceptionally poisonous kind. Bapu, who was sitting up in his bed, quietly watched the graceful, slow dance of the snakes on his blanket, and wisely kept his legs perfectly still. The colored snake was rather more lively than the rest, and kept rising up as if wishing to have a good look at Bapu. ... It was no doubt very interesting to watch, but we onlookers felt greatly relieved when the snakes were put back in their boxes. (Italics added, Slade 208)

One does not miss the admiration with which she eyes the snake’s beauty, and her simultaneous concern for Bapu, and Bapu’s own self-possessed posture. Her adoration of Bapu does not give scope for unnecessarily elevating Bapu’s stature above other creatures. Gandhi’s poise is perfectly matched by his spiritual daughter’s (Mira’s) control of a balanced tone of voice.

It is difficult to think of a better person than Mira to elucidate Gandhi’s concept of non-violence, ‘ahimsa’. That she, in accordance with Gandhi’s spirit,
does not sentimentalize or romanticize the concept of non-violence is seen in her rendering of Bapu’s complex personality through public tests, as it were. Gandhi’s non-violence was a prescription, not only for individuals, but for the whole humanity. The testing events happen in Ahmedabad. First, she acquaints the readers with the background. The “political tension in the country is steadily rising” (97); the ‘Simon go back’ boycott is getting under way and Bapu is extremely anxious to train the ashram inmates in non-violence for the imminent national struggle. Against this backdrop, a group of citizens including Ambalal Sarabhai approach Bapu with their dilemma: the stray dogs infected with rabies pose a major hazard to the city of Ahmedabad. The municipality decides on shooting the dogs; the orthodoxy of Jaina and Vaishnava population is indignant at that. Gandhi’s opinion is in favour of the shooting, and it is carried out.

Another event relating to the complexity of Gandhi’s notion of non-violence relates to the mercy killing of a sick heifer in Gandhiji’s Ashram. The sickness is too severe and existence for the creature is a torture. Bapu decides to carry out the mercy killing. He himself holds the legs of the heifer while the syringe is applied to it.
Both these events earned him indignant protests. Mira promptly records Gandhi’s response which came in the form of a quotation:

The pathway of love is the ordeal of fire.

The shrinkers turn away from it.

The way of the Lord is meant for heroes.

Not for cowards. (Slade 99)

In a truly Gandhian spirit, Mira’s explication of these lines issues not from words, but from her very life. The occasion is the advance of the Japanese through Burma. Mira’s language here subtly shows how Gandhi’s training of his disciples matched vigorous military discipline. “Gandhi now gave us all marching orders”, she reports. “Rajendra Babu, Prafulla Ghosh and Shankar Rao Dev were each to go and prepare his own Province for the coming struggle, and to me Bapu said, ‘I give you choice of three undertakings ...’” (Slade 230). She could either go to Madras to plead with Rajaji who had reservations (at that time) about the Congress decisions; or she could go to Delhi and “reason with the Viceroy”; or she could “go to Orissa and help to prepare the masses for non-violent, non-cooperative resistance to the expected Japanese invasion of the east coast” (Slade 230). Like a true soldier (of non-violence) Mira Behn is quick in “deciding”, and chooses “at once to go to Orissa”
(Slade 230). Bapu’s instructions are clear: Complete non-cooperation with the Japanese army; when overwhelmed, local people like “armed soldiers” should retire; in case of lack of courage “to resist the Japanese unto death”, they should never yield willing submission to the Japanese”, for “that will be a cowardly act, and unworthy of freedom loving people” (Slade 233). The long section devoted to her mission in Orissa, indeed makes fascinating reading. Her dialogues with the Viceroy’s Chief Secretary, Private Secretary and with other top officials reveal her extraordinary ability in political matters.

