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Through the Looking Glass of Poetry

Grounding Metaphor and Illuminating Women's History

Silence is a sign not of my defeat but of victory.
—Mahadevi Varma[1]

Of the four poets this book seeks to situate in their respective historical periods and locales, Mahadevi Varma is the most well known. A household name in India even today, she has secured her legacy in the world of Hindi poetry. Born in 1902 in Farrukhabad, a small town near Allahabad, to parents of Kayastha caste, Mahadevi Varma grew to become one of the most prominent poets of modern Hindi. Her Western-educated father received a graduate degree in English literature from the University of Allahabad and worked in the colonial government as an English schoolteacher. He was also a culturally liberal man who pursued an education in both Urdu and English.

His involvement with the Arya Samaj (an important reformist and nationalist organization founded in 1875, in pre-Independence India) was brief, as his own reformist sentiments were far too progressive to readily embrace the organization. Being an agnostic, he was drawn to the Arya Samaj and its reformist views about religion and nationalism, but his own

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1. Cited in Orsini (2000, 18).

beliefs about Hindu society moved beyond that of the group; for example, he believed that the traditional Hindu marriage was a dying institution and therefore did not object when his eldest daughter, Mahadevi, refused to fulfill her marital commitment. Mahadevi's mother, on the other hand, came from a traditional Hindu family, and her influence on Mahadevi cannot be understated. As Mahadevi recounts in an essay titled "Mere Bachpan Ke Din" ("My Childhood Days"), her mother's influence eventually won out over her father's desires in Mahadevi's choice of Sanskrit and Hindi over Persian and Urdu (Varma 2000j, 418). In the 1920s, Mahadevi moved to Allahabad to begin her education in English at Crosthwaite College, and she has been associated with that city ever since.

At the tender age of eleven, Mahadevi was married off to Svarupnarayan Varma, a boy from a well-to-do land-owning family from Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh (Schomer 1998, 167). As was customary in child marriages, the final departure of the bride to *gauna* (her husband's home) was delayed until both the bride and groom had come of age and completed their education. When the time finally came for Mahadevi to join her husband in Lucknow, she simply refused and he, surprisingly, acquiesced. She was allowed to remain in Allahabad to pursue her education and literary career.

Meanwhile, in Allahabad, Hindi was struggling to gain literary and poetic acceptance and break away from the hegemony of Braj Bhasha. The first generation of poets in modern-standard Hindi, commonly known as the Dvivedi poets, had already begun to establish themselves in the city. A fledgling Hindi Department was founded at the University of Allahabad, and the city was on the way to becoming the "other" literary center of Hindi literature, second only to Banaras at the time.

In her intellectual biography of Mahadevi Varma, Karine Schomer has described the shifts in poetic aesthetics from the Dvivedi period to Chhayavad (Romanticism),[2]

2. Chhayavad is often translated as romanticism—literally, it means reflection-ism (*Chhaya-vad*). Chhayavad suggested poetry of subjective experiences. The four poets associated with the Chhayavad school are Jayshanker Prasad, Sumitranandan Pant, Suryakant Tripathi (Nirala), and Mahadevi Varma. All four were most active between 1910 and 1940.

> During the course of this one poetic generation, the content of poetry became the individual's subjectivity [characteristic of the Chhayavad age] rather than the ideals of society [poetry of the Dvivedi eras]; the language of poetry was transformed from something functional but unappealing into something sensuous and entrancing to the ear; form and content were harmoniously integrated; and the nature of the poetic experience came to be understood in terms of the poet's vision and intent rather than objectively defined canons of poetic excellence [Sanskrit and Braj Bhasha tradition of poetics]. (Schomer 1998, 23)

Thus, the emergence of the Chhayavad age also brought with it a new poetic sensibility—a romantic sense of self vis-à-vis nature—in which the poet's vision and subjectivity was given singular importance. The rigid conventions of meter and rhyme were abandoned for a freer verse in the name of individuality, creativity, and subjective experience.

The second generation of modern Hindi poets, then, arose in response to the poetry of the Dvivedi era; they flourished between 1918 and 1938. Although they did not intend to at first, these poets began to define and create a new aesthetic in Hindi poetry that was influenced by (though not solely based on) the style of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, whose softness of language and melodious diction found a willing reading public when his Nobel Prize–winning poem "Gitanjali" ("Offerings of Songs," 1913) was translated into Hindi. Tagore's "Gitanjali" addressed the theme of love in a tender manner and infused it with compassion. Public debates between Pant and Nirala (two founding poets of Chhayavad) considered the feasibility of applying a Bengali model of diction and meters to Hindi poetry (Schomer 1998, 23–26). As Schomer notes in her study, Nirala was particularly drawn to the ideals of nondualistic Vedantic philosophy as taught by the Ramakrishna Mission of Calcutta—an organization with which he had a long association, much more so than with the devotional spirit of "Gitanjali." This was the Allahabad to which Mahadevi came as a young girl.

Subjective Space: Of City and Poetry

My very first visit to the city of Allahabad (known as Prayag, in certain Hindi/Hindu circles) was during the Maha Kumbh Mela's most auspicious

bathing day—February 8, 2001, on Maghi Purnima (the full moon night in the month of Magha).[3] *After the nearly eight-mile walk from the bus depot to the Sangam, the holy site where the three rivers of Ganga, Yamuna, and the invisible Saraswati converge, thrust forward by the thousands of pilgrims that surrounded me, I had no other choice but to take a dip in its icy waters. I may have achieved salvation for my family and myself, but I also came down with pneumonia a few days later. After one cold night on the banks of the river, my husband and I left Allahabad the next afternoon.*

On the bus ride back to Lucknow, I had time to contemplate my experience of the city of Allahabad—it was remarkably organized, generous to its visitors, unfazed by the nearly thirty million people who paid homage to it during the Maha Kumbh Mela. But my most lasting impression was of the pilgrims themselves; the millions of people who had come from all over India to take a dip in the Sangam. Most of the men, women, and children who came to Allahabad were in fact poor villagers, who rode tractors and bullock carts, were barefoot and barely clothed; leaving behind the monotony of their everyday lives and traveling thousands of miles for a chance at salvation. Allahabad, it seemed, had room for all of these personalities and voices.[4]

A Confluence of Literary Voices

In her biography of Mahadevi Varma, Karine Schomer narrates Mahadevi's experiences at the Kumbh Mela in 1966 and her subsequent participation in smaller village bathing festivals. Gatherings like these marked for Mahadevi a concept of India that transcended divisions of class and caste; all pilgrims lived in tents, and though some tents were fancier than others,

3. The Kumbh Mela is a large gathering that happens in India every twelve years. Religious leaders from various sects travel to the Sangam in Allahabad to worship and bathe away their accumulated sins. They bring with them thousands of followers, who then live with their *gurus* (teachers) in makeshift tents on the banks of the river. The *mela* (fair) lasts for approximately forty-five days.

4. My personal reflections on Allahabad during the Kumbh Mela. Part of the reason I went to the fair was to mirror and reflect on Mahadevi's pilgrimage to the Kumbh thirty-five years earlier.

one could not escape day-to-day physical and spiritual contact with members of nearby camps. Mahadevi's speech during the Kumbha Mela on the platform of the Arya Samaj is telling of how she regarded her experience of the Kumbh as a representation of the nation; in her words: "today, the whole of India is present as a concept on the bank of the Ganges" (Schomer 1998, 206). Mahadevi went as far as to set up her own tent on the bank of the river in Magh Mela (one of the smaller village bathing festivals), living there for a little over a month, much to the shock and disgust of her extended family (Schomer 1998, 209).[5] In her two collections of prose sketches, *Atit Ke Chal-Chitra* (*Moving Pictures of My Past,* 1941 [2000c]) and *Smriti Ki Rekhayen* (*Silhouettes of Memory,* 1943), Mahadevi explores her encounters with poor villagers and children, some of whom she met through her participation in these bathing rites.[6] But all this came much later in her life, when she had matured both as a woman and a writer.

When Mahadevi came to Allahabad in 1918 to attend Crosthwaite Girls College, she was a girl of only sixteen. Even at this young age, she began writing poetry in Braj Bhasha, a language to which she was drawn personally and psychically because of her mother's love for the songs of Mirabai. She later began to experiment with Khari Boli Hindi, due largely to the influence of her poet roommate, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (1904–1948). Of the four Chhayavad poets, Mahadevi was most familiar with the poetry of Pant because he was a resident of Allahabad and was gaining popularity as a poet in the student circles.[7] With Prasad's publication of *Ansu* (*Tears,* 1926), Pant's *Pallav* (*Leaves,* 1926), and Nirala's *Parimal* (*Fragrance,* 1930), each of these writers carved their way into the literary public sphere of Hindi and only later became identified collectively as leaders of the Chhayavad movement

5. Schomer cites an anecdote about how Mahadevi's housekeeper protested quite rigorously at the idea of a woman of Mahadevi's status and position spending a month with villagers on the bank of the Ganges. I would like to add here that the months of January and February, when most of these bathing rituals are held, are the coldest months of the year in Uttar Pradesh.

6. Both of these works have been translated into English (Varma 1994, 1975).

7. Jayshakar Prasad was living and writing in Banaras, and Nirala was residing at first in Calcutta, and later in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.

(Schomer 1998, 20–22). Mahadevi, being the only woman in the Chhayavad group, brought to it a new voice and poetic sensibility. She found resonances within this movement insofar as she was able to see within it—though I do not believe it was intentional at first—possible spaces for the articulation of women's subjectivities and experiences, something that had not hitherto happened in so personal a way within the pages of Hindi literature.

Her five anthologies of poetry were published between the years 1930 and 1942, beginning with *Nihar* (*Mist*) in 1930. The poems in this collection, written primarily between 1927 and 1930, reflected her subjective mental states—a young woman trying to find a balance between following her heart and meeting her social and familial responsibilities at the same time. After all, she was to fulfill her marital commitment by moving in with her husband when her education was completed. When her second collection of poetry, *Rashmi* (*A Ray of Light*) appeared in 1932, she was compared to Mirabai because Mahadevi's poetry was thought to explore the "theme of *viraha*—the agony of separation from the divine Beloved" (Schomer 1998, 241). Her third, fourth, and fifth collections, titled *Niraja* (*Water-Lily,* 1935), *Sandhya Git* (*Evening Song,* 1936), and *Dip-Shikha* (*The Lamp-Flame,* 1942), trace the contours of her maturation as a woman and chart her movement away from the emotional self toward a more universalistic, Vedantic framework, at least in its language if not in the actual subjectivities they explore.

Mahadevi did not renounce the world and isolate herself in her poetry. She remained politically active throughout her life, beginning with her ventures into the field of literary publishing in 1932, when she became the editor of the women's journal *Chand.* Three years earlier in 1929, she had taken to wearing only *khadi* (homespun cloth) as inspired by M. K. Gandhi. She had also accepted the professional responsibility of principal at the Prayag Mahila Vidhyapith (Allahabad Girls' School) in 1932. She remained critically engaged in both the social and literary spheres of Allahabad. Concomitant with her involvement in the sociopolitical life of Allahabad and its surrounding villages, Mahadevi also published several critical essays on the status of women in society, the relationship between literature and language, Chhayavad poetry, and numerous other themes.

India during the 1920s and 1930s was marked by social tensions, notably between the rising anti-British sentiment fueled by the Khilafat movement

and the Gandhian nonviolence movement on the one hand,[8] and the internal communal struggles (between the various religious factions within the country) on the other. Women's voices during this period, in the official annals of history, seem not to enter the discourse on nation. But recent feminist historiography suggests that rather than being passive receptacles of "Indian womanhood," middle-class women actively constructed these prescriptive notions of femininity because it facilitated (in other contexts) a practice of public politics otherwise inaccessible to them behind the institution of *pardah* (seclusion) (Orsini 2002, 243–308; Sinha 1994, 34).

Based on these historical circumstances of the early decades of Mahadevi's life in Allahabad, her refusal to live with her legally betrothed husband has political significance beyond just the personal. More, her adopting the white *khadi* sari very early in her literary career (in 1929) and traveling from village to village to spread education in Hindi is telling of her practice of this politics.

Given the peculiarities of Mahadevi's sociopolitical milieu and her complicated public presence and social standing as a single woman, a situated reading of her writings points to the different "voices" she was able to find in her chosen modes of creative expression. When did she write in prose? When did she strategically return to poetry? Are we to understand her modes of expression in thought as merely a result of an underdeveloped social consciousness or contradictions in thought, as Schomer saw it? Or do we read across her writings, as Francesca Orsini does, as autobiographical reflections of her multiple subjectivities as an independent woman, as a writer in the public's eye, or as a guardian of the fledgling modern Hindi writers collective? Finally, what are Mahadevi's own views on the relationship between literature, language, culture, and nation?

In a speech delivered before the Legislative Council of Uttar Pradesh titled "Sahitya, Sanskriti, Aur Shasan" ("Literature, Culture, and Government"),[9]

8. The Khilafat movement was also very much Gandhi's child as he managed to win it over in 1920. For a detailed analysis of this movement, see Jalal (1994, 8–10) and Minault (1982).

9. Exact date unknown; Mahadevi served as a nominated member of the Upper House of the Uttar Pradesh legislature beginning in 1952 and resigned before her term ended. Her most

Mahadevi addresses the failure of the government (with attention to the legislative government of Uttar Pradesh) to adequately engage the issue of education in post-Independence India (Varma 2000q, 40). Here Mahadevi begins to work through some of her ideas regarding the relationship between nation and language, culture, and literature. She suggests at the very outset of her speech that although the Uttar Pradesh government has hatched many "five-year plans," none seem to engage the question of education. This lack of attention to education and, more important for Mahadevi, "Indian culture"[10] will be detrimental to the future generations of Indian citizens—even if it does not appear to be important to the present generation (Varma 2000q, 40–41). Mahadevi extends further the argument that the colonizing effect of British rule is evident not only in the legislative aspects of society but in the attitudes of people as well. In her words:

> Our dependence, our progress, seems bent on destroying our cultural traditions as if that was a natural phenomenon. No conqueror is satisfied with merely a political victory over a race. They also want victory over the cultural aspects of society and in acquiring it, try to exert authority over the hearts and minds of their subjects as well. We are experiencing in every step of our present existence the evidence or proof of the success that our foreign-conquerors had in this route [literally, direction].
>
> Today we are free from this political condition, but our mental servitude [to the master] has been unable to free itself from its bonds, neither has our intellect found freedom from apathy, nor has our narrow-mindedness found any protection. The result: We have no outline for new development before us.

active stage in this position came in 1955 when she actively promoted the role of writers and literature in constituting national ideals. See Schomer (1998, 238) and Sohoni (2003, 146).

