



Modern Versions of Mira

GULZAR'S film on Mira, made in the late 1970s, and the Amar Chitra Katha comicbook *Mirabai* are typical instances of the image of Mira available today in urban India.

The chief paradox of both versions is that while they seek to portray Mira as a "miracle working saint who resides in her own visionary world, and is more or less oblivious to the actual world, they, at the same time, assault the eye with a plethora of tinselly detail, thus simultaneously vulgarising and mystifying.

This is most evident in the depiction of the person of Mira. Gulzar's Mira, vividly played by Hema Malini, is a pink and white baby-faced doll, overdressed, heavily made up, and loaded with jewellery. The Katha Mira is the same—the artist makes her stand in seductive poses, exposing breasts and belly, although after her widowhood, she is shown dressed all in white and divested of jewellery.

Mira's *bhakti* is as cosmetically treated as is her person. In the film, it is watered down into a little girl's milky religiosity. For example, Mira says pettishly: "Don't take Radha's name — she is my co-wife." Her *bhakti* in the film essentially takes the form of singing songs to the gaudily painted image of Krishna in a small stuffy shrine. This she does with coy seductiveness, much as does the average Hindi film heroine while addressing the photograph of the hero.

The Katha version even deprives the reader of Mira's songs. There is not a single rendition of an entire song. Instead, the scriptwriter tries to sum up her sentiments: "I, Mira, sold myself to Gopala everlastingly — and then from worldliness

I parted company!" Most of the time, however, she is not allowed even such an approximation to verse, and speaks instead in ungrammatical prose: "Gopala, you are all I have and none else! And I am the happier for it!"

The Katha also carefully rearranges Mira's life so as to contain her devotion within the household. We are shown Mira offering a tray of flowers at her husband's



feet as he sits on his throne, and the caption reads: "Mira was an ideal Hindu wife, and was loved by her husband." The villain of the piece, here, as in the film, is the Rana's sister, who complains against Mira. The Rana, annoyed at Akbar's having entered Mira's temple in disguise, orders her to drown herself, and "Mira, the true Hindu wife, did not protest." Protest, in fact, is erased from Mira's life in the Katha version. She is saved from suicide by Krishna himself, who sends her to Vrindavan. Her repentant husband follows her there and she falls at his feet, saying: "Has Mira ever gone against the wishes of her husband?"

She then follows him back to Chittor, where she spends 10 years, continuing her worship "with complete freedom." After her widowhood, she is persecuted by her brother-in-law, but even so, the Katha prevents her from taking to a wanderer's life. She goes to Media where "she was given full freedom to worship in peace."

When she is nearing death, she undertakes a pilgrimage to Mathura, Vrindavan and Dwarka, and gets absorbed into Krishna's image.

The most noteworthy feature of the Katha Mira is that she seems to be in a perpetual trance, oblivious to the people around her, and scarcely entering into a meaningful relationship with anyone. This ensures that no real conflict can take place. Even the famous incidents of the poison cup, the snake and the bed of thorns occur seemingly without her noticing them. While the others who watch are wonderstruck, Mira is too absorbed in devotion to register the fact that an attempt has been made on her life. The Katha censors out all Mira's statements regarding her discarding of familial and societal norms of womanly behaviour.

Interestingly, this notion of a saint as one who is oblivious to the world is very different from the notion evident in chronicles by *bhaktas* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These chronicles emphasise the element of conflict in Mira's life and her conscious opposition to familial claims, as essential parts of her saintliness. The chroniclers comment on her fearlessness and depict her as a determined and courageous woman very different from the Katha's dazed looking character.

