

The Fall of the Sacred Feminine in Mahakavi Devkota's "to a Beautiful Prostitute"

Tara Prasad Adhikari

Senior Assistant Professor, Apex College, Pokhara University, Nepal

**Corresponding Author:* Tara Prasad Adhikari, Senior Assistant Professor, Apex College, Pokhara University, Nepal

ABSTRACT

The present paper explores how Mahakavi Devkota, in his poem titled "To a Beautiful Prostitute" exposes the divinity that dwells in womankind, even in a prostitute. In a very poetic way, he describes the beauty of a prostitute and tells us how much he once was infatuated to her. But at the same time, the speaker expresses his hatred to this prostitute for her immoral character and the lowly profession. In this sense, we can say that the speaker has a double vision i.e. he sees the beauty and the divinity in her and at the same time he sees the ugliness. To conclude, this poem by Devkota worships the sacred feminine and at the same time laments over its fall, especially relating it to the case of a beautiful prostitute.

Keywords: Femininity, Sacred Feminine, Prostitute, Mahakavi Devkota

INTRODUCTION

In Hindu tradition, the Feminine or the Mother, is considered to be the sum total of the energy in the universe. Hinduism treats the earth as "the Mother", the trees as her arms, the mountains as her breasts, and rivers as her milk! These all names such as Kali, Lakshmi, Kamala, Parvati, Aditi, Saraswati, Devi, Gayatri, and Shakti refer to the Mother Goddesses, the Sacred Feminine.

Hinduism has different sorts of female authorities. We have a goddess of wealth and beauty, a goddess of wisdom and knowing, a goddess of destruction and creation. They are all the parts of -the Sacred Feminine! The feminine power has multifaceted appearances. She appears to us from fierce to benevolent, as well as seductive to repulsive. All these feminine expressions are celebrated in Hinduism. Kinsley writes,

Hindu goddesses are very different from one another. Some have strong maternal natures, whereas others are completely devoid of maternal characteristics. Some have strong, independent natures and are great warriors; others are domestic in nature and closely identified with male deities. Some Hindu goddesses are associated with the wild, untamed fringes of civilization; others are the very embodiment of art and culture. (5) Not only in Hinduism, even in Chinese culture, there is the

concept of sacred feminine. Laozi, a Chinese poet, in this regard writes:

The valley spirit never dies;
It is the woman, primal mother.
Her gateway is the root of heaven and earth.
It is like a veil barely seen.
Use it; it will never fail. (5)

This notion of the Sacred Feminine has permeated almost all major world religions, in one way or the other. Mahakavi Devkota also celebrates this aspect of femininity in his celebrated poem "To a Beautiful Prostitute" but a bit differently. He, simultaneously, addresses two different selves of a prostitute in the poem - they are the sacred feminine self and the fallen self.

While addressing the sacred feminine, he brings the best of the poetry, as if he is worshipping "The Mother Goddess" herself. While addressing the fallen self, the prostitute, Mahakavi uses short sentences, and becomes more prosaic. In this sense, this poem "To a Beautiful prostitute" could be taken as Mahakavi's admonition to the prostitute, for her lowly profession. He means to say that if she had known the divinity that dwelt onto her, she would have risen to the level of goddess.

Women in general are treated as the feminine force. They are considered as feminine reservoir that contains grace, compassion, empathy, care, concern, and sensitivity. Women were

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considered as an object of beauty. They embody love and they just do not satisfy men's physical desire but also reconnected men with the spiritual forces, through pleasure and prayer. The feminine is capable of igniting love in the heart of men and guide them to the holiness. If we recognize the feminine potential, in Margaret Starbird's words, "we will learn to laugh again, and to appreciate beauty" (9). Mahakavi Devkota brings references of these goddesses, throughout the poem, who are capable of doing such miracles.

The poet adores this feminine power in the poem, not the prostitute and her profession. The speaker says, "Here is the feminine flame, up and ablaze" (129). He is ready to give up everything for the sake of this feminine energy, not for a fallen woman. He invokes the sacred feminine as:

The quintessence of god's creation thou
Imaged as woman! Thou and I are halves
Of this world's heart and when together placed
We bring a beat of life. (139-142)

Mahakavi sees this possibility, which has not been yet materialized by this prostitute. The divinity that every woman possesses must be realized for the flowering of civilization. It becomes evident when Devkota, in the prostitute, sees:

I vision sweet celestial nymphs and bring
Them into life- the matchless Menuka
The splendid Urvashi! The girl divine
Engenders endless thirst in me! Behold! (42-45)

The thirst that the great poet has in his heart is certainly not of an ordinary prostitute. It must be for the sacred feminine. If a woman becomes able to tap this potentiality that lies within her, she would, in a living form, become something divine. This is the message Devkota gives through this poem. The message to the prostitute in Mahakavi's words is, "Oh recall the past! O daughter of snows! Recall Himal" (145-146).

