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MOTHER MARY AS GODDESS: ROLE OF MISSIONARIES IN MAPPING THE DIVINE GENDER IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF SOUTH INDIA

ANJU ANTONY^{1,3}, Dr. RAJANI B²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Zamorin's Guruvayoorappan College, Calicut Affiliated to University of Calicut.

Email: anjuantony@stjosephs.edu.in

² Associate Professor and Research Guide, Department of English, Zamorin's Guruvayoorappan College, Calicut.

³St. Joseph's College (autonomous), Irinjalakuda, Thrissur

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Abstract

To attribute the image of the goddess to Mother Mary would be a fallacy in Roman Catholicism as it comes from a pagan origin. Roman Catholic Church has doctrines and norms that deny the direct intake of paganism in Christianity. But, as Christianity spreads across the world, the encounters with different socio-cultural contexts have changed the perspectives of the church. The missionaries have adopted different methods in different periods of time to get along with the new cultures. This paper focuses on how the image of Mother Mary is used by missionaries to localize and assimilate into a foreign/pagan culture. It also deliberates on the select rituals and practices in the state of Tamil-speaking regions and examines the socio cultural and political nuances that have paved the way for the wide spread popularity of the Mother Mary as a divine mother or as a goddess. It analyses the various methods of missionaries that later bring cultural syncretism and inculturation.

Key Words: Mother Mary, Mari Amman, Portuguese Missionaries, cultural syncretism, roman Catholicism, Assimilation of foreign religion, goddesses in South India.

Mother Mary is venerated as the mother of Jesus in almost all denominations of Christianity. But only a few Churches like the Eastern and oriental Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholics accept Mary as 'Theotokos', Mother of God. The traditions and beliefs from the very beginning of the spread of Christianity have given her this paramount position, but not equal to the position of God. Though the Bible has left a very few pages for

Mother Mary, she has been revered and loved by the people across the world as the mother of Jesus Christ. For them, especially for the Catholics, she is the most privileged woman with the uniqueness of being born without original sin and continued as a virgin even after the birth of Christ. She is invoked for the blessings from the Divine; her intercessory role as the immediate mediator between God and the devotees has placed her above all saints. Her

unattainable position as a Virgin mother makes her unique in the realm Roman Catholicism, not as the female god, but as the most respectable woman.

This positioning of Mary was crucial when the gender of the God in Christianity comes into a discussion. The Church attributes the male gender to Christian God where the trinity in its mystery plays the vital role. So, it is difficult to place the concept of goddesses into this semitic religion. Though the religion claims that God is beyond gender, the characteristics attributed to God is conspicuously a male. As Clooney rightly points out,

We cannot help but notice that it is a Father who is beyond gender, not a mother; it is a Father, beyond gender, who sends His Son, and not His daughter, into the world; that Son in turn takes birth as a human male and not a human female. The God who is beyond gender is still called "God" and not "Goddess." (4)

Mother Mary is not treated as the female god or goddess in Christianity as that concept was alien to its patriarchal ideology. The socio-cultural and religious attribute of the divine power is none other than the male and even in the distribution of divinity, a woman is subjugated as second sex in Christianity. But when Mother Mary is placed in a different cultural context of India where wide varieties of deities were worshipped, she gets the attire of a female goddess through the ways and customs adopted by the people of localities. That replacement has intricately linked with the historical, social cultural aftermath of the arrival and spread of Christianity.

In India, Roman Catholics are minority and made up a small portion of the total population. The Catholic Church in India was the largest portion, and divided into three rites: Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, and Latin (Roman Catholic). About two-thirds of all Christians were Roman Catholic, and about 40 percent lived in the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. When Portuguese missionaries extended their religious colonization, they converted mainly the people from coastal area, who belonged to the lower caste. Those missionaries

had not entirely destroyed the older ethnic religions, cult practices and worships, rather they appropriated it as new Christianity. The missionaries tried not to alienate the rituals and practices from their own cultural practices so that they could effectively place mother Mary in the cultural and religious psyche of the people.

To attain their real intention of converting people into Christianity, Portuguese missionaries had to adopt different techniques and practices, especially in South India. Though the intricacy of caste system confused them in the beginning, they could get along with the existing system. Promising higher positions and recognitions in the church was one of the pensive methods adopted by the missionaries. Seemingly abstruse, but consistent efforts of them in the particular caste called 'Pattavar' could replace their caste deity, "Kuttiantavar" with Velankanni Mata. (Sebastia 26)

Velankanni in Tamil which means "white virgin" is a place in Tamil Nadu, popularly known as the "Lourdes of East". The church, in the name of "Arogya Mata" (The Mother of good health) was constructed by the Portuguese missionaries. In the history of this shrine, it was said that the missionaries were affected by a violent storm and they intersected the help of Mother Mary; and when they got a sign from her, they came alive on the shores of Velankanni and they thanked Mary by constructing a small chapel near the sea. (Shrine's History). The historical events were deeply enrooted in their staunch belief in Mother Mary, and those missionaries effectively used Mother Mary as one of the powerful cultural and religious tools to mingle with the pagan culture. The mythical narratives were one of the strategies to get adapted to the land where caste deities and goddesses were worshipped.