Mira’s language abilities must have been extraordinary, as her writing reveals. One may note here the fact that she proof-read many a writing by Gandhi, including the English version of *My Experiments with Truth*. Yet language is but a human tool, and a Spirit like Mira’s did not depend solely on human language to interact with life in a wider-than-human sphere. How does one access ‘thought’ if language has severe limitations to express life? The question has all the justification at this stage of the argument. Mira Behn’s self-narration is full of references to books that she read, letters she wrote and received, and printed material she edited. How to approach sublime thought in books which do depend on
language would be an interesting question. Mira’s ascetic life in India is characterized by her extensive reading of sacred books such as Vedas, Upanishads and the Koran:

The effect on me of Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata was profound, for here I discovered things that seemed to be part of my inmost self, part of something I had known long before and since lost. ... While reading the Upanishads and a few extracts from the Vedas, I heard the same note as in the music of Beethoven, and my heart stirred, and then hushed again as if waiting for a later time. (Slade 170)

How exactly did she read these works, if she speaks of the limitations of language? Essential reading appears to take place not by interacting with humans, even on the intellectual plane, if one goes by Mira’s narration:

As the days went by, I became more and more devoted to the Vedas. Ever since that time alone in the Himalayan forests, they had been part of me. No learned scholar had expounded their meaning. They entered into my inmost being through the medium of the very elements which had drawn them out of the human heart thousands of years ago. The intellectual approach was, I knew quite different, and my understanding of the hymns would be counted as a
little worth. But what mattered to me was the inspiration and strength that they gave me. (Italics added, Slade 225)

It would be relevant, to record here the manner in which she contacts Gandhi through Romain Rolland. Her meeting with Romain Rolland is prefaced by an apparently unconnected and chancey meeting with Dr. Axel Munthe. One day, she is looking at some little marmots in a wire enclosure in a hotel garden:

I heard a quiet voice asking me over the shoulder if I did not think it rather cruel to keep those little creatures shut up like that. ... [His] quiet and unconventional manner attracted me. The marmots had been a good introduction, for they put us immediately in contact with a common interest—animals and birds. But there was much more to him than that ... (Slade 55-56).

The 'much more' in his personality is unveiled thus:

I remember one day his telling me he wanted to pay a visit Bruges—or rather to his special friend the old Town Clock. ... So off we went and stayed in a hotel from which he could see and hear his friend the clock, who plays a long tune at every quarter, so long, indeed, that he plays most of the time. (Italics added, Slade 56)
A strange person indeed who is friendly with not just creatures, but ‘inanimate’ things! Madeleine had by then read the eight volumes of Rolland’s Jean Christophe, a novel based on Beethoven. After all, Beethoven had captured her soul when she had entered into her teens. Her meeting with Roman Rolland is extremely interesting. She had learned “manageable” French with the exclusive intention of talking to Rolland. She takes up lodging on the Swiss-French frontier within sight of Romain Rolland’s villa. When she meets him, it is something above human language—as her narration reveals—that makes her commune with him. It is something unsaid that is of significance for her in the meeting:

An inexplicable conviction possessed me that all depended on my meeting him. I did not try to explain anything to myself in detail. Something was working in me which was beyond the realm of reasoned thought. I ... arrived on time in a state of intense inner suspense. It is all or nothing was the only sensation I had ... . As I sat opposite him I could only think of the quiet all-embracing penetration of his blue eyes ... I tried to express myself, but my words were halting and awkward. (Italics added, Slade 56-57)
One notes the inability of language alone to strike the vital chord of relationship. By the time she gets up to leave she knows that she has not “reached something” which “was there”. During the next few days, she “wanders” “like a lost soul in the mountains”. But in the second meeting a communion between them becomes possible: “... the veil separating us lifted” she says. At that time Rolland advises her to travel and mentions his book on Gandhi. She hasn’t heard of Gandhi. “He is another Christ”, says Rolland. The impact is something that cannot be expressed verbally, she writes: “Those words went deep but I stored them away without thinking that they had any special significance for me personally” (Slade 58). At the moment of parting she realizes that

He had given me something for which I had sought, though neither of us knew in so many words what it was. I was silent, but he understood ... .