10. I have used the phrase within quotes for the present moment but will clarify Mahadevi's stance on "culture" in later sections of this chapter. I caution here, however, that I do not think Mahadevi associates Indian culture with any one particular religious community; that is, she is not of the camp who see Hindi = Hindu = Hindustan. For elaboration and detailed development of this as it extended from the late nineteenth century onward, see Dalmia (1999) and King (1994).

> There is inactivity in our political parties. Our religion is caught up in conventions and our society is dysfunctional [literally, to faint] due to social discord.
>
> We have to search for a way to traverse this darkness, or else our road to progress will remain circular, like that of a plodding ox that continually moves about in a circle but remains caught within it. (Varma 2000q, 41)[11]

She goes on in the same speech to place literature and art as vital during times of social and political upheaval, thus situating her own writing as a political act:

> One could then ask me, that when the nation is facing issues of famine and shortage of life's basic necessities, then why am I raising the issue of literature, art, culture, etc.? What time do we have to pay attention to these latter things? In response, I will state that progress in life is contingent on all of the members of society, just like one's bodily senses are dependent on each other. One cannot say that while one is breathing, one cannot reflect, or that when one is thinking one cannot see, or that when one is seeing with the eyes, one cannot walk, because only when the senses work together—to see, to hear, to think, to reflect—do we have purposeful movement in life.
>
> If our body moves independent of the mind then we will be called crazy, and if our mind is active but the body fails it, then we will be like someone who has suffered a stroke. The nation's mental and material progress only happens in harmony like that of a healthy mind and body. (Varma 2000q, 41–42)

It is clear that Mahadevi sees as central the role of the *sahityakar* (writer) in molding "Indian culture." She proposes that in the political climate of her time, politicians are ready to commemorate the valor of those who fought in the freedom struggle, but at the same time, they forget the writers and artists who have—with equal passion and courage—*raksha karna* (protected) India's cultures and traditions. As she phrases it, "Those who have borne the weight of protecting our cultural treasury are no less important than those

11. All translations herein are those of the author, unless otherwise cited.

devotees of the nation who, in our struggle for independence, fought in the political trenches. One cannot assess today what they managed to save in that terrible battle, but there is no doubt that because of them we, with respect to our literature and culture, can today raise our heads high and face even the most prosperous of nations (literally, enriched by literature)" (Varma 2000q, 42). *Kalakar* (writers and artists) must be regarded as guardians of national culture and literature. Kalidasa and Tulsidas,[12] she maintains, ought to be held in the same light as writers like Shakespeare, Gorky, and Tolstoy, adding that there are countless more writers of such caliber in Indian literary history (Varma 2000q, 44). She concludes with a plea for the Uttar Pradesh government to take seriously the question of education when charting their plans for an independent India. "If in our present imbalanced life we seek to establish harmony for the new generation then we will have to give education such a high place in our society from which the students will be able to acquire the message of unity of mankind and universal friendship and they will be able to become even more complete human beings. Simultaneously, we will also have to emancipate those who hold the fate of our new generations, our writers and teachers, from such a neglected position in society" (Varma 2000q, 44).

Although Mahadevi valorizes Tulsidas, Surdas, Kalidasa, and other such writers from the "Hindu" literary canon, her concluding remarks on "unity" and "harmony" for the new generation make clear that her vision for the future of India and her definition of culture cannot be interpreted through the present-day rhetoric of the religious right, but must be seen as part of her broader cosmopolitan vision, something she cultivated and explored with sensitivity in her poetry as well. In other words, Mahadevi cannot be understood as being exclusive of any individual or community but is seeking to be all-inclusive, even at the expense of seeming idealist (or romantic). She

12. Kalidasa (fourth–fifth century CE) is universally acknowledged as the greatest Sanskrit poet and dramatist. Surdas and Tulsidas wrote in Indian vernaculars and are associated with *bhakti* (devotional) poetry and aesthetics. They wrote in Braj Bhasha and Avadhi, respectively. Although the dates of these poets are in contention, they are considered medieval poets writing in the sixteenth century of the Common Era.

does not polemicize against Muslims, and she has a broader vision of what shape Indian society ought to take. In her poetry, Mahadevi explores issues of female sensual desire and women's emancipation through the strategic use of both traditional Sanskrit and Perso-Arabic poetic tropes. Even if her choice of language for writing is Hindi, she draws freely from the Vedas and the Upanishads, as well as from Urdu poetic tropes, but reconfigures them to express her own engagement with these traditions. Archetypal tropes from Urdu poetry, such as the "moth and the flame" and the "nightingale and the rose" (to name just two of the most popular), are employed but recast in a new form in her poems, just as she plays with the *virahini* (a trope from classical Sanskrit literature to represent a woman separated from and pining for union with her lover). In her critical essays, in particular the ones she wrote for *Chand* between 1932 and 1936, Mahadevi struck against established traditions of gender oppression while drawing support for her arguments from an imagined and deliberately constructed past.

This lack of historic specificity and the fluidity of time in Mahadevi's essays confound the modern reader precisely because her commitment to women's emancipation (as evidenced through her Gandhian "constructive work"[13] with village women) was based on historically specific, sociological strategies for the erasure of women's subjugation. In her writings, however, time remains a fluid concept.

The past, present, and future blend together in her poetry without the slightest hint of incongruity or awkwardness. This is possible because she builds on "tradition" and established literary conventions to make her point. In prose, on the other hand, a nostalgic hearkening to the past, tradition,

13. As outlined in his *Hind Swaraj* and *Constructive Programme,* Gandhi advocates directing personal action and labor to uplift the community and the nation. Implicit in his vision is the idea that through nonviolence and work, men and women of India can more constructively participate in building national character and values, address social injustice, and emancipate mental servitude. His perspective on the gendered division of labor dovetailed into his constructive work program, where prescriptive roles for men and women in the domestic sphere would mirror service to the nation. In his words, "It should be clear to the reader that Civil Disobedience in terms of Independence without the co-operation of the millions by way of constructive effort is mere bravado and worse than useless" (1941 [1945], 30–31).

and time gone by creates problems of historicity. This can be overcome, however, by historicizing her perspectives and possibilities.

The difference in voice between her prose and poetry is that in her poetry the radical thrust of her message is couched in the language of metaphor and tradition. But to make sense of Mahadevi's poetry, one has to also read her prose writings, and one cannot fully appreciate the power and potency of her poetry without explicit reference to her participation in the public and political life of Allahabad. For this reason I have engaged her prose essays in great detail before moving on to interpret her poems. The final section of this chapter concerns itself primarily with the sociopolitical atmosphere of Allahabad (and the "nation" at large) so that the implication of language and politics inherent in her poetry and prose will be fleshed out in a nuanced manner.[14]

Encounters with Mahadevi

In 1942, when she finished the collection of poetry *Dip-Shikha* (*The Lamp-Flame*) Mahadevi gave up writing poetry (Schomer 1998, 306). Soon after, she began to devote herself exclusively to educating young women. Why did she give up writing poetry in service of the nation? Why would activism necessitate, for Mahadevi, an abandonment of poetic expression? I suggest that perhaps one way to answer these questions is to look at the implications of female voice as it emerges within the context of Mahadevi's collective body of writings and embed this voice within an analysis of gender and nation.

In an article commenting on Karine Schomer's essay "Mahadevi and the City of Allahabad," Kathryn Hansen suggests that "the profession of a writer was in many ways an ideal one for a woman—as it involved minimal contact with men and could be pursued in the privacy of one's home" (Hansen 1977, 264). It is not difficult to see why poets associated with the Chhayavad school of modern Hindi poetry are often thought of in this manner—as socially reclusive, working in isolation, and having little to do with

14. "Nation" is in quotes here because India was not yet an independent nation-state during this early stage of Mahadevi's literary career.

the world around them, which was during the 1930s, India effervescent with the spirit of Gandhian nationalism and the freedom movement (Schomer 1998, 95–101). Hansen goes on to suggest that Mahadevi's "position as a woman in the literary world" (of Chhayavad and beyond) could not have been a "particularly difficult one"; in fact, "being a woman helped Mahadevi to achieve public recognition as readily as she did" (1977, 264). According to Hansen's argument, a woman practicing a solitary craft in the privacy of her home conformed to middle-class moralities about the space that women should occupy in society and, in turn, their prescriptive roles as mothers and wives. But Mahadevi was neither a traditional mother nor a typical housewife.

Rather than smooth out aspects of Mahadevi's life, I suggest that her poetry reconfigures these tensions between prescriptive social categories and values, so her poetry must also be read within these sociological and political tensions. What is it about Mahadevi that allows her to become representative of middle-class womanhood and morality precisely when the ideals of both "womanhood" and "morality" were being debated and contested in the public fervor of Indian nationalism? I do not seek here to emphasize Mahadevi's subalternity at the expense of her privilege. Rather, I seek to complicate her privilege within an analysis of gender and nation. In other words, I ask what it meant for a woman to have a room of her own (with time and money) to write in the early decades of twentieth-century India. In what ways did she conform to and concretize middle-class moralities regarding Indian womanhood? What was she up against as the only female Chhayavad poet? What did it say about her, then, when she chose to give up poetry? Although she received much fame and prestige later in her life, as Schomer pointed out in her biography, her choices in her personal life were not so readily accepted, even if the Gandhian call for women's direct participation in the nationalist struggle for independence made it ultimately possible for women like her to live a public life as single women.

Mahadevi herself notes in two separate but related autobiographical essays titled "My Literary-Journey: In the Context of Prose Writing" and "My Literary-Journey: In the Context of Poetry," (Varma 2000k and 2000l) that her choice of writing as a professional occupation and her desire to study the Vedas and the Upanishads were frowned on by most members of her contemporary society because, in fact, these were not choices women ought to consider. Writing about her mid-teenage experiences nearly sixty years later, she asks her readers to reflect on what a precocious girl she must have seemed to her teachers and family members when she insisted on studying Sanskrit and religious literature. She says:

> In our home, girls would learn just enough Hindi to be able to read the *Ramcaritmanas,* read and write personal letters, and no one desired to study more than this. I said, "No, I will study." Without any understanding that this was tantamount to a *satyagraha* [civil disobedience with specific reference to Gandhian ideology]. I would say, "I will not eat, I will not wake up, unless you send me off to study." There was no opportunity for me to study at home, and this is why I came here [to Allahabad]. Imagine if you will what it must have been like at that time: society engaged in battle [for freedom], confrontations within the family, and one kind of battle against the whole system—and right in the midst of all of this I *had* to study, I *had* to write; but after coming to Prayag [Allahabad] I found, to a certain extent, a freer atmosphere. Even then I thought that if there had been another girl or woman in my situation she would have accepted defeat. But I did not accept it and I continued to write. I wrote in Braj Bhasha, then in Khari Boli; however, I wanted to study Sanskrit and the Vedas. The surprising question is: why did I want to study the Vedas? What is there in the Vedas? What was my attraction to the Vedas? I continued to say, "I will study Sanskrit. I will learn the Vedas." I wanted to know what was written in them. This too was a new thing. It was considered senseless or pointless for women to study the Vedas where I came from. When the pundits would come to hear of it, they would be displeased. It was not like it is today. If you would imagine some sixty years earlier, when a young girl of fifteen or sixteen would say that she did not want to be a householder, she wanted to be a *bhikshuni* [a nun who begs for alms]. Imagine for a moment how difficult her life must have been, how many struggles she must have endured. (Varma 2000l, 411)

The study of Sanskrit and her use of a highly Sanskritized vocabulary was, as Mahadevi suggests in her essay, an act of resisting a system in which women's access to Sanskrit and liturgical literature was discouraged, if not outright forbidden. In a way, Sanskrit became a source of pride for her and

gave her self-confidence as an educated member of society. Although studying Urdu and Persian would perhaps have granted her access to positions of esteem in government, by virtue of her solidarity with Gandhi's constructive work program such a professional direction would have been out of the question for Mahadevi. But although it is true that for the most part her diction remained grounded in a Sanskritized vocabulary, there are numerous traces of Urdu words scattered throughout her "self-reflective" essays and some in her early poems as well. The tone of those essays seem to impart a sense of loss—a deep, genuine sadness that Mahadevi seems to feel with the discord and political disunity confronting post-Independence India. In these essays, specifically the ones sectioned together in her collected works as "Main Aur Mera Parivesh" ("Me and My Surroundings") (Varma 2000i, 397–426) that the reader cannot help but note the change in texture of her language when compared to the rest of her anthology of essays and poems.

Notes from the Field: Resurrecting Mahadevi

In April 2001, I made my second pilgrimage to Allahabad—the first being the Maha Kumbh Mela a few months earlier in February—to visit the school where Mahadevi served as principal and teacher. I hoped that by visiting the city she called home, I might be able to gain a more tangible impression of the poet who remained thus far bound in the pages of the *Sahitya Samagra* (collected literary works) that I carried with me everywhere I went.

