Chapter: 2
Mira: Rebel versus Saint

Multiple identities of Mira – Mira as the real historical figure and a Rajput princess, Mira as a figure of legends and myths, and Mira as a woman poet interest as much as intrigue us all. Taken together all these images of Mira, one aspect remains paramount for sure, and that is she has remained till date a live tradition of protest and resistance. While the historians prefer to locate the historical Mira, for the hagiographer it is the image of a recalcitrant, maverick Mira that matters. In the accounts of the historians, Mira’s mystique is underplayed, whereas in hagiographical accounts, her mystique is augmented all the more. In this chapter I shall explore accounts of Mira at three levels – the historical, the hagiographical, and the literary. The central thesis is that the literary Mira negotiates the historical and the hagiographical, and in this sense Mira’s literary representations tend to mediate the two. Most non-literary renderings tend to ignore human side of Mira as the endeavour is to privilege her spiritual longings. As there is much hagiography but little firm knowledge about Mira’s life, this chapter shall set to trace out the multiple meanings of her life with an attempt to re-evaluate her unconventional personae. The concluding section of the chapter is devoted to a close textual study of Gurcharan Das’s ‘Mira’ in terms of its contribution to the growing corpus of writings on Mirabai – historical, hagiographical and literary.

I
The Hagiographical Mira

All moral stories in India tend to show how we share our Indian past that can provide us with guidelines of right living. One major medium for achieving this objective is that of hagiography – the full colour portrayal of consistent, unerring and overwhelmingly exemplary lives. Such life-histories have served as major points of reference in religious celebrations and cultural debates that engage us formally or informally. As India’s classic bhakti poets and saints are fast becoming global personalities, Mirabai is also one of the most commemorated women in Indian history
remembered as the sixteenth century song writer and poet. Her strength lies in the fact that she made her inner reality a principal one, negating all that was antagonistic to it. Mira did not leave her imaginings in the realm of a distinctly separate reality, but penetrated to the very core of it and lived it out. She is taken to be among the handful, blessed with the vision of god and one who expressed her rapturous ardour for him in paeans and rhapsodies. For her the move was a drastic one; being a Rajput princess she gave up the security of the palace and of a married woman and took to singing and dancing in the company of other devotees. Losing all interest in the role of a wife, it is believed that she even abandoned her husband thereby challenging discourses and confining herself to a particular position in her faith experience.

Among all the singer saints of medieval north India, Mira’s story is a gripping one and Bhaktamal’s version of it is the earliest to have come down to us. Like all its subsequent accounts the Bhaktamal presents Mira as the Rajput princess so absorbed in the love of Krishna from her early childhood that she understood herself to be his bride and thus regarded her earthly marriage as a matter of secondary importance. History holds that Mira was born into a Rathor family in 1498 in Kurki village in the district of Marwar. She was married to Bhojraj, son of Rana Sanga, and heir to Sisodiya kingdom of Mewar. Several hagiographical records on her life history states that at the time of her marriage ceremony she circled the idol of Krishna instead of her husband and declaring herself married to Him Mira refused to consummate her earthly marriage and to worship the family goddess, Durga. In some variations of the legend, Mira’s husband resents her celibacy, suspects adultery, persecutes her and takes another wife. In another version he is reconciled to her behaviour when he comes to believe that she is mad. After being widowed she is said to have become a bhakta for which she was persecuted by her family but survives with divine aid every time. Her brother-in-law, Vikramjit persecutes her for political, religious and probably personal reasons.

As a consequence Mira is seen as a martyr to her own faith and regarded as holding a just claim to the immortality of her fame. Her life became a legend as the stories of her ordeals and suffering, her intense devotion to Krishna were carried all over by the same ascetics and devotees with whom she sang in the temple. Her padas (songs) found a place in the heart of a common man and this became a crucial factor in saving
some of her poems from total oblivion. Mira exists as a potent symbol of spiritual strength, one who was able to forge and comment on human political bonds. Mira’s urge to seek out the company of quite a different family different from the one that society and people has assigned her – a family composed of those who sang the praises of the lord puts her constantly at loggerheads with her family. Among her biographies the earliest has been Bhaktamal of Nabhadas who presents Mira through a poem in which he sets forth the major themes that her life embodies:

- Modesty in public, the chains of family life –
- Mira shed both for the lifter of mountains.
- Like a latter-day gopi, she showed what love can mean
- in this devastated age-ending age..
- No inhibitions, totally fearless. Her tongue sang the fame of her tasteful Lord.
- Villains thought it vile, they set out to kill her,
  but not a single hair on her head was harmed:
- The poison she was brought turned elixir in her throat.
- She cringed before none. She beat bhakti’s drum.
- Modesty in public, the chains of family life –
- Mira shed both for the lifter of mountains. (Trans. Hawley 52)

The very first line sets up an opposition between conventional modesty and singing of Krishna and the next line exhibits the anxiety that the gopis experience. Mentioning of her fearlessness, and of the poison that she gladly drank, the poem cites an example of her greatness as a devotee and finally concludes in the same vein about her outspoken bhakti. Furthermore, we read on the ordeals undergone by her and the safe passage through it. The rest of the account available to us today is the part added by the later writers and historians who flesh out the other details on her life and writings. Mira is seen refuting the discourses of patriarchy, caste and class as she sings:

- Your highness,
- Now you can’t close me with walls.
- The wise are now dear to me, lost
- is womanly shame, I’ve left
- my mother’s house
and the taste of dance is on my tongue.
The lord held a glass
in front of my heart and I’ll dance.
Take the wedding necklace, you can break
the golden bracelet
I don’t want a fort or a palace
and my hair is loose says Mira. (Futehally 2)

In a society fiercely concerned with feudal patriarchal power, Mira posited only humility. Surrounded by rigid intractable structures she inhabited the county of the formless; and finally baffles those around her by appearing to possess no shape at all.

Legends about Mira has been transmitted inter-generationally through folktales and kept alive in popular memory through word of mouth. Her life-story seems to be a cluster of legendary tales that makes its appearance in her history quite early. It is said that during her childhood a wandering ascetic visited their house holding an idol of lord Krishna. Mira got so attracted to the image that she begged for it, and ultimately received it. An annexe of the same legend tells of a wedding being celebrated next door. As the enthusiasm rose in the anticipation of the groom’s arrival, Mira asked her mother who her bridegroom would be, to which her mother jokingly stated it be Krishna. Fable also has it that Mira kept this idol of Krishna with her during her marriage ceremony and circumambulated it instead of her husband. The story has been recorded as part of Mira folklore by many writers such as Krishna Bahadur, S.S.Mehta and Shama Futehally.

Another legend that also marks her anti-patriarchal attitude relates to her refusal to bow down before the family deity as the new daughter-in-law is supposed to. Nabhadas draws out this theme of Mira’s scandalous behaviour and is later developed upon by several others writers as Mehta, Sivanada and Hawley. They relate to other episodes too illustrating Mira’s indifference to the conjugal duties. As she refused to consummate, it was then rumoured by her sister-in-law Udabai that she has liaisons with other men. Her obvious absorption into something other than her husband aroused suspicion due to which her husband burst into her room one day hoping to surprise her in adultery but found her deep in worship before the idol of Krishna.
Yet another legend of her life speaks of her going to Brindavan after she left Mewar and Merta and adding to it is the colourful anecdote of her meeting with Jiva Goswami there. Many writers such as Deviprasad, Krishna Bahadur, Herman Goetz and Futehally agree to this meeting between the two. They further relate that the renowned saint refused to see her as an observance of his vow on not to have concourse with women. At this Mira sharply reminded him of what myth dictates, that the only male in Brindavan is Lord Krishna and the others are only gopis or cowherd girls, who adore him. And the story ends with the guru being suitably chastened. Another famous episode held in Mira tradition is on her meeting with the Mughal emperor Akbar accompanied by his chief musician Tansen. It is related that Akbar in disguise as a commoner is drawn from afar to hear her sing. Giving a full play to their legendary imagination, some writers including Bankey Behari details on how Akbar seeing the dancing devotee entreated her to accept a present of a necklace. Another amusing tale that helps in totting up to her image of a fearless devotee is the one when a man in guise of a sadhu urges her to submit to his advances on the strength of the claim that Giridhar himself has commanded it. At this Mira with all humility agrees to him but lays the bower in the presence of the satsang, urging on him the same fearlessness that is by now her trademark. As a result of it the man blanches, looses any desire for corporeal contact and begs her to help him attain godly devotion which she displays. The Krishna idol presented to Mira in her childhood played a great role in her life and songs. The wandering mendicant presenting her the idol is identified by her legendary accounts to be none other than her guru Raidas whose frequent reference we find in Mira’s songs and hagiographies. If all that is gathered from legends and traditions be true then Mira is largely seen as hagiographical figure who after passing through the ordeals came out untarnished.

Mira in death too as in life is shrouded in mystery. The ill times faced by Mewar after Mira left it made her family think that the persecution of the great devotee has brought this decline and therefore the Rana in 1546 deputed the family priests to persuade Mira’s return. When threatened by the Brahmans to go on hunger strike Mira in state of dilemma went into the temple sanctorum and as certain folktales recount, she is said to have immersed into the Krishna idol. Behari too acknowledging the incident states that the mystery behind these miracles can only be explained by her love for the lord. The tale
is popularly a part of Mira tradition that has helped in further homogenising her bhakti and hagiography.