... Everything was going to be all right. How, I did not have any idea, but it would be all right. (Slade 58)

At that point of time, she finds a letter from Dr. Axel Munthe waiting for her; it asks her to accompany him to Egypt, and since Rolland had asked her to travel, she undertakes the trip. Returning to Europe after a few
months, she buys and reads Rolland’s *Mahatma Gandhi*. It is as if the mission of her life has revealed itself:

Now I knew what that ‘something’ was, the approach of which I was feeling. I was to go to Mahatma Gandhi, who served the cause of oppressed India through fearless truth and non-violence, a cause which, though focused in India, was for the whole of humanity ... . The call was absolute.

(Italics added, Slade 60)

Throughout the meeting, the accent is on what is not articulated.

How she trains herself for her mission makes thrilling reading, but at this point, we must mark the second important feature of her childhood: her awareness of the transitional period in which she lived. At a very tender age she can sense that she lives at the junction of epochs. The humour too with which she records the epochal change is noteworthy. London streets on which trotted horse carriages submit themselves to motor cars. One day her grandmother returns home and bursts into a fit of tears, saying she will never go out again in her carriage. The child Madeleine learns the reason for the old lady’s grief:

By listening and inquiring I discovered that the law, which had made it illegal for engines of
any kind to go along the highroads without a man
to go along the highroads without a man
walking some way ahead with a red flag, was going to
be repealed, so that these new things called
motorcars, which had begun to be heard of, might go
along the roads at the terrific speed of 15-20 miles
an hour! It certainly was an alarming idea and I
felt very sympathetic toward my poor grandmother.
(Slade 19-20)

This is the end of the Victorian age. Madeleine
recollects the change in subtle terms. A law at that time
forbade the newspaper sellers to shout the news as they
went along the streets. But one day “there came the sound
of muffled voices calling news”. Her parents listen even
as their faces change to dread solemnity” (Slade 22).
Mother whispers to Madeleine: “Childy, Queen Victoria is
dead” (Slade 22). The child can sense “the feeling of
blankness which filled the air” (Slade 22).

The transition is grasped in imagistic terms by the
child in the exit of the charming horse-carriages on
quiet English roads and the appearance of machines (cars
and planes). Moral choices are crucial at the time of
transition, and Madeleine at that young age of five or
six makes her choice through a thorough dislike of
machines:
The joys of the old days at Milton Heath were now fast disappearing. My grandfather replaced the beautiful carriage horses with motorcars; the riding horses also dwindled. Then a telephone was installed in the house—and so it went on. In a few short years we had switched over to the Machine Age.

Then on top of everything else came the airplanes. The papers were full of news about W. Wright and his repeated attempts to fly across the English Channel. I remember well the secret satisfaction I felt each time he failed. (Italics added, Slade 25)

Very early in her life Madeleine realizes that with the advent of a new age, the private self has lost its importance, or perhaps has become more challenging: "'What is this!' I said to myself. 'Is there to be no privacy left in the world!'" (Slade 26) The awareness of the time of transition expresses itself in the adult Mira as ecological concern. It is with approval that one regards Ramachandra Guha’s observation:

For Mira Behn, the rapidity of ecological change and disturbance was a distinguishing feature of modern life. While ancient civilizations in North Africa and the Middle East had collapsed due to their abuse of the natural environment, she wrote
... ‘in those days it took centuries and centuries to reach complete destruction, but in these days of modern machinery and science, what took a thousand years or more in the past may be accomplished in a paltry hundred years today.’ (Guha 230)

A third aspect of Madeleine’s recollection of her childhood concerns her remarkable ability for self-analysis. In a passage that strikingly parallels Thomas Mann’s presentation of Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, she says:

I was sensing the difference between my mother’s and my father’s families. My temperament harmonized more with Mother’s family ...