I spoke at great length over tea one afternoon to Rani Pandey, the wife of Ramji Pandey. Ramji's father, Ganga Prasad Pandey, was a poet and a great friend of Mahadevi. The Pandey family, from what I could gather, had been with Mahadevi from the beginning of her literary career in Allahabad. Asha was the *bahu* (the youngest wife) of Rani Pandey's son. Ashish, Rani's son, and Mangalam (her grandson) were also around, though not seated with us. Gita-ji (as she was called by everyone present) was the only woman who was not a direct relative of the Pandeys but lived under the same roof. She told me that Mahadevi had brought her with her from Ramgargh (near Nainital) as a little girl to teach her Hindi and further her education. At the time of my meeting with this extended family, Gita-ji served as a teacher at the Prayag Mahila Vidyapith. They told me that their other relatives lived in Rasulabad, where Mahadevi had established in 1944 the Sahityakar Samsad,

a guesthouse for scholars and writers to promote Hindi literature and language studies. Mahadevi's brother-poet Nirala lived in Rasulabad for most of the latter part of his literary life.

Two things became evident to me after my meetings with the Pandeys, Mahadevi's extended family: first, she was revered as a poet as much as she was feared as a strong woman; second, her connection to the Urdu language, exemplified by the comments of Mama Yash Malviya (a poet friend of the family) and Rani Pandey, seemed largely a matter of private opinion insofar as only people "of her home" seem to present her in this way. Her public persona established without doubt her fluency in Sanskrit and her command over this language evident in her highly Sankritized Hindi lexis. I could not help wondering if the Pandeys were just telling me about Mahadevi's love of Urdu literature and poetry because I had mentioned my own interest in it. Nevertheless, I was quite happy to hear this.

"One never simply meets Mahadevi and casually chats with her about poetry the way you and I are today," said Karine Schomer when we met in Berkeley to discuss my chapter on Mahadevi. As Karine had accomplished the most difficult feat of translating Mahadevi's numerous essays and poems in her biography of the poet, I thought she might be able to shed some light on the person I sought to bring to life in my own book. "One is summoned to meet Mahadevi, and she presides over her court. The whole thing is a formal affair," Karine remembered as she sipped her tea. "We were rarely alone and she was an extremely intimidating woman," Karine continued, "and we spoke only in Hindi. Of course she knew English very well, and I believe Urdu as well, but she spoke like she wrote, in the clearest of diction, and only in Hindi" (interview with author, 2003).

Similar conversations occurred in Allahabad as well with the teachers at Prayag Mahila Vidyapith, the school where Mahadevi served as principal and teacher. The teachers talked at great length to me about how nervous they were that Mahadevi would walk into their classes (as she was prone to do from time to time) and check up on what they were teaching. In fact, one of them recounted an early experience when she first came to Allahabad to meet Mahadevi and ask for a job teaching history at her school. Mahadevi told her that it was easy to teach something in one's area of specialty but to teach outside it was exceptional. She insisted that this lady teach tenth

standard Hindi, and that is the subject this *didi* (sister) continues to teach today, where Mahadevi's poetry continues to remain a part of the teaching curriculum. Her reputation as a perfectionist when it comes to speaking and writing, which Karine Schomer and others echoed, finds ready admittance in Mahadevi's own self-reflective essays. As she puts it, "This [perfectionism] is due to the grace of my *pandit* [teacher] who used to teach me in Indore. Now he is no more, nevertheless he would harp on each and every word and make me write it a hundred times. Then later I too made my students do this. I would never say 'well done!' when they wrote an essay. I find it extremely difficult to utter the word 'good.' I would continually say, 'write it again, it is not correct yet. Write it again, it is not correct'" (Varma 2000k, 406).

The impression of Mahadevi I came away with remained one of awe and reverence. It was amply clear to me by this point how chaste and upright a persona she projected to everyone, even to her most intimate friends and family members. In her essays regarding her literary persona, she repeatedly emphasizes how little she was daunted by literary trends and movements. Speaking about her fellow Chhayavadi poet Pant, Mahadevi says the following about his departure from Chhayavad and his subsequent return to it:

> Countless movements have come and gone, as for example, Progressivism came into being after our Chhayavad movement. The progressives said [regarding the Chhayavadis]: "They are all out of touch with reality. They remain afloat in imagination. They need to come down to the real world." Many came down. Even a man like our very own Pant-ji heeded the call of the Progressives. And I asked him, "What has made you write like this?" He said, "Well, it appears as if only this point of view is acceptable now." When he showed up with his beautiful curly hair cut off and his entire attire changed, I was truly shocked. I came to understand that he really believed it. But after that he did not remain as such and returned to his original self. Whereas I? I remained where I was. I did not care about whether people would consider me a "Progressive" or not. I never worried about this. In this very manner, when the Experimentalism movement occurred I did not worry. I continue to say, experiments are not for me. (Varma 2000l, 412)

These statements, I suggest, should not be taken to mean that Mahadevi was unaffected by her sociopolitical circumstances; this would not be an

accurate depiction of the poet. Rather, I read these words as reflecting her absolute commitment to the spirit of universalism that she found appealing in Chhayavad on the one hand, and to her belief that one writes about experiences with which one is intimately familiar.[15] More important, Mahadevi seems to exemplify that politics must be practiced and lived: "Having never seen a plough ox many people have written poems about the field farmer; there is no reason to do that" (Varma 2000k, 406).

It is my argument that Mahadevi's different voices as expressed in her prose, poetry, and personal prose sketches are not contradictions in her thinking but are self-conscious, political strategies for representing the variegated impulses and concerns of the rapidly growing urban middle classes of north India during the 1930s and 1940s. Her awareness of the power of language to animate change and transformation is further evidenced in her creative use of prose and poetry. Her recognition of the limits of prose and her understanding of how historicity works in the poetic seem to suggest that, far from being unreflective, she tried quite deliberately to make her politics socially viable and effective over time.

Illuminating Feminism: Mahadevi's Poetic World

When Mahadevi was a student at Crosthwaite College, she had the opportunity to visit Gandhi, as he frequented the home of the Nehru family.[16] Touched by Gandhian ideals for "constructive work," she heeded his call for social service and women's emancipation both materially and ideologically. By 1929, she had already made the conscious decision to wear only saris made of *khadi*. In 1932, while serving as editor for *Chand*, Mahadevi devoted herself to *seva* (social service) and chose education as her way of contributing to the nationalist cause. Gandhi's call for women's direct participation in the freedom movement legitimated women's independence

15. This is why even after she gave up publishing Chhayavadi poetry (clearly she was still writing, as the poem about the Bengal famine reveals) she did not dismiss her poems from this time like Pant, for example, did.

16. Jawaharlal Nehru later became the first prime minister of a free India. His family home, known as Ananda Bhavan, is in Allahabad and today serves as a museum. It is a beautifully maintained facility. Mahadevi recalls this experience in Varma (2000j, 417–18).

outside the institution of marriage and, perhaps retrospectively, sanctioned Mahadevi's choice to live life as a single woman. But she was unable to fully escape the negative stereotypes and societal stigma that accompanied this life. Nonetheless, by devoting herself to community and social service, she could enjoy life outside the shackles of marital domesticity. For women, this lifestyle is marked not by overt sexual escapades and public sexual deviance; instead, it meant that for the first time women were able to forge professional friendships and political comradeships. If sexual freedom was constitutive of this identity, it certainly had to be articulated subversively and with no outward signs of societal transgression.

There are, thus, two different literary personas that Mahadevi projects in her prose and poetic writings. One is an erotic, sensual, woman-pining-away-for-her-lover type that is most visible in the context of her poems; the other is a grassroots, social activist, woman-committed-to-emanicipating-other-women-through-education type evident in her prose pieces. Interrelated with the representation of her different personas is her deliberate and self-conscious use of language to represent her multiple subjectivities. Her poetry, although departing from Braj Bhasha tradition (the Dvivedi poets had already cleared the grounds for this), recasts the devotional sentiment of Braj poetics within a secular landscape, befitting the social needs of her time. One example of the kind of secularization I am thinking of can be found in the poem "Bang-Bhu Shat Vandana Le" ("A Hundred Prayers for Bengal"), which I translate and discuss shortly.

In Pant's criticism of Braj Bhasha in his often cited introduction to *Pallav* (*Leaves*, 1936), he argues that the poets of the Braj tradition were necessarily constricted by both poetic geography and by theme. Khari Boli Hindi, by contrast, was more expansive both figuratively and literally because poets in Khari Boli Hindi could open themselves up to diverse landscapes and themes in their poetry. As Pant suggested, "Most *bhakti* poets spent their entire life going from Mathura to Gokol, the river [Yamuna] of their narrowness flowing in-between: some remained on its banks, some were washed away by the stream, and those who struggled hard and crossed the river reached only up to Dwaraka: here the whole expanse of the world ended for them!" (Sumitranandan Pant, quoted in Orsini 2002, 151). Khari Boli Hindi, on the other hand, was not constricted by such imaginings of place

and space. He continues by saying that although "Khari Boli did not have the beautiful temples Braj Bhasha had, it has 'spacious avenues,' a market for novelties and 'consumer goods' from all over the country and abroad, and its parks were full with all sorts of new flowers" (Orsini 2002, 151–52). In addition to a rapidly modernizing India, as expressed in Pant's statements, the Chhayavad movement coincided with the beginnings of the noncooperation movement and the movement to establish Hindi as the national language as well. As such, Pant was astute in his observation that Khari Boli would better facilitate the expression of these topics, more so than Braj Bhasha would have, given its limited poetic parameters.

In the thirty years that mark Mahadevi's poetic career, the aesthetics of her poems change from girlhood reflections of love and desire to a more nuanced, self-aware love for all of humanity.[17] The vocabulary of many of her earlier poems are laden with Braj Bhasha and Avadhi, whereas her later poems seek to stretch the boundaries of Khari Boli Hindi by incorporating not just the lexicon of the Braj Bhasha, Perso-Arabic, and *git* (folk song) traditions but their aesthetics as well.

Manifest Nature and the Connectedness of All Things: Reflecting Mahadevi

When the shelter of the breaths,
Of night, becomes the resting place
(And) the beautiful, scattered pearl-necklaces
Of garlands are stolen away,

Then this is the lament of the silent eyes of flickering stars:
It is written with their tears, "How unsteady is this world!"

The early morning laughs
Vermilion powder is scattered at its edge,
On the trembling surface of the waves,
When the innocent restless sunbeams fall,

17. In all likelihood, Mahadevi did continue to write poetry throughout her life, but chose not to publish her poetic work after 1942, giving herself up more fully to the critical essay form.

Then the flower buds quietly lift their tender veil of new leaves,
And say with brimming eyelids, "How exhilarating is this world!"

When, having given their gift of fragrance to the wind
the withered flowers say:
"Why does he fill these eyes with dust—
He in whose path we lay scattered?"

"What use are they now?" –when the humming of the bees sings sweetly,
And the weeping of the rustling leaves says, "How cruel is this world!"

When the day gets written with a golden hue
(and) its life is lost,
Twilight, in the courtyard of the heavens,
Lights countless lamps.

Then, steadily extending the limits of darkness, laughing it says:
"Ages have passed, yet it still remains, this mad world!"

When, with flowers from the dream world,
One creates one's life,
When my crazy life,
Thinks "My kingdom is immortal,"

Then, from some unknown land, comes a sweet chirping,
Singing, in compassionate tones, "How crazy is this world!"
"Samsar" (Varma 2000m)

The arrival of night closes the poem "Samsar" ("The World," 1930), but not without comment. The poet interjects the soft chirping of a voice to critique the closing of day by night: she asks, "How crazy is this world?" The tyranny of time in *samsar* is cyclical, and just as the arrival of night marks the end of day, it also promises the coming of a new dawn. Dawn awakens nature and the human spirit alike. Through the strategic placement of abstract images in the space of the poem (like the flower buds that blossom and rise to greet the sun daily, knowing full well that their death is imminent), Mahadevi is able to reflect subjective experience. She never speaks; the flowers, bees, and birds reflect her voice and allow her to be self-reflexive without being directly so.

This poem is also about the cyclical nature of *samsara* (worldly existence). The *Katha Upanishad,* for example, expounds philosophically these very concepts of death and rebirth, ideas to which Mahadevi only alludes in her poem.[18] The first two chapters of the *Katha Upanishad* are comprised of a conversation between Naciketas and Yama (the lord of death). The sixth verse of the first chapter elaborates on the cyclical nature of time.

Look ahead! See how they have gone,
Those who have gone before us!
Look back! So will they go,
Those who will come after us.
A mortal man ripens like a grain,
And like a grain he is born again.
(Olivelle 1996, 232)

In addition to the idea of time as regenerative, the foregoing verse also preserves the nature metaphor with the use of the "grain." The Upanishadic idea of a dualistic world where both pleasure and pain coexist is also apparent in Mahadevi's poem. Just as the break of dawn brings promise of new life—"the flower buds quietly lift their beautiful veil of new foliage"—it also brings destruction: "the flowers have withered away after giving the gift of their fragrance."

The reader cannot help but feel the pervasive sense of harmony with nature that this poem conveys. Each and every element from the universe harmoniously coexists with the others. However, the carefree play of nature veils a hidden spirituality, and uncovering it could lead to a transcendental experience; this poem thus expresses the hidden joys and restless desires for emancipation and liberation from *samsar.* This desire, at the same time, is uncertain; it is questioned and therefore a qualified desire, a questioned

18. The *Katha Upanishad* is a story about a boy who goes to meet Yama, the god of death. When he arrives in hell, Yama is not there; so the boy waits. When Yama returns, he gives the boy three boons—because he had to wait for three days. After getting the first two boons fulfilled, as his third boon, he asks Yama what is beyond death. Yama begs him to not ask this question because the answer is complex. But the boy insists, and Yama begins to elaborate.

"oneness." The flower buds, "when the innocent sunbeams become restless," address their exhilaration and yet ask why the wind, for whom they have laid out their fragrance and petals, fills them up with dust. The consequence of this affects the bees as well. They ask, "what use are they [the flowers] now?" By imbuing nature with emotions of love, Mahadevi and other Chhayavadi poets express the relationship between man and nature as one comprised of love. Simultaneously, they are able to veil human emotions of love by alluding to the natural landscape. But the issue of pain, despite the seeming pervasiveness of harmony, seems to remain unresolved. This is what makes her poem "of this world"; it imparts a personal experience of pain and suffering.