Gulzar's film shows relatively more of

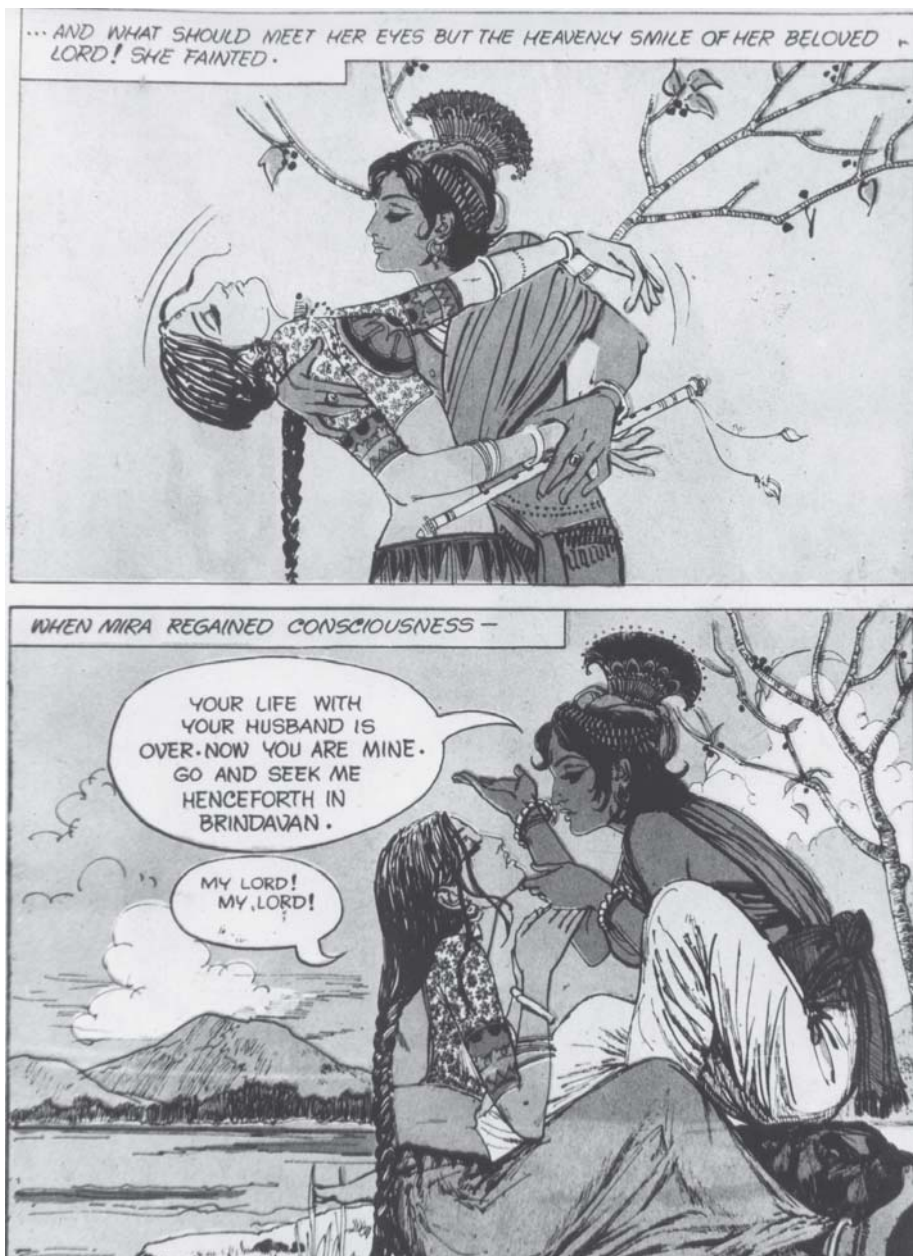


Mira's rebellion. Although it converts her husband into a typical romantic hero, full of love and sympathy for her, whom she calls "My Rana", there are moments of strength, as in the rather exaggeratedly theatrical court scene where she asserts her right to choose her own way of life, not to have the Rana's children, since she has other work to do, and rejects the society which sits in judgement over her. She is also shown walking away from her parental home, later, telling her friend that she must now face life alone.

However, the film too vulgarises Mira's *bhakti*, divesting it of philosophical content by stressing only its ecstatic aspect to the exclusion of all else, and portraying Mira as a somewhat hysterical eccentric, far removed from other people. The effect is heightened by there being almost no sense of a community of *bhaktas* in either version. We get scarcely any sense of who the other *bhaktas* are, of their interaction outside the temple, and their social or political context. They are seen only as silently adoring crowds who follow Mira around and sometimes join in her singing and dancing.

Nor do we get any sense of how Mira survives outside the palace. This is because Mira is not conceived as a flesh and blood human being. The film surrounds her with miracles and mysteries — her face dazzles her husband's eyes; a divine fire burns down the temple door to let her enter. This mystification removes her from the realm of ordinary people's experience. It also converts her into a unidimensional cardboard figure, a miracle worker rather than an exceptionally strong and gifted woman.

Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita



Amar Chitra Katha children's comicbook "Mirabai" shows an obedient Mira about to drown herself at the Rana's behest, saved by Krishna.