The poet respects the prostitute too, but just as a human being. He does not worship a prostitute. He worships the feminine goddess that dwells in her. He sees the goddess in her too. He has a feeling even for grass and insects. In "Fever Allaying Nature", Devkota exposes his true nature to us as he writes, "O flowers beautiful tormented by the sun/ o grass intimidated" (51-52). So the poet deeply honors her and adores her beauty endlessly. But alas the girl has

chosen a wrong path and the poet asks her a question, "I question thee? A strange feminine whim! An attitude insane of woman-spirit"(150-151)!The speaker is very unhappy for the choice the girl has made. She has sinned.

In his poem titled "Lunatic" Devkota has written "I see flower in the stones" (10).For Devkota, such double visions are not any difficult task. Double visions are necessary to see things from multifarious perspectives. Regarding such strategic double visions, Cahalan writes, "It helps to resist the choice of either connections and similarities or differences as more true ... than the other" (11). It is true that he sees the prostitute as dirt but at the same time recognizes the divinity in her. He tries to see the complete truth. It becomes clear as he says:

The sweetness of this flower of flesh, yourself?
Such is the law of nature, and such the pleasure
Of Krishna, Lord of love! And such the joy
Of Shiva wrapt in trance (51-54)

Here the pleasure that his girl can provide is compared with the pleasures that we get in the company of lord Krishna or lord Shiva! The trance of Shiva is compared with the trance that this girl is capable of providing! Yes the girl also possesses the divine element, which becomes clear as Alian Danielou writes, "It is the principle of Shivaism that nothing exists in the whole universe which is not the part of the divine body" (12). But the poet calls the girl a dangerous trap. He says,

What is the bar to check the moth in me?
to take this flight about this lamp of beauty , you
this is the mess divine, and this the thirst
of the enraptured Luna-longing bird.(56-59)

Here the poet makes it very clear that he is a moth in front of this light. But he knows both sides of the coin. He is not the Luna-longing bird, a bird filled with carnal desire. That is why he calls her "lavishly wanton girl"(5). Yes he adores the lady, but he only adores the feminine element in her, not her moral conduct. She is undoubtedly very tempting but the poet knows how to control himself.

Yes the speaker of the poem describes her beauty very passionately. He writes, "The swelling mangoes of your breast are rich outlines in silk" (8). Not just that soon he declares the lady as "the goddess of all beauty" (12). He calls her goddess because he sees the beauty as well the inherent divinity in this

prostitute, the divinity that lies in every woman. Devkota's double vision enabled him to do so. In fact he sings for the sacred feminine that the girl possesses and admonishes the girl for her immoral character. Goddesses are symbols of morality. We worship them for love and kindness. These goddesses symbolize the various aspects of human creativity and creation. The speaker writes,

And you surpass the silver white moonlight.
Star-jeweled do you rise? And velvet limbs you bloom?
And cast a spell of splendor upon the moon bird's heart. (14,15).

Comparing the prostitute with attributes of nature such as the moon, the star and the flower, the poet gives us a hint that he is infatuated to creative energies of the universe, not this fallen girl. This erotic energy in Audre Lorde's words is "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane" (340). Devkota is in fact singing this song not for this prostitute and her lowly profession but for the Feminine energy, the erotic power, which resides in her, just the way it dwells in other women too. That's why he writes, "O wonder! How you cheapen? You so rich?/Like garlic and like onion"(159,160)? He poet takes her also as a cheap object. She could have been a queen, a goddess but she has degraded herself to garlic and onions.

Undoubtedly the speaker of the poem accepts that the inviting appeal of this prostitute is undefeatable and invincible. At times he feels like surrendering and yielding to the prostitute. He praises her as if everything rests around her. The speaker finds her such a formidable beauty that he compares her with Cupid, god of love! He screams, "Do you, like Cupid flower shaft, invite with wanton calls/ the bumble bee to make his chant the praise of your chiseler's charm?" (17-19). These lines clearly show how Mahakavi is reminded of the goddesses as he looks at this prostitute. She reminds the poet of the tremendous capacity that any woman, even this filthy prostitute, may possess. Nancy Qualls-Corbett writes, "when the divine feminine, the goddess, is no longer revered, social and psychic structures become over mechanized" (11).

The poet writes what a woman can do to a man:
A hero's part, beloved, shall I play,
Equip me thou with arms, send me to war
Against the thing called death! Get me a stead,

Imagination called, furnished with flight!
Send me into a forest wild, like one
Wherein Sita, a princess Nepal-born,
Conferred on Rama's arms terrible power
With but a tender smile of sweetness... (131-138)

This prostitute could have materialized that sacred feminine possibility but she betrayed the poet's dream. The female energy is crucial to the balance and awareness of the collective, and to the growth and the transcendence of the individual. The sacred feminine energy is essential not just for women but also for men.