The poetic vision in Chhayavad of harmony in nature also allows for free interplay between the poetic "I" and the autobiographical "I." The intent of Chhayavadi poets was not to narrate the autobiographical "I" but to impart a sense of poetic subjectivity united with existence. The occasional poem in which the poet expressed a personal experience or emotion did exist, as with Nirala's "Saroj-smrti" ("Remembering Saroj," 1935).

> The elegy ["Saroj-smrti"] written by Nirala upon the death of his daughter, is less typical of Chhayavad than of contemporary sensibility, in that it deals concretely with the specific details of the girl's life and death, and, in the voice of the poetic "I," one can hear the actual voice of Nirala, the bereaved father. In most Chhayavad poetry, this is not the case, and it is the subjectivity of the poetic "I" alone that one hears. But this, in itself, marked a major departure from the sensibility of the Dvivedi period, for the poetic "I" made it possible to express a conception of reality that differed from what was dictated by tradition or generally accepted. (Schomer 1998, 59)

Desire, freedom, and endless arrays of emotions that pour forth from Mahadevi's poems are couched carefully within conventional tropes of religion and nature. In "Samsar," for example, though not every creature in nature experiences pleasure and pain at the same moment, in the end, they all do. What Mahadevi foregrounds in this poem are the imaginative possibilities for existence outside the monotony of mundane experiences and tradition (scriptural and prescriptive). While borrowing from the Upanishads the notion of a transitory *samsar,* she highlights the emancipatory possibilities within its boundaries rather than emphasizing the traditional interpretation

of *moksha* (liberation), where the goal is to escape completely from the world. It seems, then, that Mahadevi seeks a "worldly" liberation rather than one rooted in "other worldly" transcendence.

In her poem "Chah" ("Desire," 1930), Mahadevi boldly extolls the power of following one's heart. Even though this pursuit of desire leads one into pain, tears, and suffering, Mahadevi claims that in this journey of madness that is called love, there lies a new vision—a vision of a "rare and wonderful new world."

> This mad love desires,
> A rare and wonderful new world!
>
> In the empty sighs of the flower buds, a canopy is stretched out,
> From the soft trembling of the dew drops, the song makes a bed;
>
> Where there are dreams, there is a watchman,
> A rare and wonderful new world!
>
> Where the soft, tender breath is extinguished, there may be light,
> Where there is erasure in cessation, there is peace in burning;
>
> Grief is the stream of honeyed wine,
> A rare and wonderful new world!
>
> Meet the unbounded on that side of the horizon,
> The proud constellations have to humble themselves to roll on the earth!
>
> The sea is the resting place of the sky,
> A rare and wonderful new world!
>
> The experience of life is balanced against desires,
> This innocent mind purchases madness from mute pain!
>
> Tears may grant sight,
> A rare and wonderful new world!
> "Chah" (Varma 2000m)

Desire and love are limitless on the "other side of the horizon." Outside the bonds of everyday domesticity, unfettered dreams and desires pulse through the very core of life. The intensity of emotion and sensuality in her poetry

is both shocking and exhilarating. Mahadevi suggests that pursuing one's desires—despite the inevitable pain and suffering that accompany it—can open "rare and wonderful" windows of experience.

The idea of love and desire as leading to madness and self-destruction is prevalent in classical Urdu literature. The trope of the flame and the moth to mark the lover who is uncontrollably drawn toward the beloved is used time and again to symbolize the destructive nature of love. The beloved dazzles her assembly of suitors, and they, in turn, are doomed in this quest for union. The quest for the beloved brings pain, suffering, and ultimately destruction.

Mahadevi must have been intimately familiar with these poetic tropes of the Perso-Arabic tradition and the destructive potential of the flame. Yet in "Chah" she turns this classical image of the beloved on its head, from one who possesses destructive potential to one who is destroyed in giving love. The self-consuming nature of the beloved is like a lamp that sheds its light in all directions while destroying itself. There is a subtle but significant shift from the classical Perso-Arabic image of the cruel and carefree beloved to a sacrificing and ever-giving beloved. The idea that there is "peace" in burning is not in reference to the lover at all; rather, it is an attempt to describe the emotions and feelings behind the beloved's self-annihilation. In her words, "Where the soft tender breath is extinguished there may be light / Where there is erasure in cessation there is peace in burning / Grief is the stream of honeyed wine" (Varma 2000m). The use of the word *nirvana* (cessation), a term Mahadevi borrows from the Buddhist tradition, undoubtedly tells us that the subjectivity of the flame is being expressed. The enlightened state of nirvana is likened to the candle whose flame is snuffed out. Only when the passions (emotions and attachments) are extinguished (like the flame) can transcendence be reached and one can experience peace. Instead, Mahadevi argues that peace exists in burning, grief in itself can be intoxicating, and, most important, the proud constellations have to humble themselves to frolic about on the Earth. All of these statements grate against the transcendental philosophy espoused in the Upanishads and are antithetical to the Buddhist conceptual framing of nirvana as well.

On the other hand, one could make the argument that the subjectivity of the lover (as opposed to the beloved) is expressed in this verse. This interpretation necessitates a reversal of the Perso-Arabic trope, whereby the

flame would now come to stand for the lover and the beloved is represented by the moth. In this case, the grief-stricken lover feels peace in being burned by the intensity of love of the moth and experiences transcendence in life's final moments. This poem is powerful precisely because both interpretations are possible and equally valid.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, a poet friend and contemporary of Mahadevi, has challenged this idea of the "self-consuming flame-like" beloved. In a poignant and critical poem titled "Manini Radhe" ("Proud Radha," 1930), she asks Radha (the beloved of Lord Krishna) how she was able to withstand her lover's cruelty.

> How was your love able to be so resolute
> Tell me Queen Radha
> Tell me, it is burning me up
> Please cool me down with cold water
> You took your ideal one back, again and again
> I try to make my mind understand
> But my feeling does not change
> And I do not feel peace.
> (Chauhan 1930, 45)

Chauhan would not and does not find solace in Radha's self-sacrificing attitude. Numerous other changes become evident when one compares "Manini Radhe" and "Chah," changes that mark the development of Hindi poetry from the Dvivedi era to the Chhayavad period. The authorial voice in the concluding lines of Chauhan's poem resounds loudly. The poet questions the validity of Radha's lifelong love to her beloved, who was a cruel and absent person in her life. She dismantles the image of the love between Krishna and Radha as ideal and simultaneously professes her inability to be like Radha. These remarks are characteristic of poetry from the Dvivedi period, when poets fought to free themselves from the hegemony of the Braj Bhasha poetic tradition. Whereas previously the love between Radha and Krishna was idealized, poetry in the Dvivedi era sought to rework the conventions of Braj love poetry.

In Chhayavad, the emotions commonly associated with love—separation, grief, madness, suffering, and renunciation—are granted free rein and given

utmost importance. Moreover, the poet's voice, though ever-present and in harmony with the cosmos, is at the same time veiled by metaphors from the cosmos. In addition, the Chhayavad distinction between the poetic "I" and the autobiographical one protects Mahadevi from being criticized and grants her a contained and qualified freedom to express emotions about the mutuality of love between man and woman outside of domesticity and marriage.

In 1934, Mahadevi was awarded the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan's Seksariya Prize, an annual prize awarded to the best woman writer of the year, for her third collection of poems, titled *Niraja*. Jagdish Gupta, a noted Hindi poet and scholar, suggests that the beauty of language and experience described in *Niraja* is not present in Mahadevi's previous two collections. *Nihar* and *Rashmi*, in contrast to *Niraja*, have "constructed emotions" and a "comprehensiveness of emotional states" but lack the softness and fluidity of language that is evident in *Niraja* (Gupta 1994, 49). Because all of the poems in *Niraja* are *gits*, it is understandable that this volume would have been interpreted as such. As Mahadevi notes, "In *gits*, varied forms, colors, emotions, melodies, etc. are collectively represented, but in a sketch there is a place for each one individually" (Gupta 1994, 126, quoting Mahadevi Varma). In her famous poem, "Bin Bhi Hun Tumhari Ragini Bhi Hun" ("I Am Your Vina, I Am Also Your Melody," 1935) from this collection, Mahadevi's imaginative interplay between the identification of the lover and the beloved's subjectivity is fully elaborated. The poetic "I" occupies the position of both the lover and the beloved:

> I am your vina and am also your melody,
> Constant sleep in the stillness of every particle,
> The awareness in the first trembles of the universe;
> In catastrophes and in the footprints of life,
> I am the curse that turns into a boon by context;
> The waterway and also a streamless flow!
>
> The thirsty bird with cloudy eyes;
> The moth with the cruel flame in its soul;
> The confused nightingale with a flower hidden in its bosom;
> The mercurial shadow both one with and distant from the body;
> Apart from you and also the perfect bride!

> The fire from which drip droplets of ice,
> The void which spreads out in an instant over the carpet,
> The thrill and rapture of being wooed with precious stones,
> The very reflection on the foundation of the heart,
> The impenetrable dark clouds and the gilded lightning!
>
> I am destruction and also the chain of progress,
> The age of separation and the darkness of final longing;
> The string and the stroke, and the vibrato of movement,
> The pot, too, and the honey, the bee, too, and sweet oblivion;
> The emptiness and also the smiling moonlight!
> (Varma 2000n, 175)[19]

Here, one can see the infinite possibilities for the poetic "I." It can occupy and express the subjective emotions of both the lover and the beloved. In the *Rig Veda* 10.8.125, the well-known "Devi-Suktam" ("Hymn of the Goddess"), the refrain of *aham* ("I am") is repeated. In this hymn, the goddess reveals herself as the power behind the various gods and the sacrifice. Mahadevi's inspirational muse is the Devi; she again draws freely from ancient Vedic scripture (where there is no explicit reference to Devi but a general goddess trope), but she personalizes the message.

Furthermore, she uses the images of the *shama* and the *parvana* (the moth and the flame) and the *bulbul* and *gulgul* (the nightingale and the rose). Although these are conventional tropes from the classical Perso-Arabic tradition, Mahadevi subverts their normal usage in a new and radical way. "(I am the) moth with the cruel flame in his soul"; "The confused nightingale with a flower hidden in its bosom." The lover (the moth) has within his heart the beloved (the flame), who is both the object of his love and the subject who loves. In other words, the love is directed toward the other as contained within himself; it is self-referential in the poem.[20] The images of the moth

19. I am indebted to Snehal Shingavi for his help with the initial translation of this poem in Berkeley, California (fall 1999).

20. This idea of the divine (or the beloved) residing within the heart of the seeker is not only an Upanishadic reference but can be traced in Sufi poetry, as well as in the poems of

and the flame have rarely been configured in such a way. In this poem, more so than in any of her others, the inner and outer worlds—the subjective and the objective, or the personal and the political—come together repeatedly: "I am destruction and also the chain of progress; / I am the age of separation and [also] the darkness of final longing." Thus, the poem weaves together all dualities into one to express the emancipatory possibilities of a new feminist poetics in Hindi.

In an essay titled "Apni Bat" ("My Reflections," 1944), Mahadevi Varma reflects on her own poetry, specifically the collected poems in *Rashmi*. In this essay, she makes a clear link between the poet (the public persona) and his or her inner thoughts (poetry). In her words, "For me, man is a live poem. A poet's work of art is only a word picture of that live poem from which his personality and his unity with the world can be discovered. He lives in one world, and within him he has established another, more beautiful, more tender world. In man, consciousness and unconsciousness are both bound in a deep embrace. His outward form is mortal and a part of this limited world, and his inner heart is immortal, of limitless world—if one keeps him bound to the world, the other desires to keep him flying with imagination" (Varma 1944, 2). The inner and outer worlds of the poet (that Mahadevi speaks of) can be seen as analogous to the relationship between poetry and prose. Poetry lies in the inner world of the poet, that part of him or her that represents "an unbroken series of ties between the sympathetic moral conduct of man's heart with the entire universe." Prose works, on the other hand, are the poet's "lamentation of boundless thoughts which are trapped and confinements of space and time," a representation of the outer world (Varma 1944, 2). Thus, Mahadevi herself articulates the need for specificity of space and time and the change coupled with it, which are inherent in the prose genre.

In her prose, Mahadevi contextualizes women's oppression and the various forms it takes within social and historical circumstances, whereas her

Kabir. Mahadevi traces her influence in all of the above-mentioned sources when she says about Chhayavad and her poetry: "What we take to be a new mysticism in today's lyrical poetry bears some relation to all of these [Vedanta, Yoga, Sufism, Kabir's mysticism], yet it is different from all of them" (Schomer 1998, 114).

poetry moves beyond this realm in her treatment of female sexuality. In her poetry, she explores in greater detail the possibilities available to a woman with a well-defined sense of self—a complete sense of both female subjectivity and sexual autonomy.