In Mother’s family there was an unusual strain which had come down through several generations. A great-great-grandfather, while he was on duty abroad, had fallen in love with a dark gypsy-like beauty who was possibly of Eastern European origin. He married her ... . Her exotic characteristics passed into the succeeding generations of that English family, showing sometimes more, sometimes less—but there it was, and it had come again strongly in my mother, and from her it has come to me in many a blessing. Mother’s family was unusual and never a slave to convention, but Father’s family
was decidedly conventional, with an aristocratic society touch about it which did not quite suit my temperament. (Slade 17-18)

The passage irresistibly asks to be placed by the side of Mann’s analysis of Aschenbach:

He was the son of an upper official in the judicature, and his forebears had all been officers, judges, departmental functionaries—men who lived their strict, decent, sparing lives in the services of king and state. Only once before had a livelier mentality—in the quality of a clergyman—turned up among them; but swifter, more perceptive blood had in the generation before the poet’s flowed into the stock from the mother’s side, she being the daughter of a Bohemian musical conductor. It was from there he had the foreign traits that betrayed themselves in his appearance. (Mann 12)

In Aschenbach the Apollonian and the Dionysian are in conflict; in Madeleine Slade they rather complement each other. From the point of the departure of childhood, Madeleine says, “... new emotions, thoughts and feelings were steadily growing. I do not think they tended to make life happier ... . However, I was not depressed or gloomy, and threw myself with zeal into the things that interested me” (Slade 27).
She doesn’t bar the emotional from her being, the way Aschenbach does. Her asceticism, later, shows throughout the book a poise that Ascenbach’s does not. Aschenbach yields himself involuntarily to an irresponsible desire to travel; it is a deterioration of his will. In Madeleine’s case the “call” is “absolute” (Slade 60); and we see a steady growth of will from the time she gets the call. Unlike Aschenbach who impulsively undertakes to travel, she books her ticket to India twelve months in advance. The one-year period is for her self-training in austere living: she becomes a vegetarian and teetotaler; practices the cross-legged posture which is characteristic of an Indian; sleeps—to her mother’s distress—on floor; buys a spinning wheel and starts learning to spin wool at home; begins to work on Urdu grammar book, and, reads Bhagavadgita and Rigveda in French. The force of her character makes the family members accept her ways with the reserve natural to the English, in a “quiet gentle” manner: “Everyone seemed to realize that it was a spiritual necessity and accepted it as inevitable” (Slade 64). She knows how noble her family is, to be aware of the implications of her mission:

The only advice that Father gave me was as we separated, when he merely said, ‘Be careful.’ And it was not an easy thing for a man connected with
the highest British officials and ministers to have a daughter going to join the arch revolutionary of the British Empire! (Slade 64)

The fourth and the most important aspect in her recollection of her childhood is her awareness of a sense of destiny; an ache for the *unknowable* regions:

While I was still very small, five or six years old, in spite of the happy and loving surroundings in which I lived, my mind began to search in the region of the *unknowable* and was stricken with awe. I heard my elders talk about the stars and the infinite space which was beyond. I tried to think it out for myself, and a sickening dread would come over me, so that I would hurriedly seize on some mundane interest to drive away the horror. I never spoke of this to others, but silently tried to live it down. It lasted for years! In the same way I dared not think about eternity, and used to dread being taken to church, where I should have to listen to things like the repetition of the prayer termination: ‘As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end—Amen.’ People seemed to repeat these sorts of phrases quite glibly, and I felt it was useless to say anything of what troubled me. The church attitude about Heaven
and Hell also worried me a lot. How could people be fixed up for eternity as the fruits of one short life, especially as no two people had the same opportunities for winning through? What about people who died young, and what about poor colored people, who, I heard, were all heathens? Obviously something was wrong. It was an impossible puzzle. I could not make it out, and would again seek escape in the happy life around me.

