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The Metaphor of Marriage in Maharshi Ramana's Poetry: From Physicality to Spirituality

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Abstract - Marriage as an institution in India has strong spiritual connotations. It goes beyond the mere satisfaction of physical desires-one of the four goals of human life i.e. Dharma (conducting one's duty with compassion and righteousness), Artha (earning money), Kama (satisfying physical desires) and Moksha (liberation). These goals have been sanctioned by the Hindu scriptures which complete the cycle of life. The present generation in India and elsewhere has indulged in pursuing Artha and Kama so much, that they seem to have neglected the other main two goals of life-Dharma and Moksha. It is by incorporating these into life that the Kama may be meaningful. The present paper explores the religious connotation of the term 'Kama' in Hinduism keeping in view Maharshi Ramana's poetry. It considers the metaphor of marriage in a spiritual sense and relates the usage of this metaphor to other poets in Indian religious tradition. It is in this perspective that metaphor of marriage is to be seen portraying the higher concept of union of soul-bride and God- bridegroom.

Keywords : *marriage, soul, God, spirituality.*

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Abstract - Marriage as an institution in India has strong spiritual connotations. It goes beyond the mere satisfaction of physical desires-one of the four goals of human life i.e. Dharma (conducting one's duty with compassion and righteousness), Artha (earning money), Kama (satisfying physical desires) and Moksha (liberation). These goals have been sanctioned by the Hindu scriptures which complete the cycle of life. The present generation in India and elsewhere has indulged in pursuing Artha and Kama so much, that they seem to have neglected the other main two goals of life-Dharma and Moksha. It is by incorporating these into life that the Kama may be meaningful. The present paper explores the religious connotation of the term 'Kama' in Hinduism keeping in view Maharshi Ramana's poetry. It considers the metaphor of marriage in a spiritual sense and relates the usage of this metaphor to other poets in Indian religious tradition. It is in this perspective that metaphor of marriage is to be seen portraying the higher concept of union of soul-bride and God- bridegroom.

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I. Introduction

Indian spiritual philosophy rests on the attainment of liberation from the multiple fetters of body and thought. Maharshi Ramana says:

> To know the lord is
> To know our Being,
> Free of seeming fetters
> Of body and thought (Anantanarayanan, 1997: 44)

Hindu philosophy of religion corroborates the resplendent reality of self-realization beyond body consciousness. However, the realization of this Bliss can be obtained only in human body. Human body is a rarity to be got as the soul travels through endless circles of birth and cycles of time. The sheaths of ignorance keep the self-effulgent light covered in the wraps of senses, ego and worldly enjoyments. The goal of life according to Hindu religious thought is to remove these sheaths and be aware of Being-Consciousness-Bliss. The same is true of the idea of Hindu marriage where the two persons pursue *Dharma (*conducting one's duty with compassion and righteousness), *Artha* (earning money), *Kama* (satisfying physical desires) and *Moksha* (liberation). The concept of marriage in spiritual terms goes to antiquity in India. Progeny by procreation was, no doubt one of the major goals of the institution of marriage but attached to such goals were other more important goals of spirituality. That is why, the idea of marriage in Hindu thought exists beyond the physical union of two persons and enters the realm where it symbolizes and conceptualizes the union of human soul and God. The idea of this union has been used as a metaphor in the poetry of the most of the saints of India: Guru Nanak, Mirabai, Kabir, Sheikh Farid, Mahatma Buddha and Ravidas-to name a few-who have all looked upon marriage not as a satisfaction of mere physical desires but to pursue the important goals of life already cited. It is in this broader meaning of metaphor that the present paper views marriage in Maharshi Ramana's poetry.

II. Metaphor

The online etymology dictionary traces the etymology of the word "metaphor" to *late 15th century from French métaphore meaning "to transfer the sense of one word to another word'. It's Latin and Greek origin can also be traced over to indicate the same meaning- "to carry over"*. The similarity of sense in metaphor, whether decorative or an enriching mode of conceptualization, is its essential element. Metaphor is, thus, a mystery of language which when viewed as a figure of speech suggests resemblance according to its traditional view.

Metaphor has traversed a long distance from the classical period to modern age with contributions from Aristotle to Gerad Steen. There are two sets of views about metaphor. Encyclopedia Britannica defines it as a "figure of speech that implies comparison between two unlike entities, as distinguished from simile, an explicit comparison signaled by the words "like" or "as." Aristotle talks of two kinds of style: the clear and simple style which makes use of proper words and the style which raises poetry from commonplace to unusual and lofty by the ornamental words. The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor (House, 1970: 121). For Aristotle, poetry is a craft to be achieved by using linguistic devices such as metaphor.

