

Re-discovering Divinity: Exploring the Possibilities of Mary's Life in Sarah Joseph's "The Passion of Mary"

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Abstract

The paper tries to look at how Sarah Joseph's "The Passion of Mary" tries to explore the humane side of Mary, mother of Jesus. The literary dimensions of the short story helps us to see the unseen in the mainstream biblical text which has very few instances narrating her woes, when compared to other male characters of the gospels.

Keywords : Woman centred narratives, Bible and literature, Mary, Religion, Christianity,

Literary Spaces

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Mary , the mother of Jesus, makes her presence known in very few passages of the New Testament. The four gospels of the NT are all ascribed to male writers. From what is written in Bible we know that she was a woman from Nazareth, betrothed to Joseph (Luke.1.27). The Gospel according to Luke begins the narration of life of Mary with the story of Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appears to her and announces the good news of becoming the mother of Jesus (Luke.1.27-38). She is the one who intervenes to Jesus on behalf of the family at Cana, when the wine depletes during a wedding feast (John.2.1-11).

We also find her trying to meet Jesus at a place where he was teaching his followers. In the Gospel according to John, we find her standing with other women at the foot of the cross (John.19.25). In the Acts of the Apostles, Mary and the brothers of Jesus are mentioned along with the eleven chosen apostles at the upper room discourse, after the ascension of Jesus (Acts.13-14).

Mary is venerated as “Mother of God” by many denominations, including the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. She is upheld in many Christian communities as an intercessory saint who mediates for believers in front of God. We find statues, frescos and churches of St.Mary all over the world. The mother image which we find in chapter 12 of The Book of Revelation is also interpreted by some scholars as that which portrays the image of Mary. She is at times addressed as “the second Eve”, especially in Orthodox and Catholic traditions – the first woman being Eve who brought death to the world and Mary having brought eternal life through Jesus, the Messiah.

It is difficult to imagine the human side of a divine image once it is made god/goddess-like. We describe and attribute to such deities celestial qualities with which their ontology is removed from daily life and ordinary discourses. Somehow those narratives which proclaim them holy and venerable become dominant, and the other stories are sidelined. Quite often in theological discussions and readings, the possibility of looking at saintly figures from the perspective of an ordinary person is neglected. It is here that literary writings provide us alternative voices and perspectives.

Bible as literature and Bible in literary writings are two major streams of discussion in biblical world today. David Jasper has a clear view of possibilities of biblical literature when he says, “Literature continues to speak, even in the midst of a silence, and possibly because it has always been sensitive, in a way that theology paradoxically has often not been, to the inaudibility of the word, to the silence and darkness of God” (28). Bible in itself has literary features which contribute plot, characters, setting, motifs, images and symbols to literary rewritings. Such writings may either affirm the biblical version of a story or offer us an entirely new perspective. Bible as literature and occupying space in literature assumes an important place in interpretations from margins including women, peasants, Dalits etc. In response to the challenges faced by the other, theology has shifted and widened its horizons. Many biblical stories are read by giving ample importance to the silenced and marginalized characters.

The short story titled “Balidaanam” by Sarah Joseph, recipient of Sahitya Academy Award was translated by J Devika as “The Passion of Mary”. Sarah Joseph narrates the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, from a different perspective. She gives Mary a tint of humane, rather than a divine hue. Quite different from the “Mother of God” image which gives her celestial embellishment, Sarah Joseph’s Mary stands as a representative of an ordinary mother who bears the same passion and pain of her son, threatened and vilified by the society. The story is metaphorical and pictorial in its depiction of setting, theme and characters. For instance, the opening lines “As a terrible storm rose in the desert and roared out of it, a lone wolf’s eerie howl reached Mary. Into the storm, Mary opened her little window. The snarling wind thrust her aside and tore into the house” (122) gives the picture of

the setting and also reflects the anxiety in Mary's heart. The freedom with which the writer portrays nature as part of human temperament or making nature too an inevitable part of the human drama, helps the reader to gain a new outlook on the familiar narration. The background of the storm, desert, the sound of the wind uprooting the trees, howling of the wolves and the lightning give an creepy feeling which resonates the turbulent mind of Mary. Introducing a violent natural phenomenon at the beginning of the story creates suspense, and also helps the reader to identify with the mood of the protagonist. It also underlines the nature of the circumstances which led to the crucifixion of Christ.