But there was something which every now and then wafted me far away. It would come at quiet moments, and always through the voice of Nature—the singing of a bird, the sound of the wind in the trees. Though this was the voice of the unknown, I felt no fear, only an infinite joy. (Slade 20-21)

This fascination for the unknown and unknowable appears to be the main driving force of her life; it appears to be at the root of her asceticism. Her asceticism is, of the most satvik kind. The first stirrings of the Spirit within her are when she listens to Beethoven’s music. She is just fifteen then: “But into those peaceful surroundings there came something which awakened me as from a slumber” (Slade 30). Her spirit’s pilgrimage begins from that moment. She makes two sacred trips: one to the house in Bonn where Beethoven was born
and the other to his grave in Vienna. Beethoven’s music has a compulsive hold on her. As she plays and listens to sonata after sonata, she says that her “whole being stirred and awoke to something which had remained unknown” to her “consciously till then”. Though she had no earlier training in music, she hears something that is “far beyond music as such” (Slade 31). In her words, “I was contacting the spirit speaking through sound, the spirit of Beethoven. Yes, I had found him” (Slade 31). A new anguish grips her. In the seclusion of her room, throwing herself on her knees, “for the first time” she “really” prays to God: “Why have I been born over a century too late? Why hast Thou given realization of him and yet put all these years in between?” (Slade 31).

It is Mira’s devotion to Beethoven that brings her to Romain Rolland and then, to Gandhi. It is also her love of Beethoven that should enable one to understand the severity of her tapasya, asceticism. Her trip to India deprives her of Beethoven’s music. In a letter from Nandi Hills, Bapu had told her: “I don’t want you to forget your music or your taste for it. It would be cruel to forget that to which you owe so much, and which has really brought you to me” (Slade 94). But the demands of tapasya are an inner necessity:
“Virtually all alone, and without any means of hearing Beethoven’s music, I buried it within myself ... . Evidently Bapu did not wish this, but it seemed to be an inevitable part of the tapasya which had come to me in answer to my prayers, and neither I nor Bapu could prevent it” (Slade 94). Later in her life, when she makes a short trip to London, she refrains from going to concerts: “I did not let myself think about music, and therefore went to no concerts. The tapasya was holding me in its grip” (Slade 186).

Her tapasya demands that she learn to bear separation from Bapu, the way she had borne separation from music. References to this pain of separation are quite numerous in her self-account. Once, she is reproved by Gandhi for allowing her emotions to get the better of her (—she is overwhelmed by the prospect of setting eyes on Bapu after a long time—): “the incident was making him still more convinced that I must accustom myself to separation”. When sent to Rajasthan, she thinks of Bapu’s health and says: “the pain of our parting would not leave me” (Slade 92). Gandhi’s words suggest that the separation is perhaps necessary, in order to realize the supremacy of spirit over flesh. Gandhi’s advice to her runs thus:
You must not cling to me as in this body. The spirit without the body is ever with you. And that is more than the feeble embodied imprisoned spirit with all the limitations that flesh is heir to. The spirit without the flesh is perfect, and that is all we need. (Slade 93)

At this point, it may be relevant to note the interest that some scholars bring to the study of Gandhi-Mira relationship. Mira’s ‘pangs of separation’ and Gandhi’s habit of sending Mira to live in ashrams distant from him, and the heavy exchange of letters between them becomes the subject of Girjakumar’s psycho-biography titled *Brahmacharya: Gandhi and his Women Associates*. Sudhir Kakkar has a fictionalized version of the relationship, titled, *Mira and the Mahatma*. A possible erotic dimension in Gandhi-Mira relation would certainly be of value in Gandhian Studies. But the significance of the present study lies in emphasizing, through the common interest of Mira and Gandhi, in nature, and in animals, Mira’s environmental concerns, a point that appears to be overlooked by Gandhi—scholars. This aspect of Gandhi—Mira relationship has not received adequate attention.

It is not just that the body and soul are in conflict. The finer point that emerges from Mira Behn’s
self-narration is that the body must become soul-manifest. Arriving, “not on the outer edge of Bapu’s activities, but right in the intimate heart of his daily life” (Slade 69), Mira is right in front of the unadorned spirit: “Here one was face to face with a Soul which, in its very greatness, made the body and speech through which it manifested itself glow with gracious and natural humility” (Slade 70).