This view of metaphor underwent a complete change with inputs from Coleridge, I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Max Black, to name a few from the inexhaustible list that keeps on growing forever. Coleridge asserts that words are living powers and not merely articulated air (Erdman, 1978: 249). Tracing an interplay in mind, word and thing, Coleridge accepted

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connection between language and truth based on divinity. He defines poetry as self-expressive activity with the help of modes like metaphor. In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric,* Richards called metaphor an omnipresent principle of language and admitted that they steer our thoughts. He proposed two very useful terms "tenor" and "vehicle" as components of metaphor while talking about metaphors. The tenor is the idea conveyed or illuminated by the vehicle which is the actual figurative expression (Richards, 1936: 92-96). Cleanth Brooks defines modern poetic technique by calling it the rediscovery of metaphor and the full commitment to metaphor. He calls poem an organic whole where poetic images are not merely assembled but related to each other just as blossoms are related to other parts of a growing plant. The beauty of a poem is like a flowering plant which needs a stalk, stem, leaves and roots (Brooks, 1976: 60). Max Black in "More about Metaphor" made a strong case in favour of metaphor:

Conceptual boundaries not being rigid, but elastic and permeable; and because we often need to do so, the available literal resource of the language being insufficient to express our sense of the rich correspondences, interrelations, and analogies of domains conventionally separated; and because metaphorical thought and utterance sometimes embody insight expressible in no other fashion (Ortony, 1993: 33).

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* accept metaphor pervasive in language and thought (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 5). Zolton in *Metaphor* defines it as a mode of conceptualization and a cognitive tool without which the poets, writers and even ordinary people cannot live. Metaphor is a way to "who we are and what kind of world we live in" (Kövecses, 2010: xi- xiii). Grounded into human experience of each kind-cultural, perceptual, social and physical, we express the way we experience the world. The cognitive view of metaphor takes into view this faculty of human mind to translate the abstract via concrete. The various dimensions of human experiences in the outside world are manifested in the form of objective reality and expressed in the form of subjective imagination of the writer. Metaphor captures the world of a poet in totality. Since the boundaries of language are not fixed, it goes to the credit of a writer or a poet to make use of the boundless capability of metaphor to enter the world of reality and the world beyond reality-a world of senses, reasoning, perception and imagination. It is in this background that the present paper talks about metaphor of marriage in Maharshi's poetry.

III. Maharshi's Life

To know Maharshi Ramana is to know about your own self His life takes even the most uninitiated people on an inner journey of body to self which opens many doors of Truth, Bliss and Consciousness. His life, his philosophy and his works of prose and poetry are not mere philosophical statements but practical lessons of enlightenment. He wrote whatever he practiced and taught the same to his devotees. Devoid of complex method of meditation, his path is a simple path of self enquiry leading to a natural state of everlasting happiness.

The journey of Maharshi's life starts from Tiruchuzi in South India. Born on 30th December, 1879 in an ordinary middle class family to parents Allagmmal and Sundara, he was not very academically inclined. He spent his childhood as an ordinary boy without even an inkling of the future spiritual transformation. However life takes the course as it has to and as it is predestined. God had other things in store for him. His father died when he was twelve years old. The family moved to his uncle's house where he spent a few years without any remarkable incident. After a few years two incidents changed his life forever. An intense experience which had repercussions on his future changed the course of his life. Despite being perfectly physically healthy, he had an experience of near death. He felt the inert lifeless body and had a feeling that he was about to die. He awakened to the immanent reality of a soul which never dies. He realized the import of Shri Krishna about what he said in Bhagvad Gita regarding the immortality of soul "na *hanyate hanyamāne śarīre*" (2.20).

He sought liberation from the inherent tendencies of ego clouding the mortal humans throughout their lives. He was constantly aware of his identity with the Self-the deathless spirit. "The other thoughts might come and go like the various notes of music, but the 'I' continued like the fundamental *sruti* note that underlies and blends with all other notes," (The Collected Works ix-xvii) he himself explains. This 'I' for him was a liberation, a miracle, an awareness and an awakening. It was in this background that Venkatraman was named Maharshi Ramana- a title given to a great sage who inaugurates a new path. He opened a new path of *jnana marga* for his devotees who turned to him for spiritual instructions.