Mirabai, the sixteenth century woman bhakta of north India has been praised and revered not through her sermons or aphorisms but through her songs replete with devotional quality. Her faith as manifested in her devotional songs breaks down barriers, widens, frees and emerges. Her bhakti songs and love for the divine unites the transcendental and the mundane. Mira for her highly devotional nature is naturally related with poems that explain the importance of ranking the service of God above the callings of home and family. The poetry and hagiography of Mira consequently formed a body of literature that agrees in presenting her a rebel, a woman who defied rational patterns of womanhood to serve Krishna. Her verses carry pathos of a particular type that pleases the heart and at the same time elevates it to the portals of divinity. Observes S.S.Mehta:

her songs came into existence not for the attainment of higher post or dignity or emolument, not for fame or any other ephemeral object or attribute of worldly gain or honour; but that her heart was full of thrill for God's love and adoration and that her songs were but a natural consequence. (107)

For Usha Nilson, Mira's verses holds special place in medieval poetry and was aptly suited to the form of short lyric in which a highly intensified mood was sustained. Mira's singing and dancing has a certain inclusiveness of meaning, at once metaphoric of the openness of the poet. They are also a symbol of Mira's search for freedom. Because Mira was not striving for poetic recognition, she did not care to leave her songs in writing. Her poems are strictly seen as a form of self expression, and are at lyrical best when singing of her love for Krishna in its multiple facets: attraction, hope, longing, disappointment, jealousy, anger and the joy of union. The most prominent and passionate bhava seen in her songs is the virah that draws upon the popular tradition of love poetry and folk songs. In secular tradition the basis of virah is the absent or forgetful husband and the deserted or neglected but blameless woman. It is not merely Krishna's physical distance from Mira but his fickleness and closeness with other woman that exacerbates her virah. However, in her songs despite her intense love for the lord she holds the body, life and soul as ephemeral that will end with the onset of night. In some of her poems she dwells upon the evanescence of human existence. Addressing Krishna she says, "You alone can
release me from this existence, the end of which is certain. I am your slave. Lord, you alone can take me across this uncrossable ocean of births and deaths.” (Bahadur 36). She further sings;

O my mind,
Worship the lotus feet of the Indestructible one!
Whatever thou seest twixt earth and sky
Will perish.
...
This life is like the sporting of sparrows.
It will end with the onset of night. (Alston 116)

It was her experiences of death and bereavement at the Rajput family that taught her the flimsiness of all worldly support. Her songs despite her apparent simplicity continues to haunt ones mind and we find her to be a gifted literary craftsmen capable of expressing her experiences in an adequate form with clear selection of words, similes and pun. To put it in words of Goetz; “If poetry is inspired by the Divine, she was the greatest poet of India during the last millennium, because she was an extraordinary personality, a saint, one of the loftiest and purest of mankind.” (1) Mira sang her experiences and the unique nature of her spiritual love charged with symbolic expression. The following poetic lines depict the nature of Mira’s pangs:

O Ye! Companion of my life, not for a moment can I forget Thee.
I alone know the agony that I undergo in the moments when I do not see Thee.

(Behari 6)

Her singing remains unaffected of the ignoble talks and it is pleasure reading the poetic lines that itself reveals of her commendable persona:

My love is reserved for Giridhara Gopal
And for no-one else.
O ye saints and holy men,
I have seen the world and its ways.
I left brothers and relatives
And all I possessed.
Dispensing with worldly shame,
I came to sit with the holy men.
I felt joy in the company of the devotees,
On beholding the world I wept.
I planted the creeper of love.
And watered it with my tears.
I churned the curds
And drew forth the ghee:
The butter-milk I rejected.
The king sent me a cup of poison,
I drank it down with joy.
Mira’s love has set in deeply,
She accepts whatever comes. (Alston 40)

In many of her verses she depicts her complete surrender to Krishna. Mira looks for complete dissolution with God at death as she sings, “Let my light dissolve in Your light” (Alston 53). In her refusal to be content with the worship of the lord and rather demand to realise her final identity with him, she stands apart revered. Accepting praise or blame with equal humility she passes on: “My relatives reproach me and crack bitter jests,...Whether they praise me or chide me, I accept whatever is said, And raise it reverently to my forehead.” (Alston 38). Through her poetry one can locate several aspects of her spirituality. Her poetry held the courage to defy the royal court, the social boundaries between the high and low and between men and woman. Parita Mukta observes how for the peasants in the area where Mira lived, she retains an identity as a historical figure that has expressed their hopes and grievances. By composing songs for them, living and dancing amongst them, she becomes the centre-stage of their lives. All aspects of her life such as rejection of patriarchal order, her bhakti and her renunciation synthesise into one creative force – her poetry.

What is expressed in her singing is the breaking of dominant repressive power by Mira and the creation of a more egalitarian one. In revealing her choice of relationship with Krishna and her rejection of Rana, Mira stands out as a woman who threw aside the particular marriage institution and enters into an intimate relationship with a man she does not have an affinity with. Articulation of her songs upholds a common experience
faced by all women, and a common lack of personal freedom. Her songs have been added, interpolated and kept vibrantly alive for over centuries by women, subaltern classes and male as well as female poets in India through individual or collective singing in bhajan mandalis (informal gatherings). Further a dialect-centered approach to her poetry explains the sources of her popularity among subaltern classes. The elite Rajput clan could have suppressed Mira’s poetry in one or two dialects, but they could not control the poetic practise of co-authoring that survives by mushrooming into several dialects. The hagiographical construction of Mira is thus a continuous enterprise; it is not over as yet.

A longing for completeness is seen as the starting point of devotional, mystical way and the absence or presence of the divine is the axis on which the mystical world revolves. It follows that God is necessarily absent and he is present only through his felt absence. This longing and the mysticism can be located in many of Mira songs:

Design to favour me, O Hari,
With a gift of a single glance.
My gaze is ever fixed on Thee,
But Thine is withdrawn. (Alston, 34)

More often in hagiographical accounts the protagonists basks under mystical miasma. The mythical and the mystical collaborate in hagiographical constructions. For Futehally, Mira occupies the middle space “where the mystical and the mythical affirm each other before the mystic passes on to the final silence” (7). And her mythologized mysticism is her way of breaking free. For Mira the pining for Krishna rather unsurprisingly takes the form of an ecstatic and agonized yearning. Her relation with Krishna encompassed her whole being and the idea of Mira’s marriage to Krishna resembles yogic pattern of life. As the legend holds she is said to have been smitten with love for Krishna from her very childhood but at what point she accepted him in her life is not sure of. Whether she accepted Krishna from an age of her own conscious knowing or she found the actual experience of marriage to the Rana an unfulfilling one and thus turned more towards her own creation of a relationship with Krishna, are questions we can hardly have concrete answers for.
Parita Mukta quotes a bhajan that portrays her to be adamant about Krishna as her husband even on her marriage day. “I am wedded to Shamdiyo, I am wedded to Vitthalvar. I will not bind another's mindhod round my wrist” (138). The lines describes her symbolic marriage through which she liberates herself from the burden of existence. Mukta also relate to one of Mira’s dream where she “sees herself going around the sacred fire four times with Krishna” (122). Mira at once a poetess, martyr, a saint, had her love for god and it gathered coloured especially after her widowhood when her husband and kinsmen began to interfere. Her longing holds a mystical trait; mystical because she pours out her emotions on a figure whom she obviously cannot hope to have in worldly terms. Self-forgetting, abandoning of the ego is the cornerstone of mystical experience which she followed. Poverty for her was a willed state through which she can reach the divine and thus took up poverty as a mode of access.

In addition to her poetic achievements, various elements in Mira’s choice of living made her a figure of opprobrium to the Rajputs, for which they required her extinction. Her public stand in associating with bhajniks of all ranks, her rejection of a life of seclusion, and her resolute adherence to her religious beliefs was antithetical to the decorum demanded of Rajput family. Perhaps her worst transgression was her insistence on mingling with other devotees, who were not only men and strangers but often from lower castes. By doing this she was striking a radical blow on nearly everything that constituted the conventions of Rajput aristocracy: their privilege and exclusiveness, caste and social hierarchy, and the subjugation of their women. As women formed an important safeguard in the upholding of Rajput dharma, the ruling family of Mewar found it necessary to defend its honour by persecuting the widowed Mira. Mira was one of a kind phenomenon made possible by the ideals of bravery long cultivated in Rajput tradition. Another facet of her life is her feminist ideology based on the thesis of liberation and personal will. She resisted the norm of Indian womanhood by rejecting the institutions of family, marriage, and motherhood. Her desire for renunciation was shocking in its opposition to the patriarchal religion because for them the only way for women to gain transcendence was through husband worship and service. Mira indelibly carved out a path for personal liberties for women. For in her songs, women from all castes and classes find the hope of desired but unfulfilled aspiration. Her challenge to the
Rana, as ruler, head of clan and husband, meant that she did not cede allegiance to any of the structure of political and patriarchal power. It was her bhakti that blazed up submission to patriarchal norms and provided her strength to resist dehumanised relationship. Defying social criticism she further denounced the norms of widowhood and refused to accept sati immolation depicting her opposition to the institution of widowhood.

With Mira, however the sectarian perspective with its tendency to canonization is not so vividly present. Though having special audiences, she is not identified with single sectarian community which indeed draws our attention towards her subaltern aspect. Wisely leaving the problems of historical felicity to others, Parita Mukta sets out to trace multiple meanings within the woman saint’s life and its impact upon social milieu finding ultimately the ‘people’s Mira’\(^3\). Further looking at the emergence and the manner in which the various communities coalesced around Mira, the writer observes that in the villages, and towns in Rajasthan “the strongest force of Mira bhakti lies within the dalit communities, within the weavers and leather workers and the sweepers”\(^4\) (73). In a society where the public demonstration of one’s wealth and prestige were the hallmarks of status and power and commanded respect, Mira associated herself with the humble, low-caste living. And it was this affiliation with the socially marginalised groups in society that on one hand made the Rajput family dislike her all the more and on the other hand brought Mira closer towards the larger section of lower classes. She faced slander and ostracism but still demonstrated her truth over this tide of repressive norms, and thus her history is sung by the very people who derive strength from her life and living.

Mira’s being was scarred by thousand injuries with the trials at Chittor and the mockery of dominant society. The persecution of Mira continued day and night and she was ridiculed for mixing freely with the mendicants. The Ranas casted a long shadow over her life and ultimately blighted her earthly existence. The constant clan rivalries, internal dissensions, feuds and intrigues of the rulers of Mewar, must doubtless have been an irritant and deterrent to Mira. Although her primary reason for leaving Mewar was the animosity of Vikramjita, her brother-in-law, this too must have been a contributory factor. Mira had to suffer a lot of persecution, sadly from her own family members who sometimes even branded her as a licentious woman under the misconception that
Girdhara was her lover who secretly visited her. Believing her conduct to be derogatory for a woman of a royal household he was incensed against her and resented her moving about with sadhus and publicly dancing before Krishna idol in temples. References to her tribulations and her agony have been drawn by several writers. The tale of poisoning Mira is also related to Vikramjita who sends her a cup of poison which she gladly drank but as noted in the legend Krishna took upon himself the evil effect of the poison, leaving Mira unharmed. Another attempt to kill her was made by him by sending her a wicker-basket with a deadly cobra inside it. But when she opened the lid, there was a Krishna idol in place of a serpent. However, the magico-religious notion that Mira was unaffected by drinking the cup of poison is considered by some postmodern critics as highly compressed reference to her politically dominant marital family and the civil war waged by Mira against her natal and marital family.