It is now possible to see the relationship between Mahadevi Varma's poetry and prose as interconnected representations of her inner or "personal" world and the outer or "public" persona, respectively. The places in her essays when she seems to slip into cultural essentialism are interesting precisely because they agitate the reader; they seem incongruous with her other critiques as well as contradictory to the themes she explores in her poetry. But the "past" occupies an important place and is a source of strength in Mahadevi's writings. In her poetry, as we have seen, there is an attempt on her part to reconfigure elements from "tradition" in new and emancipatory ways. In her prose works, on the other hand, her unwavering admiration for the past often evinces an awkward construction of Indian womanhood. Her construction of "tradition" and the "past" is a product of (as scholars have recently shown) the larger discourse on "Indian womanhood" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in colonial India. In a collection of essays titled *Recasting Women,* Sangari and Vaid situate this tension between "tradition" and "emancipation" within colonial narratives of gender and the nation. Two scholars in particular, Lata Mani and Uma Chakravarti, address precisely this issue. In her essay "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" Chakravarti challenges the constructions of womanhood on the basis of a cohesive Hindu-Aryan identity. She suggests that the "past" was used, in a way, to reify woman's position. Speaking of Rammohan Roy and Pandita Ramabai's articulation of the problems of *sati* (widow self-immolation), Chakravarti says, "Rammohan [and Ramabai] argued that the ultimate goal of all Hindus was selfless absorption in a divine essence. He imbued his account [of an instance of *sati*] with two features both of which have survived into the twentieth century upper caste Hindu perception: one was the spiritual potential of women, and the second was that in the area of spirituality women were not inferior to men. From this followed the implicit assumption that the 'status' of women in the ancient past had been quite high unlike that of contemporary women" (1990, 33). Lata Mani elaborates on this point when she says, "[for Rammohan and others] nineteenth century Indian society represented a decline from

an earlier greatness. . . . Tradition in this discourse is posited as a timeless and structuring principle of Indian society" (1990, 12 and 16). We can see the influence of this thinking in Mahadevi's writings as well. For example, in her essay "Hindu Stri Ka Patnitva" ("Wifehood of Hindu Women," 1942), she is critical about social traditions that grant women only two options for independence: wifehood and motherhood. She proceeds to attack the institutions of child marriage and bride selling, and she speaks out against the conditions of wifehood for Hindu women. At the same time, she praises the status of these same women in some idealized past. Within a few pages of making these bold "feminist" statements, she says the following about women choosing their life partners: "It is proved that women of that [ancient] time were not the dependent link that women are today. Until a particular [age/state] they would be brought up *brahmacaryas* after which they had the authority to choose their own husbands and after those special circumstances they could bid farewell to the ashram [on their own]" (Varma 2000h, 341).

Mahadevi's move to praise women's position in an undefined past, when women roamed as freely as the sages, is precisely the discursive move that other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformers were also making, as Mani and others have shown. Interestingly, Mahadevi does not make this kind of move in her poetry. The past in her poetry is not reified, but it is reworked into the narrative present through a series of metaphors. Any references to "tradition" or the "past" in her poetry are oblique, metaphoric, and not direct, as they tend to be in her critical essays. Moreover, "tradition" in her poetry serves as something to contest, strive to change, and transcend if possible. For example, in a poem titled "Pratiksha" ("Longing," 1930) from her first collection, *Nihar,* we see Mahadevi begin to question tradition, whether one wants to read it poetically or historically:

> The curled rays from the silent stars spoke to me that day,
> "Sleep—your delicate eyelids are tired!" . . .
> When the moth burned and turned life into a candle,
> The infant clouds learned to cry in the open courtyard of the heavens;
> . . . He says I should look for him in my own pupil,
> But who can tell me where I should look for such a pupil?
> . . . The darkness took its collyrium and wove bedclothes upon him,
> while the dawn came and splashed him with gold water.
> . . . How many autumns have come and passed and how many honeyed
> spring days have come and gone,
> but still no one has been able to find my honey-sweet pain.
> Embarrassed, the eyes speak, what kind of impossibility is this?
> We will not play hide-and-seek with him anymore.
> And filling the illusion of dreams in its own threadbare veil,
> It shaded these tired souls with the darkness of oblivion.
> The awakening of my life! Look and don't forget, that when he comes to
> you in a dream, you should turn into a long sleep.
> (Varma 2000m, 76–77)

The poem's repeated suggestions to "sleep," awakening, dreaming, and deep sleep all build on the Upanishadic idea of the four states of existence. In the *Mandukya Upanishad,* for example, the four states of existence are described as follows: "[The first is] situated in the waking state; [the second is] situated in the state of dream; [the third is] deep sleep—when the man entertains no desires and or sees no dreams; and [the fourth] is perceiving neither what is inside nor what is outside, nor even both together" (Olivelle 1996, 289).

In "Pratiksha," Mahadevi endows the absent lover with glorious qualities. He is "splashed with gold water"; "in him the breath of fragrance lost itself in madness"; "the darkness took the collyrium and wove bedclothes upon him," and so on. Indeed, she yearns for him when she says, "ever since the moon peeked out at the night from within a bright veil, I have been searching for the traces of his remains." Yet Mahadevi finds happiness in the awakening of life in this poem, not in the transcendental fourth state as prescribed by the Upanishad. In fact, in the following line, "He says I should look for him in my own pupil, / But who can tell me where I should look for such a pupil?" she goes as far as to question the validity of the Upanishadic reference—"he sees but he has no eyes" (*Svetasvatara Upanishad* 3.19, in Olivelle 1996, 258). She asks, "where do I look, who will tell me?" The eyes become embarrassed, later in the poem, and ask, "What kind of impossibility is this? / We will not play hide-and-seek with him any more." Mahadevi interjects a new voice into the narrative at the poem's close and

says, "look . . . when he comes to you like a dream, you should turn into a long sleep." Perhaps the implication is that she should not acknowledge his arrival. Rather than celebrating the transcendental state, Mahadevi relishes the "long-sleep" state of ignoring and scorning the absent lover when he finally does show up, even if only in a dream.

Mahadevi personalizes metaphilosophic visions and manages to create a seamless sense of time from the past to the present that only the poetic imagination of Chhayavad bridges. Although time may constitute a seamless flow from birth to death to rebirth, the poetic vision tries to transcend this idea of cyclical time, within worldly, earthly concerns, thereby granting the "I" in her poetic voice the opportunity to find release from its tyrannical bonds.

Speaking Beyond Romanticism: Poetic Language That Ignites the Heart

As devout a Gandhian as she was, to the best of my knowledge, Mahadevi does not discuss, address, or quote him directly in her essays or poems. Only one untitled poem, "He dhara ke amar sut" ("O immortal son of the Earth," the first line of the poem), from a collection that was published posthumously, contained an asterisked note signifying that it was written as an homage to Gandhi—"*pujya bapu ko shraddhanjali*" (Varma 2000b, 398). The language of "He dhara ke amar sut" is ornate and highly Sanskritized, which is understandable, since it is an honorific poem written in tribute to Gandhi presumably on his death in 1948. Though many of the poems from this collection, titled *Agnirekha* (*Fire Line*), show evidence that Mahadevi was already experimenting with language and form prior to her association with the Chhayavad movement, a few of the poems that stand out deserve mention here.

I cite sections from one such poem, "Bang-Bhu Shat Vandana Le" ("Hundred Prayers for Bengal") from the *Agnirekha* collection. It is about the Bengal famine (1943–45), and hence was written after Mahadevi had supposedly stopped writing poetry (Varma 2000b, 403).[21]

21. Mahadevi's last collection of poems, *Dip-Shikha,* was published in 1942. This poem, "Bang-bhu shat vandana le," is from the collection *Agnirekha,* which was published posthumously in 1990.

O Bengal, accept our hundred prayers
Magnificent India's immortal verse, accept our prayers!

Your first raging curse, you endured in your motherly lap
Your first adornment came from being anointed with distress

The fearsome sea rages;
And crossing it, destruction arrived

You swallowed in one gulp a deadly poison, and celebrated the first festival
Blue-throated one! You thriller of the world, accept our love and tender fantasies.

In this poem, Mahadevi personifies the state of Bengal—well known throughout India as the seat of mother-goddess worship, specifically of Kali—as a woman, suggesting that the customary anointing and adorning (with water, fragrance, and flowers) that are usually associated with mother worship are turned to famine, destruction, and distress. Here the mother is anointed not with positive attributes but with poison and famine. She further qualifies this *dhvamsa* (destruction) by saying that it came from across the seas, an obvious reference to the British since the British colonial administration was initially headquartered in Bengal. Bengal's swallowing of the colonialism is likened to Shiva's drinking of the poison.

The god Shiva is also known as *nilakantha* (the blue-throated one) because he swallowed the poison that came from the churning of the seas (a genesis story) and held it in his throat. But in Mahadevi's poem, the word is feminized—it is *nilakanthini,* a feminine blue-throated one. She appropriates the story of Shiva and recasts it for a new purpose—to signify a feminized body of land that, as a result of colonialism, has endured countless sufferings. As the poem continues, the feminized land becomes embodied as a woman; a mother-goddess who seems to take delight in the destruction she causes.

The cries of lamentation wander astray in the bamboo groves
Those ponds once filled with love today burn with blisters

Villages smaller than your wrist ornament,
Your peaceful amusements,

Upon them, suddenly, the still-ocean of destruction flowed
You should take refuge today in those shores that are stilled.
(Varma 2000b, 403)

The idea of the transience of time and its accompanying illusoriness is conveyed through a series of metaphors of destruction. The divine sport of *maya*-making is deemphasized, and the consequences of it on the people of Bengal are emphasized; drought has caused the ponds to erupt with blisters, and the once-tranquil villages find themselves distraught because a wave of hunger and starvation has engulfed them. Rather than delight in the divinity of the mother, Mahadevi grounds her exploits materially in Bengal. Furthermore, because the language of this poem contains words in Braj Bhasha, this further softens (and grounds) the Hindi. Far from being a romanticization, idyllic and pastoral in tone, Mahadevi expresses the mother-goddess's potential for material destruction. After all, if Mahadevi had written this poem using the same vocabulary as she did in the poem in tribute to Gandhi, the experiences of the suffering mother would seem not of this world. The poem continues with a critique of the goddess's attributes:

Can tears endowed with power be compared with your sighs?
Oh! Your dreams become skeletons that sway.

Making small heaps of bones
Where jackals prey

"Death only death" are these your only vows?
Accept as an offering today, the awareness of your own powers.
(Varma 2000b, 403)

She recognizes the futility of the tears shed by starving villagers because the destructive power of the mother-goddess is too powerful a force to contain. Mahadevi challenges the divine mother to take stock of her destructive potential in the last verse just cited.

Another example in verse where Mahadevi "stretches the contours of Hindi," to borrow Vasudha Dalmia's words, is "Khudi Na Gayi" ("Pride Did Not Disappear"). Mahadevi wrote this short rhyming verse at her friend Zebunissa's request in 1918. It was published much later in 1982 as part of the collection *Pratham Ayam* (*First Dimension*). Mahadevi wrote "Khudi Na Gayi" in a mix of Braj Bhasha and Urdu while living in the girls' hostel at Crosthwaite College.

Without being sown, without being watered;
Neither the bud formed, nor the flower blossomed,
Neither the candle was arranged nor the flame lit,
Neither the light emerged nor the lamp lit,
Neither did you endure the pain of separation
Nor did you search for the soul in distress!
You could not ever forget yourself
When the pride does not leave, god is not gained.
(Varma 2000o, 474)

Even at this early stage in her literary career (she was only sixteen when she wrote this poem), her leitmotif of the lamp flame plays a prominent role in her poetic topography. Later in her Chhayavad poetry this literary metaphor came to signify her longing for companionship and her desire for erotic and sensual fulfillment, but in the context of this poem it marks simply her experimentation with the power of metaphoric language to convey personal experience.

Mahadevi's very first poem incorporating the lamp motif, "Dhuli Ke Jin Laghu Kanon Men Hai Na Abha Pran" ("In What Tiny Particles of Dust Is There Not Beautiful Life?"), was written in 1916, although it was published posthumously. It is childlike in tone, if not in language. In her early poems, the lamp flame is not depicted as a source of sorrow and suffering, as it becomes in her explicitly Chhayavadi poetry, but is seen as spreading joy and light to the world.

In what tiny particles of dust is there not beautiful life
You have become embodied in them like you have in us

You light fire to that which will burn to ashes in an instant
The new beautiful wick is equally ephemeral

Even in your oil is there not splendor
Once satiated, you gave out boundless light

This lovely body has been crafted with dust
And the beautiful wick of life, a gift from god

It is filled with the oil of love so that we can be without sorrow
So that the darkness of the world would be filled with new light.
"Dhuli Ke Jin Laghu Kanon Men Hai Na Abha Pran" (Varma 2000b, 409)

Even though this poem was written when Mahadevi was only fourteen, her biases toward romantic language are already evident. The lamp is portrayed in loving terms; it is filled with life and oil of love, its earthy base made from dirt, its wick a gift from god. The lamp also comes to represent Mahadevi's personal longings and desires as well, although at this stage of her emotional life she is unable to fully appreciate and express them, as she conveys in a nuanced way in her later poems. The arrival of dusk is both a joyous time and a marker of sadness because union with the beloved most often takes place only at night. It is joyous because one would be reuniting with one's love. It is heart-wrenching because the union will end with the arrival of dawn. The lamp comes to stand for the beginning of night, a period marked by waiting for the beloved and the nature of the union as well; because it is ephemeral, it will die with the end of the night. Even if Mahadevi was not speaking of her own experiences of love and longing in these poems, she was certainly beginning to experiment with the vocabulary often found in love poetry—a tradition with which she would have been intimately familiar given her traditional and classical training in Sanskrit, Braj, and Urdu poetic traditions.

In her poetry from the Chhayavad period, Mahadevi's voice reflects her maturation from one of awe and wonder, as we saw with her poetry from her childhood years, to a nuanced exploration of feminine subjectivity. For example, in a poem from *Niraja,* her voice conveys an awareness of how to play the game of love.

Beloved! I too am a mystery!

As sweet and as melodious as your laughter
As intoxicating as your glances are
There is as much lamentation and despair
And poison, in this quivering world

After drink upon drink, my thirst for sorrow became eternal
As did the gushing river of my happiness!

From every pore of my being
Both the waterfall and fire flow;
Attachment and alienation together make love
In my awakened sighs

Beloved! I have been nurtured within limits
But have sported with the limitless as well!
"Priya! Main Hun Ek Paheli Bhi!" (Varma 2000n, 214)

Here, Mahadevi seems to suggest that she can be as mysterious and contradictory as her lover. She does not dwell on the subjectivity of the lover for too long, however, for after the first few verses of the poem—which primarily depict the contradictory nature of her lover—she concentrates solely on expressing her subjective experience of love. She is both ecstatic in love and sorrowful because of it. Her emotional state as presented in the poem reflects both the alienation she feels because of the unrequited nature of her love as well as her attachment to the object of her love; she says, "both the waterfall and the fire flow, from every pore of my being." More significant, the dualities of attachment and alienation that are commonly attributed with being in love with someone, come together in *her:* "in my sighs, both attachment and alienation [come together] and make love."