M. Anantanarayana expresses the experience of awakening to the reality in beautiful words "The boy was taken up into silence, the ecstasy of being which is beyond words but of which words have held tiny glimpses the impassionate speech of mystics and seers. For, otherwise we should have possessed total darkness and not the half light of wisdom" (Ananthan-arayanan 8). The experience not only changed his whole life but charted a future course on which not many tread. The remarkable thing about Venkatramana was that he immediately recognized the fetters which bind human soul. He decided that he could not belong to both the worlds-the world of ordinary people where one continues without awakening to self- effulgence and the world of God which is within our own self. The same

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reality has also been realized by many other saints in India whether they lived in the world with their families or away from it

IV. The Hindu Life

The four stages of a Hindu's life are called *Ashramas.* The first stage is *Brahmacharya*-the student life. The second stage is *Grihastha*- the life of house hold. The third stage is that of a *Vanprastha*-the stage of a hermit and the fourth is *Sanyasa* or the wandering ascetic stage. In Hinduism one has to remain immersed in the first stage to attain spiritual and practical knowledge for twenty five years after which one gets prepared for the next stage of earning a living and leading a family life. Hinduism supports both the pursuits-earning money (*Artha*) and satisfying physical desires (*Kama)*. It lasts for fifty years and man prepares to lead the life of a hermit and an ascetic. However, it is the second stage of human life that has led most of the spiritual seekers in India to the door of knowledge. The bonds of marriage, family and society are very strong in India with a deep metaphorical import. If one takes an overview of lives and poetry of Saints and Seers in India, one finds the metaphor of marriage a dominant one.

V. Religious Poetry in India

To take the case of Guru Nanak, who was born on 15th April, 1469 in Talvandi and died in 1539. He continued' live with his family and discharge his duties. Most of his religious poetry known as *sabads* makes abundant use of the metaphor of marriage. In rich evocative images he talks about the human soul as bride and God as the house of in-laws. "*Sajjan mere rangle*" is a *sabad* where Guru Nanak makes use of metaphor of soul-bride.

Kee n sunaehee goreeae aapan ka (n)nee soe lagee aavehi saahurai nith n paeeeaa hoe naanak suthee paeeeai jaan virathee sa(n)n (Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ang 23).

Haven't you heard the call from beyond, O beautiful soul-bride? You must go to your in-laws; you cannot stay forever with your parents. O Nanak, one who sleeps in her parents' house is plundered in broad daylight.

Mirabai too, born in 1498 as a princess in Rajasthan always considered Sri Krishna as her eternal companion. She grew up in a noble Rajput family and was married to the crown prince of Mewar. Her constant devotion to God resulted in conflicts within the family. Her husband died and she refused to throw herself in the funeral pyre. She became a wandering mendicant poet immersing herself deeply and whole heartedly in love for God. In one of her most emotional poems she writes and makes use of the metaphor of marriage in the following words:

No one knows my invisible life
Pain and madness for Rana
Our wedding bed is high up in the gallows
People noticed me, point finger at me.
They see my desire (Poetry Chaikhana)

Mirabai left the royal palace and continued her devotional life not caring about the world outside.

Further, Kabir stands unique as a Saint because of the great tradition that prevails in India. He is revered by Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs alike. Born in Varanasi probably around 1440 (the exact year is not known), he acts as a human bridge to connect the different devotional traditions. He became a disciple of Swami Rama Nanda, a Hindu. He found a creative way to display his love for God, Iswara or Allah- whatever name we wished to give. In a poem titled "My Body is Flooded", translated by Andrew Harvey, Kabir also celebrates the physical union symbolizing spiritual union of soul and God:

My body is flooded
With the flame of God.
My soul lives in
A furnace of Bliss. (Poetry Chaikhana)

Saint Ravi Das, born in Varanasi was a leather stacker by profession. His intense devotional poetry found a place in Sri Guru Granth Sahib in a poem titled "If You are a Mountain" translated by Nirmal Dass, Ravi Das says:

If you are a mountain
Then I am a peacock
If you are the moon
Then I am a partridge,
My love for you
Is true and real
When I fell in love with you,
I gave up my love for others. (Poetry Chaikhana)

Ravi Das's poetry echoes of the same metaphor of physical union in continuation with the tradition of Indian spiritual poetry. The Saints who have been discussed before do not need any further exposition as their poetry invariably refers to the indissoluble union of soul and God as God is the primal source where the soul- bride has to go and merge.

VI. Maharshi Ramana's Poetry

Maharshi Ramana continues the same tradition although he was not married and a family man. Having been exposed to a very short lived but peaceful and loving relationship of his parents-Alggmal and Sundara, (both means beauty), he made use of metaphor of marriage extensively in his poetry. The first five poems addressed to Arunachala make use of this metaphor. "The Marital Garland of Letters" (The *Collected Works*) is

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even titled on the metaphor of marriage and in its 108 stanzas; most of the stanzas explain the love of God in the garb of physical union. In the invocation itself Maharshi seeks permission from God Ganesha to bless him to make this Marital Garland of Letters worthy of bridegroom Arunachala. The same metaphor continues in the poem in different words and expressions that the present researcher noticed the repetition approximately 25 times of course in different contexts. He starts with reference to his parents Algu and Sundara who were happily married to quote his words, "May thou and I be one and inseparable like Algu and Sundara, Oh Arunachala" (Maharshi Ramana :82).