II

The Historical Mira

It is not a trouble-free task to extricate facts of Mira’s life from the legendary, hagiographical and mythical Mirabai. Building up a concrete image of Mira from the mysterious ahistorical one is indeed a tedious task, as with mystics like Mira the dividing line between the credible and the incredible is very thin indeed. Oral tradition that has been accumulating all along makes it almost impossible to know the truth. Mira did not patronise any court related biographer, and neither Rajput chronicles was available for her. Her history rather has been reconstructed much later by emergent writers and biographers, wanderings mendicants and later on by historians. Thus the only practicable reconstruction of her biography is by means of critical analysis of all the information available; eliminating that which is incompatible with a consistent life development or the historical background. Looking at the differences between the motives and canon that shaped texts on either side of history/hagiography divide, scholars insist on subjecting the historical texts to the same level of manuscriptal scrutiny that we do to hagiographies. Several historians as Goetz, Mukta and Hawley have been trying to separate out the historical layers or at least stating that it is impossible when it is so. Their work on
Mirabai began with questions of history and move increasingly towards analysis of the essential Mira who is well known and alive even today in popular thought and culture.

Rajasthan of Mira’s youth was dominated by the Hindu Rajputs who maintained their tradition of marital valour and family honour. However, Mira had the courage to challenge the two centres of power of her time – royalty and religion. As most stories agree, she was born into a royal family of Rajasthan, highly educated in many arts, got married into the Sisodiya family ruling Chittor and was widowed very soon after her marriage. Few years later she left the palace to live amongst the common people and died under mysterious circumstances. Many of her life details are pierced together from the poetry and the stories later recounted by the members of her community. While the details are taken as truth by the followers of bhakti tradition, the historical authenticity of most of her story is subject to much debate. It is thus hard to disentangle the legend from history to reconstruct and reinterpret Mira’s life.

Nabhadas in Bhaktamal began talking of Mira by stating that Mira left her kul, society and all notions of decorum in order to worship Giridhar and further relates to the accepted myth of an attempt to poison Mira that in turn became ambrosia in her throat. However, his description on Mira does not help us locating her within a particular time, community or locality. Even the miraculous end attributed to her is absent from the original Bhaktamal. And it was only later that an inflated interpretation of Mira became available in the written sources. Priyadas’ commentary on Bhaktamal which was gleaned out of the oral stories and devotional verses became an important source on Mira’s history for later writers to follow. His account related to two important details pertaining to Mira’s history which was missing in Nabhadas. One was the fact that she was born in Merta and the other was that she was married to Rana of Chittor. Priyadas also recounted upon Mira’s refusal to pay obeisance to the Sisodiya goddess. His account is based partly on his own compositions and further punctuated with typical conventions for instance Mira’s bitter persecutions, the miraculous escapes, her pilgrimages, devotion towards Krishna and the breaking of norms. Priyadas’ influential writing on Mira has shaped the historical and contemporary imaginings of the literate classes for Mira.

All writers agree on at least two basic facts of Mira’s life as given by Nabhadas too. First that she was lost in Krishna bhakti and second that she was given poison which
she drank assuming it to be nectar. The material taken up for research is semi-historical as tradition is inseparably mixed up with history and it clings steadfastly round the name of Mira. But realising that the traditions at times become more valuable than history and yet it is not history, S.S.Mehta rightly states of how “it is difficult to follow Goetz ideal which points towards the historians duty of separating the true from the false, the certain from the uncertain and the doubtful from which it cannot be accepted” (22). Many folk tales have clustered round the devout Rajput poetess and they are so full of miraculous and mysterious occurrences that they can hardly bear the search light of critical examination. In view of tangled growth of traditions woven by time around her life and of conflicting versions of learned critics, it is hard to toil through them and trace the authentic details. The materials at the disposal of research are scanty as the traditions still linger on. Legends lack evidence giving rise to many more interesting legends concerned with her sufferings, devotion, miraculous escapes and her rebellious nature. There are a number of legends about her which can be given credence or rejected to as one wishes and we tend to build a picture which emerges from these accounts. Several such episodes are examined here.

The arresting exchange that took place between Mira and Jiva Goswami in Brindavan and marked well in Mira’s hagiography, comes under historical scrutiny. Though mention of this incident has been made by many scholars including Bahadur, Deviprasad, Mehta and Padmavati, some others like Gaurishankar Ojha “makes Mira go direct to Dvarak on leaving Merta, without any intermediate visit to Brindavan” (Alston 6). And further Goetz, rather than attributing any saintly feature to the incident, looks at Mira as a revolutionary who as a woman dared to discuss with the Gosain on equal terms. Mira’s meeting with Akbar has again been a subject of immense debate. Padmavati and Sivanada agree to the incident. Priyadas too speaking on the Bhaktamal refers to this meeting which Nabhadas does not suggest. Several writers doubt its authenticity as Mehta, Deviprasad and Hawley consider this episode as historically unproven and part of loving legends. Krishna Bahadur as well believes it to be doubtful on the grounds that Akbar was born in 1542 and Mira died in 1546. Goetz calls the story as ‘silly nonsense’ but making a more rational analysis of the episode holds that it may contain a historical nucleus.
The Krishna idol presented to Mira in her childhood later on played a great role in her life and songs. The wandering mendicant presenting her the idol is identified by her legendary accounts to be none other than her guru Raidas, but on this there is great deal of controversy regarding its historical authenticity. Deviprasad rejects the belief considering that there is difference in their lifetimes. Furthermore Krishna Bahadur judge that Raidas lived much before Mira as his period of life is reckoned to be from 1394 to 1418, and that the reference to him as her guru is only out of respect. Padmavati too looking at this difference in lifetimes find Jiva Goswami more likely to be her guru. Chaturvedi’s version excludes poems which refer to Raidas as her guru. However, Parita Mukta looking at how the artisanal, peasants and other subaltern rank of people have taken over Mira bhajans holds it likely that Raidas, a chamar could have been associated to Mira. Mukta comes up with a bhajan that makes this relationship explicit. Here are some lines from it:

...Mira found a guru in Rohidas
She bows at his feet and asks his blessings, (112)

Bankey Behari and Mehta too seems to be convinced that Raidas was Mira’s guru. However Alston, Goetz and Hawley find it difficult to accept Raidas as her guru and come up with their historical reasoning to refute the claim. Goetz divulge that Raidas, being a follower of Ramanada, could not have been born much later than the year 1400 and therefore it is unlikely that he was Mira’s guru at a time when she was not old enough to understand any religious or social discourses. He rather gives way to the view that Jhali Rani, the Rajput queen mentioned in devotional literature as the pupil of guru Raidas was infact the mother of Rana Sanga and therefore she might have initiated Mira into the habit of receiving sadhus and enjoy sat-sangs, a practise that Mira continued after Jhali Rani died. Hawley too holds that Mira’s direct source of Raidas’ teachings could only have been Jhali Rani and further considers the entire legendary episode as serving to fill the hagiographical lacuna, one that is relating conveniently to the yogic side of Mira’s personality. Further as a historical possibility of this link Hawley relates to a story found in the Bhaktirsabodhini by Priyadas that might have given rise to the tradition linking Mira with Raidas. Considering the matter to be a complicated one, Goetz further puts up the question that how come Raidas being a devotee of Rama presented
Mira an idol of Krishna. Though the historical claim on the relationship between Mira and Raidas is open to question there are strong indications that Mira was widely revered as the disciple of Raidas.

In the absence of any dependable records available, the history of Mira is inverted and easily becomes at best a supplement to the hagiography. Rightly puts Alston that “in the absence of reliable information about Mira’s death, the legend provides a fitting image to remember by her” (6). The devotee and the poet is so completely merged that the real Mira is not available on records. What is intended is a close look at the sources of our knowledge with a high level of demand for clarity about whether and when these sources can be dated. Thus the postmodern critics realise the need of returning to a definite historicising impetus that can interpret and shape the story of Mira.

In addition to this, researches and scholars are at variance in context with Mira’s date of birth which are only estimated and not known. Nabhaaji pronounced Merta as her birth place but failed to assign any date or year of birth. There is no direct evidence on her birth date. Many state it to be somewhere between 1498 and 1504, while others belief it to be 1557. Writers including Mehta, Deviprasad, Bahadur, Goetz holds the former view whereas Bankey Behari and Sivanada goes for the latter. Similarly there comes up conflicting views on her place of birth too where some like Deviprasad and Goetz, states it as Kuraki, the others talk of Chaukari as well.

There is a chronological problem involved even in Mira’s marital lineage. Though, the primary sources of Nabhadas and Priyadas mention no names on the issue, Colonel Tod relates it to Rana Kumbha and here comes the earliest datable reference and equally disputed. Mehta attempts to prove Tod’s analysis to be doubtful and errored. He argues on the grounds that Rana Kumbha whom he calls Mira’s husband was killed in 1467 and Mira’s grandfather Duda became the king of Merta after that year. For that reason Tod depicts an error in judgement as for Mehta, it was Prince Bhojraj who married Mira in the year 1516. Besides Mehta there are others holding Bhojraj as Mira’s earthly husband. Deviprasad and Goetz state reasons as to why Kumbha can’t be Mira’s husband. Here again when Alston holds Deviprasd’s view supported by documents found in archives of Mewar, Padmavati calls it untenable as she holds Raymall to be Mira’s husband. According to Hawley it was Bhojraj and not Kumbha. The problem thus
remains intact due to lack of concrete evidence. Nilson's account further adds to the argument that it is highly unlikely that Mira would have been married to a contemporary of his grandfather. There is great perplexity as we read because here two irreconcilable stories of her life emerge, one making her the queen of Kumbha, and the other connecting her to the court of Rana Sanga.

What comes up next with historians is the predicament of naming the Rana in Mira's poetry and hagiography. However the authenticity of the poems referring to Rana is regarded doubtful and the miraculous escapes of Mira are not fully accepted by modern Indian scholarship. For Goetz, Mira's survival was not so miraculous as the legends pretend. He argues that "the poisonous snakes could be exchanged with harmless ones, the water from the idol likewise or at least diluted". (21) According to Alston, if the poems of Mira mentioning the wicked and aesthetic Rana have any authenticity, they fit better with Vikramjita. Several writers including Deviprasad, Nilson, Futhehally, and Hawley held Vikramjita as probably her chief persecutor subjecting her to hardships. The origin of the belief is traced back again to Nabhadas' version who alludes to these persecutions. The stories of attempts at poisoning Mira is commonly accepted as probable, since it is supported by documentary evidence and early hagiographical literature.