In the closing lines, Mahadevi flirts with (and perhaps even challenges) the boundaries of how to express her "nontraditional" love for her beloved. Despite the fact that she has been raised within certain prescriptive boundaries of how one expresses love (perhaps we could read this in light of her indictment of marriage), in contrast, she has "sported with the limitless" as well. This is one of Mahadevi's strongest statements about the nonconforming nature of her love. Because it is not bound by marital expectations, she is granted more freedom to explore and express it.

Though it is never clear if Mahadevi's love is actually directed toward a specific someone, in the following excerpt of a poem from her final *Dip-Shikha* collection titled "Main Palkon Men Pal Rahi Hun Yeh Sapna Sukumar

Kisi Ka" ("I Am Nurturing in My Eyelids Delicate Dreams of Someone," 1942), she seems to come close to providing an answer:

> I am nurturing in my eyelids delicate dreams of someone
>
> I do not know why some say
> That I am lost in the entanglement of darkness,
> In paths consisting entirely of smoke
> Secretly I cried like lightning
> In every particle I pour love, under the guise of tears, for someone
>
> How can I be perplexed by beginnings and endings?
> On this path, moving forward is my liberation
> Thus the history of the union is made
> In the untold and yearning journey
> With every step my desolate world becomes filled with someone.
> (Varma 2000d, 348)

David Rubin, in his anthology of Chhayavad poetry, suggests that Mahadevi is responding to criticism leveled at her poetry, that in fact "her love is imaginary" (Rubin 1993, 179). Regardless of whether her lover is imaginary or real, what is significant here is that Mahadevi seems to use the space of poetry to respond to criticism about and reflect on her own work. It is as if she suggests that most people have not understood the love behind her tears—as if they have mistaken her tears as conveying a profound sorrow and sadness instead of seeing them as exulting love.

Even more significant, Mahadevi is neither troubled by nor inhibited by lost love. "How can I be perplexed by beginnings and endings?" she asks, suggesting that moving on after having loved and lost is more liberating than having not loved at all. Despite the risks inherent in following one's heart and dreams, insofar as those dreams may not materialize in conventional ways, she reflects on the journey of her life as a positive experience. This poem stands apart from many of the others in *Dip-Shikha* because the female voice here refers to loving a particular someone, rather than an abstract, universalized love. Ramratan Bhatnagar, a noted Hindi scholar, has also suggested that because there is no external evidence for the "internality of emotions of love," about which Mahadevi speaks so poignantly in her poetry, one cannot assume that she was in fact speaking about (and to) a specific someone (Bhatnagar 1984, 24).

This theme of journeying through love's adventures is not unique to her *Dip-Shikha* collection. The very last poem from *Sandhya Git* reflects similarly on her experience of love with one exception: Mahadevi seems to have found her lover in this poem.

> I have found his footprints in the darkness!
> My distressed heart, a traveler for ages
> Has gathered up particles of dust from the path
> Hidden sorrows bound in my breaths
> Moved on before me as a lamp.
> "Timir Men Ve Pad-Chihn Mile" (Varma 2000r, 300)

After traveling a long and arduous road, Mahadevi delights in her union with her elusive lover. Whereas in the past he has always been just beyond her reach, she finally manages to have touched him in this poem.

In a poem from her *Rashmi* collection—the collection that officially earned her the title of "modern Mira" because of its themes of the pain of separation from the beloved—Mahadevi's elusive lover becomes embodied in her; he becomes her tears, her memories, her sighs, and her eyes:

> Friend, how can I make him mine?
>
> He becomes my tears,
> And slips away,
> In the snares of these eyelids,
> I regret imprisoning him!
>
> Like lightning in the clouds,
> His image forms and disappears,
> In the screens of my eyes,
> So that I cannot gauge him!
>
> He becomes light and gets lost,
> In a tangle of moonbeams,
> Where, through each and every particle,
> I search but cannot find him!

In sleep, in the ocean's throbbing—
He forms, from the slapping of the waves,
His very own sweet story,
But I cannot relate it to him!

He becomes the unwavering gaze
Of those simple stars,
But, uneasy, even his reflection,
I could not touch!

In my mind, he stealthily,
Becomes the sighs, and hides,
So that I can see him in my breaths,
But I cannot stop him!

He becomes memories in my heart
And disturbs me day and night,
This harshness of his,
Makes it so that I cannot forget him.
"Ali, Kaise Unko Paun?" (Varma 2000p, 142–43)

Here one already witnesses the beginnings of Mahadevi's universalized love, what would become in her later collections like *Sandhya Git* and *Dip-Shikha* a critical aspect of her Vedantic vocabulary for expressing love. Nevertheless, in this poem, her emphasis remains on her subjective experience of love. Even though her lover becomes her tears, she cannot stop him from flowing away; she can see him in her breaths, but he manages to escape in her every sigh. Despite every attempt to hold on to him and make him hers, all she has are memories of him because he finds ways to escape; yet he throbs like a splinter in her heart, and therefore she cannot forget him.

With the publication of *Dip-Shikha,* Mahadevi's poetic voice becomes closeted but does not die. Poems like "Bang-Bhu Shat Vandana Le" ("A Hundred Prayers for Bengal") and "He dhara ke amar sut" ("O immortal son of the earth") were written after 1942, when she stopped publishing poetry. In both these poems, through a play with language and metaphors, Mahadevi continues to project different voices of subjective experience. In the former, she poignantly captures the devastation of famine; in the latter, through a highly stylized Sanskrit, she eloquently captures the charisma of Gandhi.

In her poems, beginning with her first collection, Mahadevi brings to light what women's emancipation could look like if they were truly free to choose their own destinies. As for women's sexual autonomy, she explores its multiple possibilities in the pages of her poems. Though her earlier books of poetry sought to bring to light either her subjective experiences of love and longing or the relationship between two lovers, her later works (with noted exceptions) delve into more abstract depictions of the nature of love. Over time, her metaphors became more universal in their vision and scope. But this is not to say that the passion fueling her poetic vision for thirty-some years diminished with time. Rather, as she matured as a woman and a poet, her social commitments to the nation became a more pressing need, and accordingly she had to cast that passion into a new mold—that of prose.

Fields of Protest: Implications of Language and Politics

Mahadevi's essay titled "Mere Bachpan Ke Din" ("My Childhood Days") synthesizes many of the themes with which I have engaged thus far in this chapter: namely, women's education, resistance to tradition, the role of the writer in a transforming society, and transcending religious and ethnic differences.[22] "Mere Bachpan Ke Din" imparts a deep sense of loss—of community, history, and childhood innocence. As she traces the contours of how Hindi came into their family and how cross-cultural her childhood experiences seemed, Mahadevi reflects on the impossibility of such visions in her present environment and social circumstance in a post-Independence India. She suggests that her memories of her childhood seem particularly strange to her when she recounts them, as if these experiences appear to have taken place in a dream world (Varma 2000j, 416).

Two key features of this essay that strike the reader are, first, the manner in which Mahadevi is able to re-create and make palpable the emotions of teenage naiveté; and second, the discretion and ease with which she traverses

22. I borrow the phrase "Fields of Protest" for the title of this section from Ray (1999).

difficult questions of language and religioethnic politics, emotions that are impossible to convey in a nonpatronizing tone unless one is confident and comfortable that one is indeed unbiased. Through a series of vignettes about her hostel days at Crosthwaite College, Mahadevi grapples with questions of language politics that modern South Asian literary historians have only recently begun to engage. I quote at length from various sections of this essay:

> In the hostel [at Crosthwaite] there were four girls to every room. I met my very first friend Subhadra Kumari there. She was two years senior to me. She would write poetry and I too knew how to rhyme from my childhood. My mother used to write and also sing devotional poetry (*pad*). She used to sing the verses of Mira with exceptional form. Listening to her singing over an extended period of time, I began to write in Braj Bhasha. When I came here I noticed that Subhadra-ji was writing in Khari Boli. I too began to write in the very same way. But Subhadra-ji was already very prominent a writer. I used to write unbeknownst to her. One day she said, "Mahadevi, do you write poetry?" I got scared and said, "No!" In the end she searched through the books on my desk and found many poems in them. Then, like one captures a criminal, she grabbed the papers in one hand and my hand in hers and took me around the entire hostel telling everyone that this girl writes poetry. During this time there used to be a journal called *Stri-darpan* that was published. I would send my pieces there, and several of my rhymes got published. Then when there were poetry gatherings here, we too used to participate. During that time there was a great deal of propaganda about Hindi. I came here when I was seventeen. After that Gandhi-ji *satyagraha* movement began and Anand Bhavan [the home of the Nehru family] became the headquarters of the freedom struggle. All about there was also the propaganda for Hindi. When there would be poetry gatherings, the Madam from Crosthwaite would take us along with her. We would recite our poetry. . . . When my name would be called I would listen with a feeling of unease. I would win the first prize. I must have won no fewer than a hundred medals in these gatherings. . . .
>
> Subhadra-ji left the hostel and a Marathi girl named Zebunnissa moved into my room and took Subhadra's place. She came from Kohlapur. . . . Zebun would speak Hindi but would mix Marathi words into it. I too began to learn some Marathi from her. There was also an *ustani-ji* [female Urdu teacher] in school—Zenat Begum. When Zebun would mix up her Marathi words and speak Hindi, Zenat Begum would not spare her. . . .
>
> During that time there was no communalism that I saw. Girls from Awadh would speak Avadhi with each other; those from Bundelkhand, would speak Bundeli. No distance separated us and we studied Hindi together. We were also taught Urdu. But among each other we spoke our own language. This is a hugely important point. We would eat in a common cafeteria; stand together in prayer; there was never any controversy.
>
> Until the time I came to the Vidhyapith, this was what I was used to. Sometimes, our childhood impressions are such that they remain intact until we grow old. There is one more impression from my childhood that I remember and that is that we used to live in the compound of a *javara ke nawab* [large landowner with a title from the Mughals or the Awadh nawab]. His status of a *nawab* had been seized. He used to live in a bungalow and we used to live in his compound. The Begum would ask us to call her "*tai*" [aunt—wife of father's elder brother]. We used to call her *tai-sahiba*. Her children would address my mother as "*chachi-jan*" [aunt]. I would celebrate my birthdays at their house, and her son's birthday would be celebrated at our house. She would ask me to tie *rakhi* to her son [whereby Mahadevi would be accepting him as a brother and he in turn accepting her as his sister]. . . .
>
> In their home both Hindi and Urdu were common parlances. But in our home she would speak Avadhi. It was possible then for us to be very close. After seeing the state of affairs of the present day, it appears as if all of those occurrences took place in my dreams. Today, this dream is lost.
>
> Perhaps one day if this dream comes true then India's story would become something else. (Varma 2000j, 416–19)

What Mahadevi makes explicit in this essay is the marked shift between life as she knew it in the 1920s and the sociopolitical circumstances of her present that no longer facilitate her childhood impressions and dreams. Her essay centers this shift in her experiences on the interlocking concepts of language and communal politics that led to the eventual Partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Though it is unclear exactly when this essay was

written,[23] its tone reflects a sense of community and history that transcends binary divisions of Hindi versus Urdu and Hindu against Muslim, something that Mahadevi felt was now irretrievably in the past.

Additionally, Mahadevi notes the fluidity with which she, as a native speaker of Hindi, used interchangeably Urdu, Avadhi, and Khari Boli, sometimes going as far as to incorporate these different languages (and the aesthetics associated with each one) into her Hindi poetry. Her use of Sanskrit, as I have already pointed out, was a marker of legitimacy and authority, on the one hand, and a bold act of resistance to patriarchal hegemony and Brahmanic orthodoxy, on the other.

In her essay "Hamara Desh Aur Rashtrabhasha" ("Our Nation and National Language"), Mahadevi defines explicitly the implication of Hindi and its status as national language. Hindi in its present form (known as Khari Boli) was not contrived, she suggests, but "developed with the heart of the people, from Prakrit and Braj-Avadhi." She likens its development to the "seed and the earth," each giving to the other and taking from it to thrive (Varma 2000f, 72). Hindi has thus grown with the hearts of the people, "not only as the profound voice of saints and seekers but also as the language of practical communication in the bazaars and market places" (Varma 2000f, 72). Mahadevi sees Hindi as a language that cuts across class and caste boundaries. She is able to reflect such politics in her poetry in an unpretentious manner precisely because "she did not live apart from the *lok* [the common folk/the people]" (Bhatiya 1984, 90). As such, "village [*gramin*] vocabulary has found its way [in her poetry] in an unaffected and unforced manner" (Bhatiya 1984, 90). For these very reasons, and her nonpolemical stance with respect to Muslims and Urdu, words explicitly of Perso-Arabic lexis, like *bandi-khana* (prison), and *dagh* (wound), find their way with equal ease in her poems from *Nihar* (Bhatiya 1984, 91).