Naturally, Gandhi’s dietetic experiments dominate her consciousness. She herself goes through these experiments during her tapasya. Her “new education” (Slade 67) after her arrival in India, begins at the threshold of Kastur Ba’s kitchen: By Kastur Ba’s casual look, she learns that she must not enter a kitchen with shoes. The education is not easy. Having lived mostly in solitude, she finds “communal life” (Slade 79) in Gandhi’s Ashram of ‘heterogeneous’ group of inmates—from “fanatical ascetics to skeptical family women” — (Slade 70) rather tough. It is her devotion to Bapu that mainly helps her adjust herself to the non-monastic type of the Ashram. In her Spirit’s pilgrimage, India’s climate certainly is daunting, and “the body tried to object”, she says, and adds, “I refused to take any notice” (Slade 79).
The spirit-body discourse takes place in utter seriousness, but without the narrative becoming solemn or dry. On the other hand, her sense of humour is always there. An example should serve to press home this point. Soon after her arrival in Sabarmati ashram, arrangement for her food is made not in the general kitchen, but a quieter one meant for three or four inmates. Surendraji, her Hindustani teacher in the ashram, prepares large solid rotis which she eats with relish; “but unfortunately the results are disastrous.” She collapses, as she is unable to digest the unaccustomed food. The matter is reported to Bapu who, after good-humouredly scolding Surendraji asks him to be Mira’s nurse till her recovery. Mira’s recollection of that time when she negotiated her uneasiness and vomiting sensation runs as follows:

Surendraji got a basin and put it by my side. He then sat down cross-legged in the middle of the room and fell into deep meditation. Here was a situation I had not foreseen! With a nurse like this, one must at all cost keep still and not disturb his meditation by vomiting. Anyway, it had the desired result. I lay there quiet as a mouse, watching Surendraji out of the corner of my eye, and gradually I began to recover. (Slade 69)
At another time there is a Congress open camp. Gandhi asks her if she has a sensitive nose. The affirmative answer from her makes him explain the motive behind his query:

‘... they have asked me to inspect the sanitary arrangements in the Congress camp, which they have arranged according to my suggestion of trench latrines. I have no sense of smell whatever, so I want you to come along with me and do the smelling part of the inspection’ (Slade 76).

In the body-spirit discourse, Mira Behn’s autobiography presents both flesh and spirit with equanimity. The best illustration of the poise in her rendering is to be had in the episode where the revolutionary Prithvi Singh, now a convert to Bapu’s ideals arrives. Mira had earlier ‘polished’ the English version of the story of his adventures, and is now attracted to him. Sensing the attraction, Gandhi tells her with ‘unexpected seriousness’: “If you feel like that it means to my mind that you should marry” (Slade 217). In an instant he absolves her of the oath of celibacy she has taken. This is enough to convey to us the nature of tapasya Mira practiced. The spirit is to be made perfect, but without violence to the flesh; the spirit must not impose, but
the body must submit. Mira’s narration is remarkable here:

After all the pent-up suffering I had been through I could not catch any balance in this completely new orientation, and my emotions ran riot. Fate was tossing me around like a little cork in a rough sea. Prithvi Singh wisely resisted all proposals whether from Bapu or others. (Slade 217)

One notes with almost awe, her use of the word ‘wisely’.

The restlessness deep within her being remains. Her separation from Beethoven’s music for three decades ends with the receipt of a book of Rolland sent by his widow. She also remembers at that time a book on Beethoven that Rolland had given her in 1931. She starts reading it to re-experience the “stirrings” she had experienced thirty years ago; the reading is done with “new vision and inspiration” (Slade 316).