Historians are further engaged in authenticating Mira's going to Dwarka as her last pilgrimage. As the legend relates, the Rana sends a delegation of Brahmin to Dwarka for persuading Mira to return, to which she refuses. When the Brahmins threaten to commit suicide, Mira in throes of dilemma turns to the image of Krishna in the temple of Ranchod and is said to have been absorbed by it. While there are others giving credential to the story, Hawley calls it ambiguous and Goetz comes up with his rationalising practice stating that this miraculous escape held in her tradition could be due to the Brahmins who unable to convince Mira to return might have declared her dead out of fear of the Rana's rage. Krishna Bahadur also doubts the historical validity of this story. How Mira ended her individualist existence remains unanswered by hagiography, oral tradition and even history. The same question has been disturbing the historians as always. There is not a single song that mentions the ultimate destruction of the person of Mira. Mukta tries analysing on the subject and keeping aside for a moment the transcendental end
attributed to Mira that she merged with Krishna *murti* at the temple in Dwarka, she evaluates other alternatives too; one is self destruction and the other is destruction at the hands of the Rana but reasoning out both the possibilities she rejects even these two. For her, the story of Mira’s mergence into the Krishna murti is one that marks the ultimate negation of worldly relations. Exploring all possibilities she shares on an evidence relating to an underground passage from within the temple of Dwarka to outside. Mukta hold this alternative to be more likely considering that it would not have been difficult for Mira to slip away and later join up with a group of wandering singers. Goetz too is of the similar view that Mira might have slipped and fled. History thus obscures us for truth of what happened at the temple of Dwarka.

An aggressive father-in-law, a vindictive sister-in law, an envious husband who heard Mira conversing and laughing behind doors and suspected that there was a paramour; all these details considered as primary sources on Mira’s life are referred to by the orientalist scholar Hermann Goetz as a “collection of silly, sentimental legends’ whereby the history of a Mewari princess is described in terms of motivations of a lower middle class household”. And further talks of “extricating the real greatness of Mira’s efforts from the cheap sentimentalities of popular hagiography’ as for him ‘what is important is the struggle of this wonderful personality on her way to her beloved lord Giridhar’” (preface).

But for Bankey Behari Mira was a saintly soul and quotes a message of Mira’s *kirtan* to further his argument; “Take the vow of purity. Discard the inheritance of flesh. Help others to give inward peace...Interpret revelation. Soul is ever speaking; hear it.” (11, 1961) Behari further address Mira’s life as a story and doesn’t claim for any real place in history. His account on her life itself begins in a tale-telling manner: “I got up from my reverie and, with tears in my eyes, entreated my mother once again to recite the tale of this saint; and she began:” (36). To him, Mira is the moth that burnt itself in the candle of love for Girdhara and for all times filled the temple of Devotion with fragrance. Undaunted by fire or frown, unperturbed by persecutions, this devotee of Sri Krishna sang her songs of
princely renunciation and self-surrender, that shall infuse courage in the aspirant on the path of Love. (31, 1961)

Refuting the critics who blame Mira for her outright rejection of family duties, Behari holds that Mira left no stone unturned to please her husband. It was only her love for Krishna that accepted no compromise and it became supreme over all duties, spiritual, moral or temporal. According to Mukta, Mira is neither a romantic heroine nor a defied goddess. The nucleus of her life lies in her negation of princely state and her taking up of a life of affinity with pilgrims in her pursuit of a relationship with Krishna. And around this kernel have crystallized voices that have given birth to an influential person of Mira in which she is more than herself.

If a straightforward reading of Mira’s life is unavailable, eliciting certainties from her songs is equally problematic. The written texts assembled from oral traditions are part of collective oeuvre. Certain points must have been re-accentuated. There is a considerable difference in opinion in the authenticity of Mira’s songs and even on the number of verses attributed to her varies beyond all measure. The availability of her verses in several dialects; Hindi, Gujrati and Marwari have made it difficult for researchers to determine her own genuine work. According to one view her songs were not written or composed at all rather jotted down by the holy men in whose company she moved. When some critics goes on to appreciate Mira’s poetry scholars including Krishna Bahadur does not admit to the view completely and point towards the tampering that have taken place with the original. Mehta again holds that her songs are attributed to her but does not belong to her rather were composed by other minor itinerant anchorites. Many scholars are of the view that her songs have been tailored much and altered by those who sang them. Adding to the existing dilemma, Hawley highlights the problem of translation of these poems in various languages that changes the meaning of the original in the process. The problem stems primarily from the lack of words with perfect correspondence. He exemplifies his argument with listing the variety of translation available for one particular poem and one can notice the difference in meaning with the change in use of words.

It is difficult to locate the evidential manuscripts for Mira’s poetry. Mirabai the famed Rajput poet princes is also surrounded in mystery like many other historical
personages. To Hawley who looks into the matter sharply find it unlikely that all the poems attributed to Mira could have been composed by her alone. In fact he holds that there is much about Mira that would have attracted later poets to use her name. Her poems retained a purely oral tradition and were written down later and consequently it is improbable that we have substantial written collection of Mirabai as maintained by her. Putting it firmly Hawley rejects the idea of attributing the authorship of the entire present day collection to Mira alone. Interestingly he draws out how by the use of signature in every pada (verse) as a practise adopted by bhakti poets; the poet becomes the part of a poem and therefore the meaning and the value of the poem itself changes at the moment the identity of the author is revealed. And the later writers tampering with Mira verses evidently used this feature to index the author’s authority and further her veneration as saint. His research relates that very few poems associated with Mira are extant in sixteen century manuscripts and attributes only five poems that have clearly emerged from those manuscripts. Further Mukta, too trying to analyse Mira verses talks of locating nothing but a ‘virtual impasse’ and also raises weighty doubts about the available manuscripts as they have never been made available for scholars to scrutinize.

Kumari Sangari’s study of Mira songs reveals a sensuous yearning for her lord and renunciation of worldly desires. According to her, it is the female yogie - with its material basis in patriarchal subjugation -- which provides the emotional force of self-abasement and willed servitude (50-51). Sangari looks at her choice of Krishna and finds it paradoxical and multifarious as for her He is both pastoral cowherd and prince proprietor. One reveals His laxity of social decorum and the other aspect speaks of His political power and pragmatism. Both these aspects are seen entering into her configuration of god, husband and lover. The conventional triadic relation between wife, husband and god is broken as the wife here no longer gets her deliverance through godlike husband rather her bhakti offers her direct salvation that transgresses and reformulates patriarchal ideologies. Mira songs indicate poignancy and express a particular social relationship signifying a humble yet powerful subalternity. Her description of Krishna varies calling Him sometimes Giridhar nagar, Shyama, Dwarka ke Thakur, Maharaj, etc. Mira renounces her own class and caste status,
gives up the benefits of princely power along with the perilous norms of upper caste widowhood and consorts with lower caste men and women.

Mira’s songs derive their emotional and cultural power from the metaphoric use of the common analogy between god and lover, between divine service and domestic or wifely service, between the spiritual and the sensual. The female in her song is seen centrally a desiring subject that asserts the identity of the individual soul and yearns to realise this through a spiritual consummation. The attitude that she adopts towards Krishna is in the very idiom of a traditional Indian wife albeit an attitude that she refuses to adopt towards her worldly husband. Because her songs have not been written down by her rather appropriated by the populace much in manner of folk songs therefore conflicting versions exist. Though of late efforts have been made to identify the authentic and collate them, Shama Futehally, considerate towards the folkloric sentiments argues that what is more important is the memory of the folklore and not hallmarked authenticity. Hagiographies on Mira tend to be organising around her poetic compositions attributed to the figure they describe. Quite a number of poems attributed to Mira display this hagiographical emphasis prominently.

How do we evaluate Mira as a saint – as a symbol of legendary devotion and personal rebellion, as a historical figure and woman who resisted the power of feudal patriarchy and the social codes of family, pride and honour? For this we need to look to at the relation between the historical figure and the legendary saint. ‘Mira’ who may be gleaned from the historical facts is the one who belongs to the realm of political events. Looking at the social conflict engendered around the figure of Mira in Rajasthan society, Mukta reports that because Mira challenged the Rajput authority; in culture of Rajasthan she is not seen as a figure to be excoriated rather deemed as a term of abuse levelled at a woman as a charge of promiscuity. And it is only recently that Rajput women have allowed her memory to surface among them and that they have been able to do this by Rajputising Mira, by interpreting her actions and deeds in a way which conforms to notions of heroism and valour prevalent in Rajput community. In the process Mira is hereby essentialised.

Some writers even place Mira within a subordinated, feminine domestic sphere. Sanagari examines how the Rajput chronicles too conjure up mythical histories about
Mira which for them becomes a way of legitimising their domesticated view of Mira’s life-story. Making a ground level research Mukta looks at the singing of Mira bhajans in Rajasthan communities that faces a similar degree of oppression. Fear of losing benefaction of the Sisodiya ruler, they deny any familiarity or loyalty to Mira bhajans. And because of this her bhajans evolved outside the Rajput rule, amidst the dalit quarters and peasant dwellings. What she finds is that despite the efforts of upper-caste Rajputs to obliterate Mira from historical memory, her songs and legends are still alive mostly among lower caste devotees as they could relate with her a common experience of subjugation. Reading against the grain she looks at the domestication of the figure of Mira, uncovering a highly politicised feminist Mira; a people’s Mira who struggled against patriarchy. This people’s Mira is then compared to several other Mira’s who are found to somehow lack a solid organic link with any specific social base. Among these lesser Mira’s are the the satyagraha Mira of M.K.Gandhi and the sentimentalised and socially mild Mira of modern mass media. Thus focussing on Mira’s social history, Mukta attempts to return her to recognisable communities, placing her history within the history of a collective cultural revolt and within the milieu of a collective struggle for social emancipation, thus relieving her from the isolation imposed upon her by a number of writers.

In contemporary times, the critics now points to the process where the writers with different ideological persuasions and with diverse stories to tell built up a biographical sketch of Mira using published anthologies. And rather than to concern themselves with the symbolic meaning of Mira they are involved in unearthing which Rana she was married to, what was her exact date of birth/death and so on. Present day scholars negotiate upon available resources, revealing diverse social and cultural meanings which have arisen in different epochs around Mira’s persona. There exists many written biographical studies and a pool of collective remembrance on her. Amidst all one can notice an indisputable association; that she spurned her caste and family obligations in order to live out a relationship with Krishna and the rest of the information is based upon the influential hagiography and upon the imaginative conjectures derived from it. The problem with hagiography is that the entire of it seems to be creation of writers with specific sectarian associations. Extrapolating salient historical features to
Mira’s life, the latter day rationalist thinking had a lasting impact on the way Mira is being interpreted. Hawley looks at the improved Mirabai who is drawn closer to reality by shifting her away from the mystic.