What space, then, did her prose occupy in critiquing civil society, and what did her poetry facilitate?[24] Mahadevi provides some clues to these

23. It was published in 1970 by Setu Prakashan as part of the *Mahadevi Sahitya* anthology.

24. Many essays in the massive, nearly 500-page *Mahadevi Abhinandan Granth* deal with the question of how to interpret her poetry—whether one is to regard it as mystical

questions in her autobiographical essay on her literary journey, "Meri Sahitya-Yatra: Gadhya Ke Sandarbh Men" ("My Literary-Journey: In the Context of Prose Writing"). Addressing her different writing personas, she says that the *bhav* (emotion, mood) she projects in her prose sketches endeavors to bring to life certain people who have affected her; these *samsmaran-lekh* (memory sketches) are different from her *nibandh* (essays). Many of these essays and reflections remain unpublished (Varma 2000k, 406). As she explains:

> I have [also] written about political leaders. They are not political acquaintances, but rather I knew them intimately. For example, I wrote for Rajendra Babu, Jawahar Bhai, Tandon-ji, etc. I wrote about my poet friends as well. I wrote about their poetry along with their specialized knowledge. I have written about the charismatic qualities of political leaders, and about everyday people as well. I have taken all the qualities about them that are close to my heart; about what makes them dignified, what makes them human. With a considered emotion, I have expressed our intimacy. These [reflective essays] are different than my [critical] essays. Thus, these people are very surprised that I do not say the things in my poetry that I say in my prose and if in fact I really think in this way? That when I make a particular argument or reasoning in my prose, how is such a critique to enter into my poetry? It is possible that I could place a particular subject into my poetry. . . . But there is no reason for this. Whatever I have to say concerning the state of affairs (*vyavastha ke sambandh*), or on some profound topic, as far as I am concerned there is a way, a particular way, to make an argument. Why should one abandon this method? Why can we not present it in a way that others would accept or believe it, or at least be able to provide a counterargument? There is no room for counterargument in verse. If it were given in verse then it would become a parody. And then this would become the task of a jester. Probably in connection with becoming a teacher, I had to take an even greater pleasure in writing essays. Perhaps

poetry, secular poetry, or "feminist" poetry. See, as examples, Bhatnagar (1984, 24–33). For analyses of mysticism versus Chhayavad in her poetry, see Kokil (1984, 274–78) for a discussion of women's issues in Mahadevi's writings.

> if I had not entered the field of education, I would have been content with just writing poetry. However from the very beginning, my teachers for both were separate: one taught me *samasya-purti* and the other taught me language. . . . When I write prose, I first think about the subject in a definitive way. And then I think about the necessity of providing a particular argument or criticism. I have many different essays of such types. Some are quite difficult to grasp. For example when I wrote about the Himalayas, I even had to do quite a bit of research. And only then did I write about it. Essays of this type I do not have much affinity for because to render them into prose I have to contemplate them with objectivity. The way in which I intertwine myself into my poetry I am unable to do in my prose. And it is for this reason that you will find some of my prose intangible and difficult to grasp. (Varma 2000k, 406–7)

Mahadevi establishes that prose and poetry serve different political purposes, and they help convey her different voices. In her prose, she can use a critical voice and build on established methods to make her argument. In her poetry, on the other hand, she is able to foreground the personal, experiential, and emotional aspects of her life. Resorting to prosaic argumentation in poetry, she suggests, would be akin to parody.

Mahadevi's prose sketches are pioneering in Hindi literature, as she was the first to experiment with this literary form (Aravindakshan 1973, 26–35). Her use of language in these sketches is such that one is able to quickly grasp the character, flavor, and texture of the person being described (Aravindakshan 1973, 15). Though much work has been done on Mahadevi's *Atit Ke Chal-Chitra* (*Moving Pictures of My Past*) and *Smriti Ki Rekhayen* (*Silhouettes of Memory*), little has been written on *Path Ke Sathi* (*Fellow Companions*, 1956) prose sketches. Unlike her characters in her first two sketches, who are mainly the servants and common people who touched her life, the characters in *Path Ke Sathi* are literary people. In this collection, Mahadevi is not only able to impress on the reader the charisma of her fellow poets, she also addresses how her poetic opinions differ from those of her literary companions (Gokakakar 1966, 52–54).

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his reading of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), suggests that Tagore performed a "division of labor" between his prose and poetic works to express *both* a socially grounded critique of the nation and an all-encompassing love for the nation at the same time (Chakrabarty 2000, 151). Romanticism was the strategy that writers like Tagore developed to deal with these very different ways of seeing the nation—one that recognized all the pitfalls of the nation (social evils), and one that sought at the same time to create a positive image of the nation in an imagined and constructed history (romanticism). The prosaic facilitated for Tagore critiques of "poverty, ill health, factionalism, ignorance, casteism, 'feudal' oppression, and so on; and, the poetic pictured the Bengali home/village as a place blessed with divine grace and beauty, a peaceful home for the tender Bengali heart, the golden Bengal of national sentiments" (Chakrabarty 2000, 153). What Tagore envisioned for the Bengali urban intellectual is a means, a "transport" out of, and a way of coming to terms with life in the city (Chakrabarty 2000, 171). As Chakrabarty elaborates:

> The poetic helped transcend the mere thingness of things by letting us see beyond the real or *bastab*. It is true that Tagore did not give middle-class Bengalis the literary wherewithal with which to aestheticize directly their salaried labor, rickety institutions of civil life, and other life possibilities in the urban landscape of Calcutta. Bengali literary modernism could not be itself without somehow moving beyond Tagore. But Tagore's idealist romanticism remained an indispensable aspect of the literary strategies that made life in the city pleasurable for the literate. (2000, 170)

Two points in Chakrabarty's formulation of the differences between the prosaic and the poetic find resonance in my reading of Mahadevi Varma's poetry as well. First is his suggestion that the poetic contains a transport out of the everyday, and second is his understanding of "pleasure" in facilitating such transport. Like Tagore, who had a major influence on the early Chhayavadi poets Pant and Nirala, Mahadevi also performs a division of labor between her prose and poetic writings. But she complicates matters further through her experimentation with prose sketches, a new phenomenon for Hindi literature in her time, because in these sketches she explores the psychological and social aspect of women's experience—the abuses they suffer from mothers-in-law and stepmothers, widowhood, child marriage,

and so forth. There is no room for this type of "realism" in her poetry (Varma 2000c). Instead, Mahadevi can be seen as making acceptable a kind of woman's pleasure in the urban landscape of nationalist Allahabad through a mediation of love and nature, increasingly casting this feminine "pleasure" in the shimmer of Vedanta.

Eroticism and feminine pleasure are a vital part of Braj Bhasha poetry as well; many of Mirabai's (1498–1547) devotional songs about Krishna are most sensual and erotic in their tone. Although Mahadevi was compared quite frequently to Mirabai, it must be made clear that there are fundamental differences between them beyond the large historical period and the colonial baggage that separates them. Mirabai's eroticism is cast in a devotional mode, whereas Mahadevi's is set in a secular landscape. Like Mirabai, Mahadevi takes up and plays with, in her poetry, the idea of the *virahini*, but the end result is not union with the lover, though this is certainly one part of it. As the case with Krishna *bhakti* poetry, separation itself becomes a means to an end and serves as her poetic inspiration. However, I suggest that Mahadevi as *virahini* takes pleasure in distancing herself from wifehood and familial confines, not because she is fundamentally opposed to the institution but because she realizes her individual longings best in the projection of a desired, absolute union with her lover. As she puts it in her essay "Ghar Aur Bahar" ("Home and World," 1942):

> If they can remain single for their entire lives and relinquish the desire for children or a happy home life, they can find a place in this field [of education], not otherwise. As soon as they are married, the dreams of a happy home life become handcuffs and chains and grip their hands and feet in such a way that the flow of the life force stops within them. They can get permission to travel in celebration of some fortunate woman's wedding rites, they can order expensive dogs and cats to raise, and if they find the time they can attend big parties. But working professionally, even though it could be making the innumerable children of the country into human beings, radically destroys the prestige of the husband. Saying that this opinion has not injured an essential part of women would be to lie, because in that case we would never find such high numbers of girls so disengaged within marriage. (Varma 2000e, 368)

What Mahadevi sets up here is the space outside of marriage for women to be self-sufficient, namely, through education. The isolation she felt as a writer, her longing for companionship, and her profound commitment to women's empowerment—all aspects of her own experience as a woman in the early twentieth century—find grounding in her *virahini* trope. What she longs for is not merely unification with the lover but also a coming together of her public and private experiences, her aspirations for doing social service with a personal longing for fulfillment as a woman. In her poetry, she develops her idea of women's pleasure, linking it to an explicit sexuality that is rooted in the debates of her sociopolitical context. Dissatisfaction, detachment, and suffering become the wellspring of her creativity, but they are also expressions of the real repercussions of living life alone as a woman and as a writer in a rapidly modernizing Allahabad.

Between Tradition and Feminist Emancipation

By the time Mahadevi moved to Allahabad in 1918, the city was ripe to become an important Hindi literary center. Noted scholars, writers, and poets frequented Allahabad for literary gatherings and meetings where the future of Hindi literature was debated in the context of *kavi-sammelans* (poets' gatherings). Institutional support for Hindi literature was provided by the various literary magazines published in Allahabad, like *Saraswati* and *Chand*, to name just two of the more well-known, and university boarding houses took in and encouraged poets and their craft (Schomer 1977, 210–25). The popularity of women's journals, *Stri-darpan* and *Chand*, speaks to the manner in which women from middle-class families with close ties to the nationalist movement actively carved out a space in which women's opinions and voices found a forum—by women and for women. Women's morality (what came to stand for the prototypical Indian woman, how she would raise her children, etc.) was regulated and mediated by the rhetoric of nationalism in the pages of these journals.[25]

25. Note, for example, Francesca Orsini's thorough study of women's journals during this period (2002, 242–308).

While serving as the literary editor for *Chand,* Mahadevi intervened in the debate between the Progressives (PWA) and the Chhayavadi writers by arguing that the subject matter of poetry and the craft of poetry were two different issues, the latter being the sole criteria on which to evaluate a poet's merits. In other words, what marked poetry as "good" had little to do with whether the poem harbored a political agenda, but depended on the finesse of the poet to play with language, meaning, and tropes to express subjective experience.[26] In the introductory essay to her collection of poetry in the series titled *Adhunik Kavi* (*Modern Poet*), Mahadevi argued that the ideals of Progressivism were not incompatible with the aesthetics of Chhayavad.[27] She explores the contours of artistic expression in the following manner:

> Today's rational age demands that the poet depict reality without coloring it with his feelings, but there is no place for this kind of realism within the realm of art. . . . [It is the realm of] the mediocre artist, who, carefully setting down every line in just the right place, exerts himself to reproduce on paper an exact replica of the object he is drawing, and end up creating a fully realistic picture that is devoid of any power to move us. . . . The great artist, however, is one who can grasp at once what is most poignant about his subject and, in a few bold lines, . . . reveal its very soul. (Schomer 1998, 266)

Accordingly, the artist's task was not to spell out in detail the problems of society in his or her creative expression, but to come to terms with the relationship of the individual's transformation within the ever-changing social landscape. Her critique of the PWA position with respect to Chhayavad then remained grounded in her belief about poetry's ability to be subtle.

26. Playing with subjective experience was one of the definitive markers of the Chhayavad movement. So although not all poetry had to necessarily be about subjective experience, Chhayavad poets tried to come to terms with the individual's experience embedded as he or she was in the totality of life's networks.

27. The Progressive Writers Association (PWA), founded by Hindi writer Premchand, had its first meeting in Allahabad in 1936. The PWA had a clear manifesto and social agenda: to make Hindi literature "up to date" and engage sociopolitical themes of the period. The Progressives regarded Chhayavad poetry as escapist, having little to do with the social realities of the time. See, for example, Coppola (1975).

Mahadevi was not alone in her views about Chhayavad and its place in the Hindi poetic tradition. According to David Rubin, the move toward the subjective (inward, reflective) from conventional descriptions of nature and landscape typical of Braj Bhasha poetry was in and of itself a marked shift in Hindi literature. This shift, according to Rubin, was:

> extremely significant because for the first time in Hindi literature high value was attributed to the individual experience, to purely personal emotions, to the assertion of individuality for its own sake as a basis of art. The individual was to be important not only insofar as he served to reflect a tradition, a myth, a body of beliefs or the operation of a divine scheme, but in his own terms. If one looked back now to epic and classical material, it was not simply to laud and evoke the splendor of the tradition but to find a framework or a form for otherwise too intense and too passionate personal experience. (Rubin 1993, 11)

This "right to feel," as Orsini refers to it in her study of the gendered construction of the Hindi public sphere, became an integral motivation in the legitimating of women's journals during this time period as well. *Chand,* in particular, pushed the limits of what was considered to be the acceptable voice women's journals would project. More than compilations of "political education" for women, *Chand* sought to give legitimacy to women as "emotional beings, questioning their home-bound existence, and envisaging [for them] new public roles" (Orsini 2002, 274). Despite the ripeness of the climate for women to come into the public spaces of society—of politics and publishing—the fact remained that women like Mahadevi, who lived public lives as single women, had to give the impression of utmost respectability in all aspects of personal and professional life to be taken seriously as symbols of Indian femininity and womanhood.

Sacrifice as a National Ideal: Gandhi's Calling and Mahadevi's Response

Sacrifice and service, Gandhi's twin ideals for how India would win freedom from the British, cut through the very fabric of society at the twilight of the British Empire. One aspect of Gandhi's intervention lay in the domestic sphere (the private, the home); his ideal *satyagrahi* (freedom fighter) was

molded out of his understanding of woman's nature as fundamentally driven toward sacrifice and service to her husband and family. His vision of sexual abstinence and *seva* (social service) made it possible to imagine the part that each individual could play in helping transcend colonial tyranny. Mahadevi's engagement with Gandhian thought and praxis may have been partially instrumental in her decision to give up writing poetry and, more important, devote her time entirely to social service and education. After entering the field of education, as she notes in an autobiographical essay, she could no longer remain content with just writing poetry (Varma 2000k, 404–8). She was not an armchair intellectual. Although the former might suggest a lack of social consciousness, the latter, according to Mahadevi, would be "like sitting in a burning house giving orders to put out the flames" (Varma 2000a, 201).