Mahakavi projects this beautiful prostitute with superb beauty and consciousness, and addresses her as the daughter of the earth. The poet says, "Oh, daughter of the earth, the thing called man" (31). Most of the people perceive prostitutes as dirt but for the poet this particular prostitute is 'luxury and grandeur'. The poet longs to be defeated by her. The poet accepts her as a great fortune, and wants to be her foot's adornment. He confesses, "I feel defeats are luxuries, I am your foot's adornments" (41). He further adds, "The sweetness of the flower of the flesh" (51) and "and this, the fragrance where I lose myself" (61). This beautiful prostitute has triggered this sort of emotion in the poet. He is ready to do anything for her but as the poet becomes aware of her another self, he hates her. The poet curses her. He says, "You could have washed a world! / Muddle it, go/ and rot you, so"(43). He curses her at last because he fails to convince her to quit her immoral profession and seek the divinity that lived within her. Instead of achieving the sacred femininity, she chose the living hell.

Poet's longing for her is so strong that he is ready to fight even with death. He writes, "should death be by your side, I will fight with death" (92). It cites his strong attraction to her but at the same time he is reminded of a Christian myth, a legendary story where Eve tempts man for his fall. He says, "The lovely eve was burning, before her blaze" (103). Abdullah Al-Kahtany in this regard writes,

Eve was blamed as the one who persuaded Adam to eat from the forbidden tree with the result that Adam and his progeny were banished from paradise. This sin of disobeying the orders of God has resulted in what is known as the Original Sin and the Christian dogma of redemption through Christ, 'the savior'(12).

Here Mahakavi clearly indicates that he is attracted to this prostitute but he is attracted to the sacred Feminine only, not exactly, to the flesh. He is not talking about the flesh throughout the poem. He writes: "a noble challenge for my soul to climb" (161). But at the same time he writes "Demand me not through appetite, O scorcher I fear thee/ invite me not by flesh, oh, girl, I shall be sinned" (151-154). The poet wants something divine from her. It is not that the prostitute he wants. This is why he addresses the girl as "O youth", "O Moon", "O light of womanhood", "O female power" and "O daughter of the earth".

Many people have misread this poem by Devkota as Mahakavi's love for a prostitute. It is not so. The speaker does not just see good things in her. He says,

You serpentine flash, you stinger!

You mocker and snarer!

World-mother now turned into world devourer!

O Wretched beauty!(160)

Towards the ends of the poem the speaker asks the prostitute to throw off her mask and come before him in real terms. This shows how that girl tried to put the speaker into an illusion. She was trying to give the poet an impression that she is a divine thing, a goddess. As soon as the poet became aware of this mask, he asked the girl to go away. Thus shattered the poet's dream of this lady to achieve the sacred divinity. Once the poet realizes that she has fallen low, once he realizes that she has defiled herself, he becomes very angry to her and even curses her.

This scenario of the poem resembles with a Christian myth also. In Christianity, there is a story of the first man Adam and his wife Eve. In those early days, man and women stood together, hand in hand in love with one another. There was a perfect harmony as well as the balance.

Soon the female counterpart appeared weak as she surrendered in front of the strong arguments of the Satan. As she fell, she felt the pain sink deep into her heart. As the feminine fell, we were thrust into harsh times.

Devkota's present poem "To a Beautiful Prostitute" weaves a very similar story. The poet talks about the fall of the feminine, in a bit different way. He adores the feminine aspect of the lady but at the end hates her for her lowly behavior. She had potential to rise to the level of

goddesses, but she turned herself into a filthy bug.

In the words of Amritanandamayi Devi, "women are the power and the very foundation of our existence in the world. When women lose touch with their real selves, the harmony of the world ceases to exist, and the destruction sets in (qtd. in Maya Warrior2). Mahakavi in this poem gives almost the same message that a woman possesses divinity. She possesses tremendous beauty and power. The feminine stands for the creative energies of the universe. But if she chooses a wrong path, she not just degrades herself, but also the sacred feminine. The poet gets furious at the end because the prostitute of the poem not just wounded the poet but will wound the entire civilization in the long run. Since the girl betrayed the poet, he calls her:

- voluptuous vixen! I will call you names
- sleek and grass-fed mare
- bargained flesh! O love purchased!
- ditch of lust!
- moth of ruin!
- you intriguing corruption, you!

Collect yourself! Reform your attitude.(163-169)At last he writes, "I feel so helpless, I know not why./ O nymph celestial, you,/ O female power" (175-177)! To conclude, the poem "To a Beautiful Prostitute" adores the divinity that dwells in women kind and at the same time warns them about the possible fall, the fall of the sacred feminine.

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The Fall of the Sacred Feminine in Mahakavi Devkota's "to a Beautiful Prostitute"

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