Thus we intend to survey the secular practises and ideas that have historically accumulated and been formulated around the figure of Mira. She is seen more than a historical figure and beyond the shadowy realms of the past to inhabit the very core of future which is embodied within the suffering of the people seeking an alternative. What emerged from Mira bhakti were various forms of identification to Mira and also a historicised and region specific Mira taken up by the subordinate classes of Rajasthan as a vehicle of opposition to the feudal privilege and caste norms. She needs to be rescued and rewritten in more empirical terms, and this time not as a goddess, but as an individual who dared to live and speak on her behalf.

III

Mira in Contemporary Theatrical Imagination

With each turn in history, Mirabai, the saint poetess of medieval India takes a new appearance. During the colonial period, she becomes one of the chosen icons of the non-violent nationalist imagination and enters the nationalist consciousness, and in the postcolonial phase she emerges as a symbol of the marginalised when viewed from a more human and non-religious perspective. Contemporary poets, activists and writers appropriate her name and legacy to provide credibility to their respective arguments in a way that continually widen, if not exceed, her original discourse in new situations. As Mira is resurrected and re-invented she undergoes strategic cultural transformation that quite significantly impinges on, and not just echoes the changing contours of culture in our times. Mirabai’s great appeal to people combined with lack of historical evidence gave rise to many interesting legends. The stories of her intense devotion to Krishna were carried over by some ascetics and devotees who sang and danced with her, thus augmenting her legendary image. This chapter intends to counter the purely hagiographical information on Mira by positioning her in a more human context and by interpreting the factual and legendary material about her from a non spiritual perspective.
She will be immortalised first and foremost on account of her wild passion and intense love which is the basis of all human relationship.

As nationalist fervour relents and poetic imagination seeks human explanation of events, icons rarefied beyond reason, the myth of Mira is re-staged with a humanist perspective. Such an exercise of humanising the mythical, saintly woman has become quite a (post)modern literary trend and is taken up by some contemporary writers. Lending it a critical gaze, Gurcharan Das, a modern Indian playwright too comes up with his play *Mira* written well in the postcolonial phase of critical inquiry. As against the common perception of the saint poetess, Das in his one act play *Mira* creatively re-imagines the persona of the mystical figure who is already in fix between the historical and the hagiographical. The volume *Three English Plays* that brings together a collection of three plays written by Das during his twenties brings us this interesting and re-invented persona of Mira, the sixteenth century Rajput poetess who is known for her devotion for the divine and subverting the ideals of Indian womanhood by challenging the social order. *Mira*, based on the life of the Hindu saint Mirabai, is easily the most ambitious of the three plays and perhaps the one where Das's creativity and talent are displayed most emphatically.

In his play *Mira*, Das has attempted to combine the Indian legend of Mira with the sophistication of western total theatre where he explores the phenomenon of sainthood through the story of Mirabai. Das's acute consciousness that he is creating a text that, first and foremost, is meant to be performed, and not relegated to being merely read, made him use certain techniques of total theatre with lots of music accompanied with abundant use of aphorisms. To this concern, also pervades his well-written introduction to the play that adds to the value by informing each piece, and can be attributed the play's overall achievement. In this denaturalised total theatre form of *Mira*, one finds a synchrony of subject and medium. The playwright's presentation of the sublime, sometimes indicating that the Rajput princess must traverse on her road to salvation and sainthood is dramatised through ritualistic cadences and movement, dance, song and aphoristic speech that further holds the play tightly and giving it an exciting interpretation. *Mira* is an excellent performance text, one that stretches the talent and creativity limits of actors. The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it
seems to hold traditional values, it has also the means of questioning these values. The various conventions, the songs, dances, aphoristic dialogues — all this permit the presentation of alternative attitudes to the central problem.

As per the playwright’s instruction this one act play is to be performed in one setting. All actors are on the stage all the time and there is no exit or entrances. When actors speak their dialogues on stage, they do not generally enact what they say. Action does not stop when a dance is indicated and the dialogue continues throughout the dance, as a visual and emotional aid to the actor’s words. Das thus drives his audience to a brilliant treatise on the body movements or space. Further, he seems to practise Brecht’s technique of ‘estrangement’ and ‘distancing’ as reflected through the characters in the play (who are otherwise deeply emotional, that might shock the readers), distances them, moving and then converting them.

The dramatist makes specific use of sound and colour — the use of wailing and mourning, songs and dialogues to indicate happiness. This seems to be another way of enriching the theatre by verbal means — colour, songs, sound. The use of folk patterns and ritual elements inspire passion, jealously, mutual rivalry, betrayal and in the process conveys a message. Mira reflects the manifold proportions of Das’ theatricality, style, form and total theatre wisdom. The central theatrical device in the play is the effective use of all actors on the stage who forms the chorus and sing the popular bhajans of Mira. As the play progresses the actors instruct each other, from neutral commentators they also turn voyeurs who participate and condemn their acts. Music and dance also becomes an instrument of comment and analysis. Devotional tunes turn upon itself indulgingly and sometimes critically. Mira thus succeeds as a non-natural theatre with lots of songs and dances. And in his use of this altogether seldom used technique, Das admits of the influence that exercised over him in the writing of his play as he confess “It needed a young Martin Branzell of la Mama to introduce me to the magic of theatre — to teach me that theatre could be created minimally with body movements of the actors” (Intro 16). So when Mira says in the opening lines “I am an ant on a matchstick lit at both ends” (103), the playwright in the introduction reveals how “the actors made such a picture with their bodies” (16) to dramatise the intended effect. The play is minimalistic, total theatre in the true sense of the word as full of surprises and variety, dance, drama and singing.
Bringing the esoteric quality of a saint's life to the reality of the stage, *Mira* allows for the transformation of hagiography, history and theology all at once into theatre.

The action takes place in early sixteen century Mewar, a princely state of north-western India. There are in all five characters on stage presenting Mira, Rana (her husband), Jai (Mira’s cousin), Uda (sister-in-law) and Jhali (her maid). The play’s prologue introduces us to Mira’s state of mind, her devotion, her pain, her anguish, her barrenness, her saintliness and the beginning of a new journey – emphatically her marriage day. The playwright in the beginning of the play itself brings forth the much evident history-hagiography conflict that forms part of Mira tradition. She is caught between the choice of her divine lover (Krishna) and her earthly husband (Rana). It hints at her ardent longing for Krishna and he being her ultimate choice in rejection of the Rana:

Actress 1 [Mira]: I love my God.
Actress 3 [Jhali]: What about the Rana?
Actress1 [Mira]: What about my pain? (103)

The brief conversation here unearths Mira’s conflicting persona where she is caught between two possible alternatives – the domestic and the spiritual, the secular and the sacred; the historical and the hagiographical to which she manages a tough escape. Adhering to several well known historical facts and also giving due space to Mira’s hagiographical persona, the playwright endeavours to trace the transformation of the saint poetess from “a human being into a lovelorn bhakti saint” (intro 15). And it is this transformation from a woman to a saint that Gurcharan Das finds problematic to describe. As he utters, “saints are not interesting for the theatre. Only human beings are” (intro 14). According to him this transformation of Mira from a human being into a love-obsessed bhakti saint has a different inner logic, different from what hagiography dictates. Rather than calling her a born saint as most hagiographers do, Das as a modern dramatist restages Mira’s life story by giving a closer gaze at the person of Mira. He then formulates his version by pulling out well the historical Mira from the popular, legendary Mirabai. Das unfolds the legendary Mira intending to humanise the hagiographical one and trying to retrieve the woman from a saint by explicating how she possessed all the human desires – both sexual and emotional, thereby attempting to make a more rational
interpretation at the person of Mira. He reveals her entire journey wherein after
experiencing particular circumstances she moves from an ordinary woman towards an
extraordinary being.

As the play opens Mira as a young bride is shown seeking love from her husband
Rana, but on the day of the honeymoon, she is asked to bow before goddess Kali – the
family goddess of the Ranas with their conventional logic that the “Kali will give you a
son if you worship her” (104). Related by some historians as Hawley and S.S.Mehta as
well, the dreadful Kali frightens Mira, and she refuses to pay obeisance: “I can’t feed
blood to her” (109). The disillusionment set in, right in the beginning, multiplies and thus
paves way for a plausible transformation of Mira into a saint. Instead of Mira
worshipping Kali we locate Mira’s devotion gradually shifting towards Krishna, her
personal God. She holds: “The universe is my Lord Krishna” (130). Unlike Mira’s
hagiographers who do not relate to any such transformation taking place, Das goes on to
relate episodes one after the other that heighten the conversion process of Mira’s soul and
being. The playwright gives credence to both her history as well as her hagiography
incorporating events and episodes from both narrative forms and framing it within his
dramatic artistry. The backdrop of the play is largely historical where he picks up
characters from real history as Mira, Rana, Jai, Jhali and Uda. However, leaving the
question unanswered and not naming the Rana in his play, Das too depicts of undergoing
the dilemma of historical authenticity, an issue that has bothered Mira’s historians as
well.

Mira’s much talked off marital incompatibility is revealed in the title of scene two
– “Isn’t the Bed Small for Two of Us?”. Here, Gurcharan Das focuses on the evolving
relationship between the husband and the wife (Rana and Mira). At first, Rana is charmed
by Mira’s beauty; “every month the moon vainly tries to match Mira’s face. Having
failed, it destroys its work and begins again.” (105). Initially there is novelty, the
embarrassment of the two young people discovering each other. As the novelty wears
Rana becomes absorbed in the affairs of the state and the imminent war with the
Mughals. Mira at this feels frustrated without her husband. Her demands both physical
and emotional are greater. She constantly speaks of the need of love in one’s life which is
not understood by her husband. While conversing with Uda she states; “A body without
love is dead” (109). She is the ‘Rainbird’ (title of scene three) dying of thirst. When she discovers that her husband is not equal to her love, she becomes disillusioned with marriage. Finding her love unattended by her husband, Mira speaks to her maid Jhali; “Love is like a creeper, Jhali; it withers and dies if it has nothing to embrace” (124). By emphasising Mira’s desire for love, Das here seems to agree to her hagiographers. Since Rana and Mira do not consummate, the possibility of the birth of a mandatory son becomes impossible. Everyone in the palace holds Mira responsible for it and accuses her of being barren, which she contests through a series of metaphors: ‘A single lamp, no matter how bright, always casts a shadow. Put another one beside it and darkness of both disappears’; “The chariot can’t go anywhere on a single wheel” (107).