The accurate observation and meticulous efforts of the missionaries to understand the concepts of goddesses and deities helped them to cultivate bhakti towards Mother Mary. The adaptive technique to create syncretism was quite visible in the stories of Apparitions as well. In Hinduism, the temple is constructed based on the self-

manifestation of a deity: "The deity manifests its presence in the form of a stone or of a statue buried in the ground or submerged water." (Sebastia 48) Mary's apparition to the boy in Velankanni found a resemblance with this myth of Hinduism. The symbols like boiling milk, water, child and mother have inseparable relation with the myths of deities and goddesses in Hinduism that were effectively used in the hagiography of Mother Mary. These symbols definitely created binaries of black/white, pure/impure, red/white etc. that definitely led to the hierarchy and supremacy of the particular. "The symbols and myths seemingly justified the superiority attributed to Mother Mary "which is opposite to ambivalent, indecisive temperament of goddesses" (Sebastia 51)

Thus, the similarities of the deity 'Mariyamman' or Mother Mari with Mother Mary were not coincidental. It was a deliberate attempt of Christianity to replace the deity of a lower caste with a white, appealing and universally approachable woman figure of Mother Mary. Mother Mary is kind and helpful and the universal haven for all people irrespective of their caste and gender. But Mariyamman causes diseases when she is not pleased with rituals unlike Mother Mary, who in turn is the intercessor between God and human beings. It proves that the spread of Christianity was not devoid of the power play of ideology. Thus, the paradigm shift from the most venerated woman to the goddess was not an aftermath of the blameless deed, it unquestionably links with the socio-political and cultural scenario of that period.

The customs and practices followed by the missionaries had much impact on the non-Christians also. Since the people did not find much differences in the festivals and celebrations conducted in the temples and churches, inculturation was rather easy. As Bloomer said,

Early Portuguese missionaries were clever to fashion local Catholic festivals in ways that would attract local non-Christians. At coastal Velankanni, one of India's largest Marian pilgrimage sites, and elsewhere, devotees flocked in the hundreds of

thousands to "car festivals," or *tēr bavani*, the grand chariot processions of Mary and saints that occurred especially at festival times. These Marian chariot processions, which had originated in different incarnations in Rome and Europe as vibrant processions in their own right, were modeled here on the local Hindu ones. (6)

Since the religious and spiritual roots of India were enriched with the elements of Bhakti and ritual purity, every caste enjoys their own deities with their own practices. Almost all the forces of nature were adored as deities in India. The pantheon of Hindu goddesses and the idea of female divinities who were equal in power to their male counterparts had been the culture and practices in India which was quite unfathomed by the patriarchal constraints of Christianity. But these religious contexts were quite suitable for missionaries to make their beliefs assimilated into the local culture.

In South India, the possession by deities and goddesses were fecund practices. But possession by Mother Mary and other saints was another tool used to localize the alien religion. Unlike the 'slain of the spirit' that experienced in the Bible and the Western Christianity, the South Indian possession by the deity and Mother Mary was typically marked with dancing or shaking or loss of memory for a short span of time. These Mary-possessed Catholics develop a local shrine to worship and seek blessings from her. These incidents have other political and polemical implications but for the believers, she can resolve their troubles, by descending on someone. The fierce goddess possession rituals in the past were appropriated with the image of Mother Mary as the goddess of Sakthi. The Virgin Mother has the capacity to conduct exorcism. The very idea is forbidden in Catholicism, but certain places in Tamil Nadu still have the practices of exorcism by the name of Mother Mary. But these practices were done mainly by the people who belong to lower caste; they were not the repercussions of missionary deeds. The localization of the idea of Virgin Mother was not as a most venerated human being, but as the goddess or deity whom they were familiar with.

Even before Second Vatican Council spoke about accommodation and inculturation, the socio-political climate of South India had started negotiating with the co-existence of different religious rites. Though accepting and tolerating the foreign rites had been unacceptable to the Church in the beginning, the perceptions were changed. The ways to get assimilated into the plurality of castes and cultures were intricate, inconsiderate and forceful many a times, but it was undeniable that the missionaries paved the way for inter-religious encounters to confront new ideas for assimilation and accommodation. However, Virgin Mary as Mother goddess or caste deity co-exist in the private sphere of belief system in Tamil Nadu that again proves the uniqueness and tolerance of religious plurality in our culture.

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