_The Spirit’s Pilgrimage_ is a fascinating account of the centrality of Beethoven’s music in Mira Behn’s life of tapasya. Gandhi too knew this, as Romain Rolland reveals in a letter to an American friend. Mira Behn quotes the long letter in which Rolland writes:

On the last evening, after the prayers, Gandhi asked me to play him a little of Beethoven. He does not know Beethoven but he knows that Beethoven has
been the intermediary between Mira and me, and consequently between Mira and himself, and that, in the final count, it is to Beethoven that the gratitude of us all must go. (Quoted in Slade 149)

It is significant that Rolland refers to the name Gandhi had given: ‘Mira’, and not to her original name. Gandhi may not have known Beethoven; but he was an enthusiast of Mira the medieval poet-singer-saint. She was a devotee of Krishna, and a rebel, who broke away from her princely family and lived against conventions. Madeleine too broke away from her aristocratic family and was a ‘rebel’. In renaming Madeleine and making her his spiritual daughter, Gandhi certainly pointed in Mira Behn a new spiritual-political icon in the struggle against Imperialism. How clearly and forcefully Mira played that role becomes evident in her meeting with Mr. Laithwaite, the Viceroy’s private secretary, in 1942. Mira’s advice through Mr. Laithwaite, to the British Government, runs as follows:

‘... I want at the last to put before you the most vital, the most terrible thing of all. Gandhiji is in deadly earnest. This time it will be impossible for you to hold him. No jail will contain him, no crushing will silence him. The more you crush the more his power will spread. You are faced
with two alternatives; one to declare India’s Independence, and the other to kill Gandhiji, and once you kill him you kill for ever all hope for friendship between India and England. What are you going to do about it? You do not know the latent power lying buried in this coming move. Even we do not know the force of Gandhiji’s spirit, but I can sense it, and I tell you that if the rebellion has to burst, this Viceroy will have to face a more terrible situation than any Indian Viceroy has ever had to face before.’

‘I want you to try to realize, ... that even this rebellion is a friendly gesture. Perhaps it is difficult for you to conceive of a rebellion as a friendly gesture, but with Gandhiji such a thing is possible’. (Slade 236-37)
Works Cited


Mrinalini Sarabhai (1918- )

A celebrated Indian classical dancer, choreographer and instructor of international repute, Mrinalini Sarabhai is the founder director of the *Darpana Academy of Performing Arts*, an institute for imparting training in dance, drama, music, and puppetry in the city of Ahmedabad. Born in the well known Palghat Iyer family of the Swaminathans as the last child, Mrinalini has opted dance for studies as against formal schooling in childhood. She spent her childhood in Switzerland where she received her first lessons in western technique of dance movements. Later at Shantiniketan where she was educated under the guidance of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, she realized her true calling. Then beckoned by the *American Academy of Dramatic Arts* in New York, she got herself enrolled in the Academy. On returning to India, she continued her training in Bharatanatyam under Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and Kathakkali under the legendary Guru Thakazhi Kunju Kurup.

Mrinalini got married to the well known Indian physicist Vikram Sarabhai in 1942. She founded *Darpana* in 1948. A year later her performance in Paris at Theatre National de Chaillot won her international critical acclaim. Mrinalini’s daughter Mallika too went on to attain international fame in dance and Theatre. Besides
Mrinalini has authored novels and books on dance. She was the chairperson of Gujarat State Handicrafts and Handloom Development Corporation limited. She is also one of the trustees of the Sarvodaya International trust, an organization for promotion of Gandhian ideals, and is also the chairperson of Nehru Foundation for Development. Her writing includes books on dance and a novel, *This Alone is True*.

Mrinalini Sarabhai has been awarded by the Indian Government Padmashree (1965) Padmabhushan (1992). She was honoured with D.Litt. by the Universities of East Anglia, Norwich and UK, all in 1997. Mrinalini was the first Indian to receive the medal and Diploma of the French Archives Internatinales de le Danse. She was nominated to the Executive Committee of the International Dance Council, Paris in 1990 and awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship, New Delhi in 1994. Mexican government too presented her with a gold medal for her choreography for the Ballet Folklorico of Mexico. *The Voice of the Heart* is the title of her autobiography.