The playwright’s Mira is not shown portraying any mystical element in the beginning of the play. She rather possesses very human emotions and longs for her husband’s love; “Mira blushes and leaves” (117) at the arrival of her husband. Explicating such a relationship and her longing for her husband’s love, Das here seems to re-state his findings by questioning the popular belief of Mira being averted to her husband’s advances from the very beginning due to her initial involvement with Krishna.

More than Mira’s indifferences to her husband’s overtures, it is Rana who seems to be indifferent to her; “She never eats anymore since the Rana stopped calling her” (125). He is obsessed with war and affairs of the state. The following sequences of dialogues between Mira and Jhali reveal the fundamental differences between the husband and the wife (so rampant in Mira’s life-histories):

Actress 1: Mira is angry with the Rana.
Actress3: Marriage without quarrel is like food without spice.
Actress 1: Marriage without love is no food at all.
Actress3: He can’t play with you forever. The Rana must rule the kingdom.
Actress 1: The Rana must also rule the Rani. He only thinks about the kingdom.
Actress3: Mira only thinks of love.
Actress 1: He only thinks of war.
Actress3: He is a conqueror.
Actress 1: The real conqueror must first overcome himself. (106)
Unlike many writers of Mira's history, Gurcharan Das tries to reason out the failure of Mira's marriage in terms of the usual middle class post-marital animosity between a non-working feminine housewife and a workaholic husband. Indeed the entire scene three ‘The Rainbird’ is a metaphor for Mira’s great thirst for love. And Das puts it skilfully describing the state of her painful agony, “this Rainbird in the sky in crying for anguish. It was dying of thirst” (107). The scene “No more a Lover’s Quarrel” marks the complete disillusionment that Mira experiences with her husband and hints at her move towards Krishna; “Mira looking very hurt, goes and picks up Krishna” (122). This shift in her love comes as an imperative factor in her transformation from a human to a saint. What was perceived to be ‘lover’s quarrel’ earlier by inmates of the palace turns into full-scale dispute. Rana shuts the door on Mira’s face. In moments of utter seclusion she turns to Krishna. Her demand for love when not fulfilled by her husband Rana looks for an alternative which makes Mira go to Krishna. The playwright seems to suggest that Mira is driven to Krishna in sheer desperation, and Krishna here becomes the surrogate of the husband. A similar interpretation is also made by Kumkum Sangari, who describes Mira’s ardent longing for Krishna and he being her ultimate choice.

In the following scene the disheartened Mira is seen lost in thoughts of Krishna who is now entering her consciousness thus replacing her husband, Rana. Mira’s great love and devotion for Krishna which is traced much in her devotional songs (that form integral units of her hagiography) is given due attention by the dramatist too in his play where a number of times Mira speaks of her affection and longing for her god. In the prologue itself Mira declares “I love my god” (103). Her devotion increases; “I can’t put my feet anywhere because he is everywhere” (123). Her love for god seems to hold a sought of fixation because when Uda seeing Mira washing her Krishna idol calls it ‘ordinary’ looking, Mira replies gruffly; “He is not ordinary” (111), and yet again Mira’s reacts annoyedly when Jhali calls it a ‘doll’ (124). The idol now carried greater significance to her than any real human being. Though at the outset Mira finds it odd and strange at this new found feeling but gradually she gets inclined to the new love and gets so attached to it that she forgets her earlier craving for the Rana. Here we see, along with her deep eccentric longing for the God as a lover, Das portrays his heroine to be conscious of her objectionable love and unlike her hagiographers, he depicts her of
holding the emotion of lust for the divine. On this she is seen talking to Jhali, “I crave him as a woman and that’s sinful. I want him as a woman” (130). She further shares her mind with her saying:

Actress 3 [Jhali]: Who are you attached to?
Actress 1 [Mira]: Krishna.
Actress 3 [Jhali]: Oh, is that all?
Actress 1 [Mira]: I want him in a different way.
Actress 3 [Jhali]: I don’t understand you. You mean, you mean…
Actress 1 [Mira]: Yes. Yes.
Actress 3 [Jhali]: you mean you lust for him?
Actress 1 [Mira]: Yes.
...
Actress 1 [Mira]: Listen I’ll tell you when I first discovered this, I looked for the best way to endure it. I tried to hide it. I couldn’t. I tried to control it. I couldn’t. I finally decided it was best for me to die. (129)

The conversation highlights the nature of Mira’s pangs, her irresistible love for Krishna that in turn marks the very human passion of pining and longing. And it is this human love that has been accorded an intensely religious or spiritual halo in the hagiographical accounts of Mira. Her ever-increasing devotion towards Krishna further arouses suspicion of her incestuous relationship with other men and put her at odds with the people in the palace who start accusing her of infidelity. And later again finding her attachment to the idol of Krishna as insane everyone around her including the Rana feels that “she is going mad” (128). Even Jhali her compassionate companion goes on questioning the unusual love that Mira has for her god, “How can you feel that way about a god?” (130). It was this out of the ordinary love, that became unacceptable to the Rajput clan and society. At this Uda, the jealous sister-in-law conspires to put her to death being more worried and thoughtful of protecting the family name and honour.

In subsequent scenes Mira’s growing isolation is portrayed through a series of dramatic sequences. First she is shown caught between Kali – “holy goddess of million wars” (111) and Krishna – the eternal lover. As she is forced to make ‘humble offering of holy blood’ before the goddess Kali, she faints. Then Mira’s warm embrace –
“unorthodox welcome” to his cousin Jai almost smacks of incest: “She holds him in a spontaneous embrace. Let me look at you cousin. How handsome you’ve become!” (115). The palace women, the sister-in-law do make an issue of Mira’s immodesty:

Actress2 [Uda]: You don’t go up and embrace a man like that, I almost died of shame. Think of your sacred husband. What must he have felt...and in front of everyone...if I had been the Rani... (117)

Mira ignorant of the artificiality of societal norms tries to analyse and synthesise the socio-cultural activities of the Rajput tradition. In the early scenes Mira tries to incorporate and imbibe, internalise the properties, decorum and the spirit of Rajput heritage. Metaphorically speaking Mira’s journey into the traditional society is one of acculturation and assimilation but at the same time also of individualism. Various perspective exhortations are echoed by Uda and Jhali. She is supposed to show restraint and reservation. She is expected to shed her impetuosity and become more regal and reserved.

Mira’s view on love-war, victory-defeat, sorrow-happiness accentuates the rupture. She feels continually cornered among the war-hungry Rajputs of the palace. Her desire for peace and recluse, as mentioned in her hagiographical accounts too, was in sharp contrast to the warrior Rajputs. The playwright allows her actress Mira to speak her mind as she would repeatedly say to Rana and her cousin Jai on their insistence on holding wars, “The best soldiers are not warlike” and further remarks, “War is the festival of death” (116). While the three go on discussing we are again acquainted with Mira’s hagiographical/virtuous aspect and her complete aversion to war and violence:

Actress 3 [Jhali]: Fools win wars, not wise men.
Actress2 [Uda]: Victory comes with reason and tactics.
Actor 2 [Jai]: Victory comes with courage.
Actress1 [Mira]: Courage is wise, said the wise man.
Actor 2 [Jai]: War is blind, said the fool.
Actress 2 [Uda]: War makes men noble.
Actress 1 [Mira]: War degrades life.
Actress2 [Uda]: Life is an illusion, said the wise man.
Actor2 [Jai]: Give me more illusions, said the fool.
Actress1 [Mira]: Life is sorrow, said the wise man. (120)

Although the others go on supporting the idea of war and victory, Mira expresses her utter disinclination to it which adds to her devout image. Das here through these interesting aphoristic statements brings to light the stand that his characters take on to. Mira’s dialogues hint at her understanding of the transient nature of man’s life. She recognizes the fleetingness of this world and therefore opts for peace instead of war unlike Uda and Jai who speaks of exercising Rajput honour of war and courage. Das furthermore represent Mira to be a nature lover who finds joy amid the nature’s beauty and would appreciate the birds, the flowers around her and is also shown sensitive to their pain. Feeling herself trapped in a ‘golden cage’ Mira moves out amidst natural surroundings and speaks joyfully to Jhali, “Look at the day. How ecstatic it is! Smell the tress and the grass. And the mist and the wind in the sky…” (123). And later again excited with the idea of going riding in the forest with her cousin Jai she describes her pleasure saying:

We’ll go flying among the trees and the animals; we’ll climb hills and descend into cool streams with white horses ahead of us, black ones behind and my hair lying in the clouds. We’ll ride fast in the winds and the cold water of the streams will be nectar to my lips. (125)

The above lines underline her fervent yearning to leave the humdrum and pass on to the world of love and perpetuity. Mira’s longing for self-determination and freedom of individual self (that is examined in works of Mukta and Sangari), is given due attention by the playwright as well.

The demand imposed upon Mira to beget a son for the kingdom initially weighs heavy upon her mind and she is frequently seen talking of it. The accusation of barrenness is understood by Mira quite early in the prologue; “I never had a son” (103). And yet again her conversation with her cousin Jai when she jokingly informs him of carrying Rana’s child reveals of the uncompromising insistence laid upon her to produce an heir to the throne:

Actor2 [Jai]: What are you going to call the child?
Actress 1 [Mira]: Son.
Actor2 [Jai]: What if it’s a girl?
Actress 1 [Mira]: I’m going to have a son.
Actor 2 [Jai]: What will be his name?
Actress 1 [Mira]: The Son. (119)

Later again in scene ten after being dejected by her husband when she starts looking up to Krishna, Mira dreams of a son:

I must have gone to sleep with you in my arm. What a strange dream I had! There I was in a field and I had a baby in my arms. He had shining black eyes, and a black dress and a black turban. (123)

For her sentiments precedes any physical contact. Her love for the lord is intense and sublime. On the family’s persistent demand for an heir she reverts, “A son will be born out of love” (105).

Mira’s sexuality – hitherto totally subsumed by her spirituality – is also amply hinted, if not fully elaborated upon. She is very conscious of her curves:

Actress 1 [Mira]: Do my hair right. I am feeling hot. Here, take the comb. Feel how smooth my hair is. See how it falls on my shoulders. How it reaches down to my hips.

Actress 3 [Jhali]: The walls have ears.

Actress 1 [Mira]: My long black hair on my round white hips. (125)

This is indeed a bold depiction of a saint-woman. Neither history, nor hagiography concede womanliness to Mira. Her body is more a site for ideological warfare, than an ensemble of human sentiments, passions and instinctive urges. The playwright retrieves the woman from Mira, the saint. Remarkably enough it is Mira who speaks of her sexuality in the face of espionage. She is thus brought out by the playwright from her submissive feminine role. Modern playwrights, novelists and poets retrieve heroic characters from intimidating nationalistic frames, only to bestow upon them their share of humanness. Such an interpretation of Mira’s personality has remained unnoticed by her hagiographers.