It is interesting to note that long before she met Gandhi, Mahadevi resisted her child marriage to Svarupnarayan Varma. Even after completing her bachelor's degree, she remained adamant about her decision to not live with her husband and even considered becoming a Buddhist nun. In an interview conducted by Karine Schomer, Mahadevi speaks of her decision to not honor her marital commitment: "[I decided] to lead the life of a *bhikkhuni* (nun) without taking on the ochre robe or withdrawing from the world" (Schomer 1998, 199). But even as she chose the life of celibacy without affiliation with a particular religious order, Mahadevi wondered about the extent to which her lifestyle was publicly accepted: "It would have been better if I had become a nun. If I had, perhaps the world would not have kept on trying to discover individuals it could imagine I was romantically involved with" (Schomer 1998, 198n8).[28]

Gandhi's program of *satyagraha* (adherence to the principle of truth; truth force) had created a space for women to participate in the nationalist cause by breaking through the dichotomy between the domestic and the public spheres of everyday life. By extension, the spinning of *khadi* and the exercise of moral restraint, what Gandhi extolled as "feminine" virtues, made possible the practice of *satyagraha* while conforming to women's

28. It is interesting to note the kind of public persona she cultivated well into the later years of her life. When Karine Schomer interviewed her, she was nearly seventy years old.

prescriptive domestic roles. In the Gandhian vision, women could enter the public space if they wished to do *seva* for the nation.[29] Therefore, Mahadevi's involvement with the Prayag Mahila Vidyapith (Allahabad Women's University) helped project her impeccable Gandhian persona. Poetry, on the other hand, offered her a means of creating a larger "private" world, in which she could explore the eroticism of love and desire simultaneously as a literary and a feminist aesthetic.

Though deeply influenced by Gandhi's readings of caste and Untouchability, Mahadevi's stance on women's sexuality departs radically from the position advocated by Gandhi. Gandhi's position on male/female sexuality was ambiguous insofar as he tried at various stages throughout his life to come to an understanding of sexuality vis-à-vis his principles of self-sacrifice and "truth." He writes openly about his various experiments with celibacy, his failed attempts to control and channel his sexual urges into the ideals of self-sacrifice, and the outright denial of his wife's sexual needs, in service to his principles of "truth" in his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (M. Gandhi 1983). Mahadevi's poignant explanation of the isolation and loneliness that women feel, caught as they were between the world of domesticity and "conventions" and the "call of the new age in front of them," reveals that she was concerned primarily with the lack of social structure for educated women both inside and outside the home (Orsini 2002, 304). As Mahadevi explains: "Old-fashioned men look down upon them with contempt; modern-minded men support them but are unable to help them actively and the radicals encourage them but find it hard to take them along. Truly, modern women are more alone than old ones" (Orsini 1998, 304). Although "sexual" loneliness is not explicit in Mahadevi's statements about these problems plaguing modern, educated women, her poetry takes up and substantially develops the theme of female sexuality and eroticism through the classical and conventional tropes available in Sanskrit, Braj Bhasha, and Urdu literature. Far from denying female sexuality, or promoting asexuality as Gandhi essentially formulated it, Mahadevi's poetry explores the contours

29. For a detailed (and well-illustrated) study of women's participation in the nationalist movement, see Kumar (1993).

of love outside the confines of marriage. She was a married woman who wrote passionate poetry about a lover who was not her husband; her poetry, therefore, must be understood as only a partial acceptance of Gandhi's ideals of female sexuality. The extent to which she departed from Gandhi is telling, once again, of how women like her served as agents in their own construction, dismantling the master's house not with the master's tools but with the countertools of feminine subjectivity and poetry.

In his reading of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (*Indian Home-Rule*), Suresh Sharma suggests that Gandhi was not seeking in tradition "the resource for a better and more powerful variant of 'modernity'"; rather, he chose to discuss the contemporary challenges facing Indian society through "a traditional framework of validation" (Sharma 1995, 283). Through his theoretical lens, Mahadevi's contradictions regarding modernity and Indian womanhood take on a new political urgency hitherto ignored by Hindi literary criticism. She lays out the contours of the debate regarding women's oppression as a social and historical phenomenon in her critical essays by taking into consideration both the subjective forms of women's oppression and the external manifestations of their subjugation. In a now famous editorial essay, "Hamari Shrinkhala Ki Kariyan" ("The Links in Our Chains," 1936), Mahadevi outlines the different projections of womanhood that men have thrust on women. Men have either deified women and worshiped them or considered them worthless and therefore neglected them (Varma 2000g, 293). These different projections on what women are and should be, according to Mahadevi, had resulted in Indian women's inability (unlike their male counterparts) to assert their individuality. As she explains, "Everyone has the need for the development of an unfettered individuality, because, without it, man would not be able to express his willpower and intention, nor would he be able to weigh his duty on the scale of justice and injustice" (Varma 2000g, 293). She goes on to argue further that women cannot express their desires and exercise their will because their personalities are not self-defined and are mere shadows of their men (Varma 2000g, 295). The solution, Mahadevi suggests, is not to be a mere *pratibimb* (reflection) of the *bimb* (original) but to develop a strong sense of self and individuality. In her words, "We do not need the permission of the world to cut away the fetters we have accepted for time immemorial. But if a captive were to cut off his feet along with the shackles that bind them, then we must keep in mind that his desires for freedom would be in vain. If without protecting our individuality and our specialties, and if a necessary portion of our life along with our bondage slips away, then, it will be inevitable that we would find freedom from one type of bondage only to enter into another" (Varma 2000g, 299).

Because women's individual selfhood and personalities have been thwarted in the self-interest of men, society as a whole has developed in the "artificial cover of tradition" (Varma 2000g, 295–96). The psychological effects of such oppression, according to Mahadevi, are detrimental to women because they do not help women grow and develop as individuals in their own right; moreover, they cannot become free citizens of a nation. Though this last idea is echoed by Gandhi as well, Mahadevi's intervention was informed by her commitment to gender equality. Her subjectivity as a woman enabled the type of thorough social critique that Gandhi did not subscribe to, not because he was a man but because his commitment to subjective independence and national freedom were fundamentally informed by a more traditional reading of gender, rather than a gendered reading of religion and tradition.

In her discussions of the institution of marriage, particularly in her essay "Hindu Stri Ka Patnitva" ("Wifehood of Hindu Women," 1942), Mahadevi levels a powerful critique at Hindu tradition, going so far as to say that marriage can be akin to slavery:

> In women's lives, the absence of political authority and financial independence certainly remains. In addition, there is no hope for [her to have] a place in society. [Women] understand their first goal to be wifehood, and their last, motherhood; therefore a single path of livelihood, and a single means of life were fixed. If we can bear the harsh truth, we would have to accept it with humility: that society has given to women the most debased means for building up her life. She must live, having been made a means for the exhibition and enjoyment of man's wealth. No weight is given to her worth in the form of an individual and citizen. Motherhood is honorable for the upkeep of society, wifehood is also praiseworthy for individual fulfillment, but can it be said that only these two are appropriate for the physical and mental health of all women? [literally, 100 percent]. Could

not a woman direct her physical and mental capabilities toward some other worthy goal? (Varma 2000h, 337–38)

During this historical period when Mahadevi is writing, the "worthy goal" was in keeping with Gandhi's call for *swaraj* (freedom) through the various forms of social service, noncooperation, and moral self-purification. Despite her otherwise impeccable Gandhian stance, the goal as far as Mahadevi was concerned was education and self-empowerment. Through the acquisition of education, Mahadevi argued, women would gain a distinct sense of self and then would be in a better position to effect social change.

In "Shrinkhala Ki Kariyan" Mahadevi finds fault with Indian society's treatment of women, whereas in her other essays "Hindu Stri Ka Patnitva" ("Wifehood of Hindu Women," 1942), "Ghar Aur Bahar" ("The Home and the World," 1942), "Adhunik Nari" ("The Modern Woman," 1942), and "Hamari Samasyaen" ("Our Problems," 1936), she delves deeper into the different social and economic aspects of Indian (especially Hindu) womanhood. In "Adhunik Nari," a piece that could be read autobiographically, she addresses the isolation that professional and educated women face as a result of their social and economic standing (Varma 2000a, 323–31).

Gandhi's vision of female sexuality was fundamentally one of domesticity; that is, female sexuality was legitimate only when it was expressed within a controlled marriage. But the lover in Mahadevi's poetry is not always the husband of the beloved. He comes, stays for a while, and then leaves the beloved behind; sometimes, the woman occupies the subjective position of the lover, thus, it is she who leaves her male beloved. Poems like "Chah" ("Desire") take up and explore fully such subjectivities of lover and beloved, subverted and reversed (Varma 2000m, 42).

In her poetry, Mahadevi departs from the Gandhian vision in several significant ways. First, she uses the traditional love relationship of Radha and Krishna to speak about a new kind of female sexuality, one that could exist outside of marriage and domesticity even in an age obsessed with social reform. Second, she remains very conscious of the "present" in her poetry, and in fact, she celebrates "worldly" or material liberation rather than "other worldly" or spiritual liberation. Third, Mahadevi's poems provide multiple and pluralistic readings of history using traditional tropes that readers could

instantly recognize, but through the strategic use of these tropes she managed to convey a radical new message about women's empowerment and subjectivity.

Mahadevi did not see women in the constricted view popularized by Gandhi. She chose powerful and liberating images of womanhood from "traditional" Hindu literature to empower herself and the women of her time. She documented in her essays and sketches the systemic basis for women's subjugation, arguing that if women were able to have equal access to education, they would be able to have economic and social autonomy. Confining institutions like marriage became the target of some of her harshest criticisms. In her poetry, she explores more completely the infinite possibilities of what such subjectivities for women could look like if the societal taboos associated with domestic freedom were to be dismantled.

Beyond Borders and Boundaries of Feminism and Hindi Nationalism

Alok Rai, in *Hindi Nationalism,* argues for a broader understanding of Hindi's diverse history beyond its current right-wing political implications and impetuses. As Vasudha Dalmia points out, quoting Rai, "Hindi offers valuable insights into the making of Hindutva, but it is not entirely to be confused with it (Dalmia 2003; original citation in Rai 2001, 93). I would extend this argument to suggest that Mahadevi's Sanskritization of Hindi should not be confused with any tendency on her part to polarize the language with respect to any specific community or religion. Instead, an examination of her poetry and prose illuminates her cosmopolitan thinking; her last two collections bring her personal aspirations in harmony with the universalistic teachings of Vedanta and display her genuine humanitarianism transcending communalism and divisions of social class and caste.

Although it would be difficult to argue against Rai's theory that Hindi pitted itself against Braj Bhasha so clearly and definitively in the early twentieth century, as Dalmia points out, the process by which this happened was both subtle and complex (Dalmia 2003). If the often cited introduction to Pant's *Pallav* is truly reflective of the shifts under way in Hindi by the time Mahadevi is writing verse in Hindi—that "Hindi" was Braj's other, as Rai interprets Pant—then Mahadevi's use of Braj vocabulary and aesthetics

needs further explanation. Dalmia's formulation of the internal links with the Braj Bhasha tradition that poets and writers of these years sought to maintain (and divorce themselves from) propels a rethinking of the relationship between Mahadevi's language choice and feminist politics of experience. As Dalmia explains:

> While it is not difficult to agree with Rai that Hindi sought to maintain a respectable distance from Braj bhasha verse in the first half of the twentieth century, the process does seem to have been more complex. For, the very poets self-consciously distancing themselves from the older Braj tradition yet forged an internal link with it by recasting its themes and concerns in a contemporary frame and idiom.
>
> Poetry in this new Hindi then partially overcomes the anxieties created by its relative late arrival on the literary scene by adapting and transforming the themes and concerns of Braj bhasha and Avadhi verse. We meet with this anxiety until well into the 1930's, while the thematics of poetic works in Braj and Avadhi continue to be appropriated and subjected to repeated re-workings in larger or smaller format. Krishna becomes a *Mahapurush* or great man, rather than an incarnation of Vishnu in *Priya Pravas,* Radha a social reformer.
>
> Later poets continue to tussle with these themes and reformulate them. The iconoclastic Chhayavadi poet Suryakant Tripathi Nirala (1897–1962) writes a poem on the great Avadhi devotee-poet "Tulsidas" (1938) to reflect his own philosophical and social concerns. Hindi poets are thus creating internal links with an earlier tradition, by reoccupying the spaces they clear and relocating traditional themes in a secular setting. (Dalmia 2003)

Thus, what these scholars emphasize is that although a break with Braj Bhasha was a necessary impetus to establish the modernity that a standardized Hindi came to represent, one could not do away with these traditions altogether. Poetry, to be appreciated and digested by the public, needed to evoke a sentiment to which the reading public could relate. For this reason, while increasingly moving away from the divine love between Lord Krishna and his consort, Radha, the theme of their love resurfaces time and again in the poetry of the Chhayavad generation, only this time recast in the mold of secular love.

Ideas of the "purity" of the Hindi language went hand in hand with the deliberate weeding out of Urdu lexis as well as voices from popular and oral traditions: this often resulted in the "'normalization' of radical voices (e.g., Kabir) and of 'vulgar' tastes like the courtly-erotic riti poetry in Braj Bhasha" (Orsini 2002, 381). But precisely Mahadevi's incorporation of Braj Bhasha—both in terms of its themes and concerns as well as lexis—makes her poetry at once stand out among the Chhayavad poets and acceptable to the public as well. A woman writing about passion, eroticism, and love at a period in Indian social history when ideals of sacrifice and duty to the national cause were being emphasized—how else could Mahadevi have escaped public condemnation? Very few women writers were able to strike a balance between their public and private lives, between social respectability and sexual autonomy the way she was able to accomplish. Mahadevi was able to adopt such a pose because she veiled her passion and eroticism in the pages of her poems. As she became more involved in the field of education and social "constructive work," she probably felt the need to downplay the passion and eroticism inherent in her poetry, emphasizing instead her mastery of the classical languages and literature, turning herself over (at least publicly) to prose. Even if the flames of the lamp were dimmed with the publication of *Dip-Shikha* in 1942, the passion that gave it life could not be extinguished along with it.