Another merit of literary writings of religious or canonical stories is that it offers ample space for etching moods and emotions in a detailed manner. For example, apt phrases or sentences like "Filled with fear, Mary banged the little window shut" (122) or "Crossing her hands on her chest, raising eyes that were beginning to brim with tears, Mary kept praying" (122) or "Her body quivered like a leaf from sorrow and fear" (125) give an accurate idea about the emotional state of a mother whose son was being hunted by the community. Bible narrates only the historical and political setting of Jesus' crucifixion. We do not find the complete picture of Mary's agony as a mother whose son is about to be persecuted. By pitting Mary against a tempestuous background, Sarah Joseph fills the blank spaces of the religious text.

The advantage of having a literary outlook on biblical narratives is that the writer gets an opportunity to experiment with powers of imagination and thereby sketch even the minutest details which are missing in dominant narratives. In "The Passion of Mary", the home-space which is completely absent in Bible, is given due importance. The images of a little lamp glowing on the doorstep, "The pictures hung on the wall", "the clothes on the clothesline", "the moth-eaten beams of wood", "the pet kitten", (122) "the little window" (123), Mary's headdress and the red cloak of Jesus (125) all reveal the poor space occupied by Mary. Instead of the heavenly glow and the halo which we see around mother Mary, this woman is shown in her home as natural as any other. The salvation motif which looms large in Bible seldom gives importance to woman spaces or details of a household. A creative writer can imagine the missing elements of the metanarrative and sketch them carefully on her pages. The reader can easily identify with a mother who waits for her son with warm food "inside the covered earthen pot" and "water to wash his face" (125). Such images help us to identify more closely the mother-son bond, more than any supernatural powers which have idolized them as Mother of God and Son of God.

Another quality of literary readings and interpretations of Bible is that the existing dominant narratives are given new insights. For instance, Mary is reminded of how many babies were killed by Herod instead of Jesus when he came to know that a king was born in Bethlehem. Mary must have had secretly thanked God that her son was spared. But the night before his crucifixion her mind reels back to those times. Sarah Joseph makes the protagonist recollect the mothers' agony: "Around the altar, the river of the blood of the innocents was flowing. The mothers of Herodia wept and sobbed weakly 'Today is Mary's sacrifice'" (124). Such a rendering makes it possible for an imaginative identification of a mother with other mothers who suffered the same pain. The young maidens and the old women too join her

grief: “Mother your sacrifice will surely be accepted...” , “Daughter now is your sacrifice...” (124). The story also gives the other side of the usual handsome face of Jesus made popular by artists and directors:

Yesterday he returned after spending many days in the desert. With his long hair and beard dishevelled, covered with red dust, his clothes dirty and stinking, his lips chapped by the desert wind. Many days of hunger had blackened and burned his skin. His heels were cracked and sore (121).

Also the agony of Jesus is made clearer in these lines than in any statement or dialogue by him in the gospels: Mary remembers the words he had uttered as he laid upon her shoulder, veins cut and bleeding, racked by the agony of his decision. He must go (126). The intimacy of the mother and son, and the pain of accepting his mission while leaving his mother behind, was a grave situation Jesus must have had faced. The literary view gives it a fit image.

Literary works on biblical characters are not merely products of imagination alone, but a strenuous effort to re-write the already existing mainstream ideology. The blank spaces of a dominant text gets filled in by such works, not to complete the note, but to open newer possibilities of reading and writing. “The Passion of Mary” is such an attempt by Sarah Joseph which may augment stories of Mary, the woman who suffered an agony less narrated in the Scriptures.

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