Furthermore, what is merely hinted as incestuous relationship between Jai and Mira takes on a concrete shape in the culminating scenes. Jai’s relationship with Mira takes on a clear incestuous turn:
Actor 2 [Jai]: ... I have missed you very much. Since you left Medta, I have been wasting away in the desert. Let’s go away tonight. We will ride through the forest, and no one will know. If they follow us, we can hide. I’ll take care of you...keep you warm. (126)

The demand (as against the desire) for a son drives the disconsolate Mira to Jai, but the encounter does not last. Mira’s sex-life remains unattended, unfulfilled. Krishna remains the only choice and it is here that she makes a compete surrender to her lover:

Actress 1 [Mira]: Krishna, you are all I have left now. Even Jai is gone. I have nowhere to go. What shall I do? I think I’m going to cry. No, I must be brave. Krishna, I never asked you for anything. Can you do something for me? Can you give me a son? I know it’s asking a lot. But what are friends for- especially when they are gods. O please, my dear god... (127)

The sexuality of relationship becomes all the more evident, as Mira without fear of repercussion admits openly:

Actress 1 [Mira]: Make him come to me. I remember it was dark. No one saw us. We went to a thicket and I was so shy. O he was flattering. My couch was of leaves but his was my bosom. His lips were like nectar to mine. And I was drunk in his embrace. He held me tight, I could hardly breathe. And we together, I felt sweated and moist, hidden away. I thrilled him so. His half closed eyes became restless and he desired me again. (129)

The active participation of Mira in the sexual act brings about an unexpected reversal of roles. Instead of Krishna thrilling her, it is she who thrills him. In such a sequence not only Mira stands animated as a young lover, Krishna too is stripped of his iconic stillness. It is in such moments that Das as a playwright transgresses both hagiography and history; the literary takes over, humanising both the god and the devotee in the process.

As maintained by several writers of Mira’s life-history, her unusual love for Krishna came as a challenge to the social order and completely ruffled the conservative Rajputs. The playwright too reveals Mira’s rebellious, unconventional persona which is brought to us in the beginning of the play itself when as the new bride she makes a blunt remark refusing to worship the family goddess saying: “I don’t like her face” (104). In her rejection to bow down to the family deity, what is marked is her anti-patriarchal
attitude that makes her a figure of revolt among the Rajput community. She abandons royal duties to attend the life of a wandering saint. As Indians define themselves in terms of their relationship to other members of the family, their faith in individualism never comes as an ultimate value. They are defined by the roles they have to play. Therefore, Mira’s involvement with her own self was seen as an act of insubordination within the social context. The turning point came with the battle of Khanua in 1527, when the Mughals defeated the Rajput confederacy under the leadership of Mewar. It is with this defeat that the Rana gets defeated in his family life too as Mira goes to Brindavan renouncing the humdrum. Das’ Mira successfully clears the space where all forms of hegemony and domination are contested. The play in a way also deals with the construction of a feminist ideology where the feminine self yearns for achieving freedom and liberation for the individual. Though attempts are made by the Rajputs to domesticate and subjugate Mira, she ultimately releases herself from their hegemonic structure. Looking from the point of view of Mira critics, her choice of living was anti-patriarchal. Her devotion despite its positive aspects of single minded pursuit of the divine and self transcendence with its subversive aspects is also viewed as an escape from all womanly roles.

Furthermore, Gurcharan Das brings into his play some of the conventional customs of Indian society and nobility. By doing this he is informed neither by history nor by hagiography, but by general sociological observations. Literary or for that matter dramatic representation does not tie itself down to rigorous empirical details for routine matters. On the marriage night Das describes the situation of the new couple as typical of Indian marriages, thus highlighting the importance given to physical touch that precedes the much required emotional contact between husband-wife relationships. Further the orthodox thought belief of the Rajput society is revealed when the family pesters Mira to worship the goddess holding that the Kali “leads our armies in war. She gives life; she takes life. She is time” (111). Das further brings in the patriarchal set up of sixteen century Rajasthan society where the women were expected to observe certain decorum. When Jai bows down to Uda to greet her, Uda “covers her head with her ordny, which hides her face as well a mark of modesty and acknowledgement” (114). Along with Uda’s observance of the Rajput customs, the playwright also depicts Mira ignorant of
such customs as on meeting Jai she goes all along to embrace him at which she is stoutly rebuked by Uda. But Jai unlike Mira is shown quite conscious of the societal norms, and "blushes self-consciously and tries to extricate himself from Mira’s unorthodox welcome" (115).

Besides incorporating several such elements taken from Mira’s history and hagiography, the dramatist does not overlook her subaltern leanings that again add to her hagiographical image. When forced by Rana to worship kali Mira shows her reluctance saying:

I will do anything for you. But not this. If I did, I’d stop being Mira. I am being asked to play the actor who is elevated from the peasant to king for two hours. (113)

The dialogue reveals her subaltern inclination where she posses humility and depicts her ignorance of the aristocratic mannerisms. Yet again while presenting her anti-war views she speaks of her proclivity towards leading a peasantry life, “I’d rather be a peasant in peace than a prince in war” (116). Life of glamour, pomp and show does not please her. She would feel herself trapped and longs for a different life: “I live in a golden cage hung with silk; my food is honey and my drink is milk – but all I want is a nest in a tree” (123). Repeated use of the word ‘peasant’ by Mira in the play adds to our understanding of her subaltern predilection.

Not only literature has the potential to become site of alternative history, it can also be seen as an enabling complementary discourse of hagiography. Attending to the stock of Mira’s legendary tales, the play interprets the popular legend on Mira relating to how a royal conspiracy is planned to kill her but she is miraculously saved. First when a poisonous snake is concealed in a basket but as she opens it, the snake turns into a garland of flowers. Second, when deadly poison is mixed with her drink but she swallows it, fully aware of what it is and emerges unscathed:

Rana sent a cup of poison  
Mira drank it and laughed  
Bells on her flying feet  
Mira drank it danced away. (130)
However, like many hagiographical narratives, the process of transformation of poison into nectar remains un-explained. In fact the historians too, despite their rational analysis are unable to explain for the authenticity of this incident. While history provides the outlines of ‘bare’ plot; the necessary dramatic suspense is provided through hagiographic inputs.

Besides this popular legend, Das gives acknowledgement to several other legendary myths that are canonized with the memory of Mirabai like her refusal to worship the family deity, her going on the pilgrimage to Vrindavan, a temple built by Rana in memory of Mira and also enunciates her much recorded childhood incident:

when Mira was little girl, she saw marriage procession. She went in and told her grandmother that she too wanted a bridegroom. Her grandmother jokingly took Mira to krishna’s shrine, pointed to him and said, “This is your bridegroom”. Since that day she has been very attached to it. (132)

Besides choosing elements from Mira’s historical and hagiographical sources in his reconstruction of Mira’s life story, the playwright is also seen making deliberate omissions to several historical events and characters, perhaps due to the existence of her unauthenticated and conflicting accounts. Raidas, popularly held as Mira’s guru in her legendary tales and historical accounts finds no mention with Das’s play. Other such examples of selective exclusion are the episodes relating to Mira’s death and her meeting with Akbar. Das further avoids giving credence to the manner of Mira’s death that remains extremely doubtful in her history till date. Additionally in order to reveal more precisely the transformation of the legendary Mirabai, the dramatist seems to have made a conscious choice of characters who aid well in her conversion process. However, keeping his use of characters to the minimal must have been in accordance with his use of particular theatre technique.

Das uses the historical material and substantiates it with dramatic diction. The scene “Don’t ask the Blindman the Way” focus on Rana’s poignant cry: “The House is doomed. There will be no more Ranas, no more victories, no more Kali, no more Mewar. It is over” (137). To reinforce the process of transformation, the playwright shows Rana also losing the battle, and his wife. Das explores the tragedy of the Rana who feels lost in every way towards the end of the play: “I have lost the war; I have lost my wife” (133).
Returning from the lost war he regrets for not attending the lovelorn wife and wish to get back to her: “I want to go back to her. I miss her” (131). Here, the tragedy of the already defeated king is heightened while Rana yearn to return to his wife at a time when she is now unavailable to him. Looking at the unhappy Rana with his desire to possess his wife once more, Jai comes up explaining him of a woman’s nature and the fluctuating nature of man-woman relationship where the two go on accepting and rejecting each other and that “the story has no ending” (132). However, there is no comfort to the tragic hero. He is filled with all regrets and gets nostalgic of the days when Mira used to demand his love and attention which he never paid heed to:

She used to follow me like a shadow wherever I went, afraid we would be separated. She wouldn’t eat until she had fed me by her hand… (136).

At the end of the play we see how the other characters go on claiming their right on the transformed Mira:

Actress 3 [Jhali]: She is a saint!
Actor 1 [Mira]: She is my wife. (136)

And at this juncture in the play Mira’s sainthood reaches its pinnacle. The attitude that makes Mira detach from the phenomenal world and immerse herself in Krishna bhakti is rather a painful sight for Rana who now retires to his fate. The lines marking the end of scene seventeen explores the tragedy of the king to its fullest:

It is going to be quiet here with everyone gone. I can smell the emptiness. I am going to spend the rest of my days amusing myself by counting the spider webs growing from floors to the ceiling. Old age comes slowly, especially if you have to wait for it. (137)

As noted much in Mira’s hagiography and carrying some historical truth as well, Uda, Mira’s sister-in-law is at constant odds with her. The dramatist highlights the jealously and ill-felling that she holds for Mira and recounts her role in Mira’s sufferings. She is depicted to be constantly mentoring Mira to follow up the aristocratic traditions and the customs of the royal lineage. When Mira on meeting Jai embraces him, Uda comes up countering her actions. She goes on to spread rumour of Mira’s liaison with other men and calls her ‘witch’. Uda speaks: “All day she dances. All night she dances. And she sings these vulgar songs. She must have someone inside” (128). Finding Mira indifferent
to the family customs, Uda attempts to kill her through poisoning. She states, “A snake’s poison and a wasp’s sting are better than an unfaithful wife.” (128). Besides relating to the historical sources in presenting Uda as the rogue in Mira’s life and bringing sufferings to her, Das also slots in element of dramatic fiction that would affix to Mira’s hagiographical reflection. Here he depicts the transformation that even the ill-famed Uda goes through along with Mira and Rana. After Mira is saved from the poison which is said to be miraculously turned into nectar for Mirabai, Uda is also seen a changed person. She realises the saint in her and when Rana returns from a lost battle Uda asks to “prepare the fire for the holy anointment” and tells the Rana that he “has won the biggest victory”; ‘Mirabai is the Rana’s victory” (132). She further adds: “Dear brother, she has raised Mewar to its highest” (133).