The metaphor can be explained in the background of strong relationship between husband and wife in India. In the next metaphor, however the tone changes as he complains to God that he has lured him home but does not allow the divine union, "Entering my house and luring me (To thine) why didst thou keep me prisoner in thy Heart's Cavern oh Arunachala!"(83) Simultaneously, he asks the God why he drew him near. The metaphor again sounds of physicality as he asks God further not to turn him away as people will blame him (83). In yet another comparatively stinging statement, he calls mind a female prostitute who wanders in the street to find customers. The strumpet mind will cease to walk the street if only she finds Thee (83). He makes a request to hold the mind wandering in distractions permanently so that his search may stop. His questioning continues in the same form when he asks God to prove his chivalry as he is not ready to embrace him after abducting, "After abducting me if now thou dost not embrace me, where is thy Chivalry, Oh Arunachala!" (83).

The metaphor of physical union recurs when Maharshi compares the wordly entanglements of ego, attachment and sensual pleasures to the modesty of a woman outraged by others. He questions God to be watching nonchalantly and not paying attention to the outrage of modesty, "Does it become thee thus to sleep when I am outraged by others, Oh Arunachala! "(84). Maharshi calls these worldly attachments as "the cruel snares of fascinating women" and requests God to "honour me with union with thyself, Oh Arunachala! (84). In a rich metaphor of evocative images pointing towards sensual description of physical union, the following lines are self explanatory and need no further comments, "Tear off these robes, expose me naked, then robe me with thy love, Oh Arunachala! (85)". Of course, the repetition of the word "robe" twice in the stanza refers to two different ideas- the first "robe" refers to worldly sense entanglements and the second "robe" refers to the "robes" of divinity.

The most amazing thing in Maharshi's metaphor about physical union is that it presents all the shades of this union-complaint, dissatisfaction, eagerness and excitement. It also elaborates the activities involved in this union-luring (83), hold her bound (83), embrace (83, 86, 88, 92), outrage (84), honour (89), robe me with love (85), leaving (89), touch (90), espouse (90), cleave (92), ravished (92), enter (93), entice, stealing into heart, draw in (93) and to wear the marital Garland(94). Maharshi expresses his anguish if God-The bridegroom does not embrace the soul- bride. The repetition of the verb 'embrace' reiterates the fact of union which is more than physical and enters the world of transcendence. This request is repeatedly made in the poem several times. Quite openly Maharshi uses the metaphor in the following words, "Enfold me body to body, limb to limb, or I am lost, Oh Arunachala!" (88). He also expresses his anguish when God refuses to solicit his prayer. In the manner of a bride who wants her conjugal rights, He asks, "Does it not shame Thee to stand there like a post cleaving me to find thee by myself, Oh Arunachala!" (89). He calls God his refuge as he melts away and enters him. The God is "standing Naked" for which the poet uses the word *Digambara*. This word consists of two nouns compounded *Dik* and *Ambara*. *Dik* refers to direction of space and *Ambara* means both sky and clothes, hence it means one who is clothed in the directions of space infinite. Here the naked does not have any negative connotation as in spiritual poetry the word is used quite often in a positive sense. Naked means to be free from the worldly attachments. There is another reference to the ultimate union of soul and God when Maharshi offers an invitation to God," Let us embrace upon the bed of tender flowers, which is the mind, with in the room of the body (or the ultimate truth) Oh Arunachala!" (92). Two comments need to be made here. It is a conceptual metaphor where body is referred as a room. Body acts as a container which can embody the ultimate truth of union with God. Lakoff and Johnson have mentioned this category in *Metaphors we Live By*, "We are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and in-out orientation."(1980: 29). It is in the category of ontological metaphors that we keep these metaphors.

VII. Conclusion

The metaphor of marriage makes better sense when viewed in Indian perspective. Marriage in India is not only the marriage of two persons but also of two families, ways of life and ways of thoughts. In India marriage has to be worked upon with persistence, devotion, surrender of ego and compatibility. All these attributes can also be assigned to soul's relationship with God. This relationship is all encompassing. It has to be nurtured with love, devotion and surrender of ego: That is why marriage in India does not mean the satisfaction of sexual desires only. Of course our

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scriptures sanction this aspect when they refer to *Kama* (physical desire) as one of the goals of life. Still it is only one of the four goals which have been considered together for the emancipation of human soul.

In comparison, generally speaking, marriage in the West is for convenience and is losing its importance. If it does not work, people let it go! In India the relationship is still strong only because of its spiritual roots. However it is not denying the fact that divorces are on the rise because of materialism. There is a need to go back to our culture, poetry and Saints to nourish the roots which are drying up for the want of water of spirituality. The spirituality has that nectar which can sustain the eternity of life even when the human body ceases to exist and mingles with God.

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