By bringing in the change that his characters underwent, the playwright seems to suggest of the immense influence that Mirabai exercised over people. In the play too it is in correspondence with Mira’s transformation that the other major characters, Rana and Uda get transformed as well. The unfriendly sister-in-law surrenders herself to the saintly Mirabai as she speaks, “She has changed us all” (133). So much so that she is said to be going to Vrindavan with Mira on her holy pilgrimage. After the miraculous escapes that Mira had from her death Jhali also calls her the “purest queen in the world” (133). Though Rana and Uda mark effective change in their characters, Jhali and Jai remain quite stable. Jhali, Mira’s ‘faithful servant’ in the play remains a compassionate figure for Mira throughout who is the only companion to Mira instructing and safeguarding her13. And more than Jhali, the other unwavering character in the play is Jai14 who remains unchanged till the end. Showing concerned for the disillusioned Rana who finds Mira moving away from him, Uda asks Jai to stay on a while and look after the gloomy Rana. But holding a more rational outlook than any other character in the play, Jai replies her back:

This is his wife’s duty.

(Pause.)

I have to live my own life. (Passionately).

If you wise and saintly people have given up living, why should I? (136)
With the character of Jai, Das seems to suggest of some rational players in Mira’s life history that remains unaffected by her hagiographical persona.

Mira’s desire to be completely merged with Krishna, her god lover is complete as she speaks, “He is inside me. Just as the seed is in the tree and the tree is inside the seed, so I am in him and he is inside me.” (135). Indeed an influential way of conveying the imagery. Mira’s conversion into Mirabai is complete as the poison that she drinks for her unfaithful conduct as a wife, turns into nectar for her. Further her battle to master her insane attachment to God and her realisation that she can master it, constitute a fulfilment. “In her mastery is her sainthood” (Intro 15). From a reality the image of Krishna has become a symbol of greater reality for her and she is transcended in this process of realisation. Mira finds complete peace within her self when she locates a place to outpour her extraordinary love and thus detaches herself from the phenomenal world. The play opens and concludes in a similar vein with Mira as the bride – to Rana in the prologue and to Lord Krishna at the end. Her individual being gets contented in the last scene of the play when she finally feels her lover’s presence:

He has come....the time has come....I am a bride today and I’m going to his home of infinite happiness….I am free-free from life and death and time. Look at his light.... I am blinded. But how I love my blindness. (138)

The entire dialogue simultaneously marks the end of the play and also Mira’s journey towards her sainthood. Though the playwright depicts Mira attaining her sainthood, still he does not state this plainly, like most of her hagiographical accounts do. He, rather explore all possibilities attached to the person of Mira that would provide for a more rational understanding of this transformation process. The entire trajectory of Mira’s life thus evolves from the quagmire of ordinary life. It is indeed questionable whether all women in the condition of Mira would have transformed into Mirabais.

Mira’s myth is an embodiment of the understanding of a people, an understanding often intuitive and dependent on the miraculous and the divine. Thus myth can be re-questioned and deconstructed to retrieve their lost bearings and identities. Interpretations and reconstructions like Mira provide a sense of continuity and impart a sense of tradition to the past. It helps to construct new epistemological and social frameworks, deconstruct patriarchal structures through individual questionings. With his
well presented play, Gurcharan Das too goes on exploring the diverse, cultural, social meanings attached to her and looking at her transformation as a more genuine possibility and reality, rather than a myth. Giving due cognizance to her history as well as her hagiography, Gurcharan Das as a modern Indian dramatist has been recreating and reassessing the persona by imparting new meaning to the mystic saint. Das’s Mira though takes off from both historical and hagiographical planes, yet as it travels, due to the imperatives of literariness, it transgresses both. The historical as well as the literary pasts feed Das’s imagination, but in the end it is the literary imagination which feeds back both forms of the past, generating a possibility of progressive and dynamic circularity which is dialogic, dialectical and mutually deconstructive.
End Notes:

1. Another extension of tradition as related by S.S. Mehta states that Mira’s singing and dancing brought the divine idol of Giridhar descend from his established seat and took Mira in his lap. Bankey Behari also relates to one of her miraculous escapes when as ordered by the Rana she is ready to drown herself and someone from behind grasped her, who was no one but Krishna.

2. Mira belonged to the tradition of bhakti movement where the individuals expressed their devotion directly to personal god. The world of bhakti was thus an alternative to the dominant man-woman relationship attracting a woman of sensitivity who sought to escape the hatred and domination which underlay the Rajput system of marriage. Her bhakti could be seen as an enunciation of the principal of love in an age and a society marked by war, and the rising power of the state. It is precisely this antagonism that the conflict between the demands of the warring state and the dialects of one’s heart that lies central to Mira’s bhakti. This form of bhakti is seen as an individuated expression, a socially isolating one, which has sharpened Mira bhakti too.

3. Her landmark study on the subject attempts to give shape to Mira’s persona not through an analysis of her verses rather through the place she holds in the articulation of specific peasant and artisan communities in Rajasthan. The community of Mirabai that emerges from her collective bhajan singing validates her existence. It is this community for her that provides the foremost support, network and embedded social acceptance necessary to keep her memory alive. Substantiating her argument she states that because Mira managed to survive outside the realm of ruling sphere, it suggests that she had a powerful following seen in this community of bhajniks. She is not seen as an elite articulation; her bhakti is not ritualised and displayed in temples rather it has emerged through the affirmation of a life upheld by the bhajniks who gathered together.

4. Studying how Mira is accommodated by subaltern classes, Mukta points out to her acceptance of Raidas, a chamar by caste as her guru. This association made her increasingly popular with dalits and other classes who shared the experience of untouchability. The peasantry section of society found in Mira a symbol
through which they have voiced their rejection of the authority of the Rana and to the feudal power. The peasants, weavers, artisans and the dalits, all sought in Mira not just a figure of mutiny but a form through whom they could gain in dignity and self respect. Mira in wanting to live a different life from the socially ordained one becomes the voice of the oppressed.

5. Parita Mukta has confirmed this in her book (22).

6. In addition to her manner of death there is ample controversy on her year of death. For many it’s around the year 1546 while for others it’s around 1600, and yet there are others who state it out rightly as unknown. There is no settled conclusion.

7. Mira has further been incorporated and equally appropriated by the artists and commercial media who gave her a new social base and turn. Numerous films were made on Mira, one popular among them being *Mira* produced in 1979 by Gulzar. It is observed that with the growth of commercial art, the inner being of Mira has been thrown away where her image gets transformed into an ever-changing and gross physicality.

8. In early twentieth century giving a political turn to this domestication, Gandhi attributed Mira with qualities of purity, of feminine creativity and of an artless charm. Finding Gandhi’s domesticated view of Mira at odds with the community of Mirabai, Mukta states;

   there is chasm here between Gandhi’s upholding Mira as a fighter and *satyagrahi* and in depicting her as a woman who went to seek ‘devotion to one’s husband’. Gandhi is attempting to walk a tight rope here, in firstly ensuring that the challenge of Mira remains within the bounds of an unarmed struggle, and secondly in keeping safe the institution of patriarchy which was to be the bulwark of Gandhi’s future society. (185-6)

The people’s Mira did not express her devotion to the Rana as Gandhi’s Mira does. Ramifications of these writings confined Mira to an elite view spotting her within high Hinduism. The conjoining of the figure of Mira to the histories of elite literary tradition, to a high Hinduism and to a high cultural form were all practices initiated by the nineteenth or twentieth century interpreter of Mira.
Within all this the people's Mira who lived as a symbol of social emancipation remained mute. She has certainly not been linked to the imaginings of the subordinated, nor has she been seen as an emblem of women's assertion.

9. There are a number of plays including musical ones too that have been staged on the figure of Mirabai. Dilip Kumar Roy's *Mira: In Brindavan* (1961) and *Mirabai and Akbar*, a rhyming play based on the writings of Sri Chinmoy are two such examples. However, these plays look at her from a more religious and spiritual plane, deifying her completely and does not provide any critical imagining on her complex character.

10. Total theatre is a homogenous fusion of all figurative arts; music, dance, drumming, exaggerated makeup, masks, singing chorus. It suggests a complete and compelling live experience. Freed from the constraint of linear action, it explores all dimensions of the stage art, not confining the text to one meaning that is staged explicitly, but offering several possible interpretations and allowing each system to enrich the immediate meaning of the story. As the actor is thought of as the basic material, this theatre form attaches a lot of importance to gestuality. The term is traced back to Antonin Artaud, a French actor, theorist and writer who advocated this physical, visual and non-verbal aspects of theatre. He berated the limitations of naturalism for appealing only to our rational verbal side and instead argued for a ritualistic form of communication where words could operate as incantations rather than meanings. For him the physicality of the theatre should wake up the audiences, sensitize them and stir their unconscious. The synthesis of music, dance, elaborate costuming and mask helped him forge his vision of total theatre. His main theoretical investigations are contained within his writings in *The Theatre and its Double* (1938).

11. Brecht's principle of *Verfremdungsseffekt* which can be translated as the 'making strange effect', precisely seeks to make the familiar strange, to give every day events the status of something grand or epic. The 'Alienation Effect' was developed by Brecht in the 1920's and 30's. The technique 'estranges' the audience and forces them to question the social realities of the situations being presented in the play. To this end, Brecht employed techniques such as the actor's direct
address to the audience, harsh and bright stage lighting, the use of songs to interrupt the action, explanatory placards, and speaking the stage directions out loud.

12. Mira in her act of loving Krishna, is seen embodying the ideals of bhakti sainthood that emphasize the intense mystical experience of personal devotion where the devotees cajole, chide, woo, rage against god, who is a personally chosen husband and an imagined lover to the bhakta.

13. However, in presenting us the character of Jhali which in history otherwise finds little reference with Mira’s life history comes as part of Das’s creative imagination. Many historians relate Mira to Jhali as the person who initiated her into the practise of singing Krishna songs and was herself the mother of Rana Sanga, whereas other writers totally obliterates mentioning this character.

14. While presenting us the character of Jai, Das adheres to history to a great extent. His portrayal of Jai too as in history is a great warrior appreciated by one and all as a great combatant valuing the Rajput honour. He puts in for Jai;

…Blessed with all manly virtues
Lion-like in build and muscle
Warrior Jaimal pious-hearted… (114)