Hadewijch and Mirabai against the Christian and Hindu Mystical Tradition

May her nature make you understand in fiery longing
How one sees with longing in longing…[1]

— Hadewijch

Mira's pain comes from separation; what she wants to do, she'll do.[2]

— Mirabai

Mystical traditions were prominent in the 4th-5th century BCE in Classical Greece and primarily engaged male thinkers. The mystical society of Medieval Greece continued to be predominantly androcentric and viewed female bodies as "less divine" and "less able to connect with God"[3] until new voices emerged between the 12th and 15th centuries. Female mystics such as Hadewijch from medieval Flanders began to express courtly love for God and sang about longing and pain in the 13th century. In a similar strain, the mystic poet Mirabai from Rajasthan, North India, carried out personal strife against patriarchal folds through her songs, a century after Hadewijch. In North India, women's lives and movements were governed by social constructs. Both women used separation and longing as the main subjects of their expression and challenged rigid religious structures using personal experiences and an ingenious use of words. They created intelligent metaphors for distance and subjugation.

Reading Hadewijch and Mirabai in one plane historicizes the emergence of female voices and highlights the role of asserting female identity in the revelation of various societal injustices. If women did not voice their battles through poetry, history would have been dangerously incomplete. For instance, female mystical expression moved the nexus of religious worship away from scripture and towards personal relationships with the divine. They posed a concern that scripture could emerge from power and was restrictive. They derived extensive bridal metaphors for God.[4] While scholarly attention has been granted to Christian-Sufi mystical dialogues,[5] the parallels between Hindu and Christian female mystics remain a less explored area in religious studies.

Medieval Europe and India, though distinct in their customs and geographies, were bound by commonalities of androcentrism that shaped the socio-political and religious frameworks of their time. These systems, often unquestioned, relegated women to the peripheries of power. In medieval Europe, scholar Ellen Kittell points out that women were seen to be "half as much as a man" in the economic status quo.[6] They remained excluded from inheritance laws, and land ownership, with property often managed by male counterparts or relatives. Religious institutions, namely the Church, only recognized male monastic orders such as the Benedictines, Cistercians, and Carthusians, as opposed to supporting the Beguine movement as well. Medieval India witnessed similar patterns through rigid caste hierarchies and patriarchal kinship structures.

Practices like *sati* (widow self-immolation) epitomized gender injustice. The earliest recorded evidence of *sati*, dating to 510 BCE, included a ruler's widow.[7] This practice, whether voluntary or coerced, ensured that property remained within male lineages, thus depriving women of an opportunity to gain economic independence, thereby perpetuating gender-based economic disparities.[8] Such violence and injustice have often been studied through the lens of pain which is crippling, however this paper posits a new reading of pain.

Pain became a profound spiritual and religious phenomenon. It was seen as an ecstatic process, central to the experiences of female mystics like Mirabai and Hadewijch. In this process, the fragmentation of the self and the world was reconciled, allowing for a deep sense of unity and centralization with the divine. Pain has not been historicized, but if it is, the approach of the female mystics is a turning point because a subdued voice found expression, turning the personal against the communal. In the light of a permeating "age of anger,"[9] a discussion on female mystics and comparative mysticism establishes an understanding of religion that moves beyond rivalry and towards liberation.

In their writings, Hadewijch and Mirabai sustained love when physical or temporal separation in society challenged its continuity. A deeper inquiry into their songs reveals patterns of anti-establishment, expansion, and interrelation. The New Historicism framework by Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher[10] is used to analyze the intellectual histories of Mirabai and Hadewijch. The literature they produced, personal narratives, and the socio-cultural context are examined with a focus on the "recurrent use of anecdotes" and a "sharp focus on neglected details."[11]

Existing literature has focused on Indian mysticism or Christian mysticism.[12] There is little discussion on *viraha-bhakti* or devotion in separation in cross-cultural contexts.[13] Holly Hillgardner has discussed Mirabai and Hadewijch's longing in its entirety, while Sheena Purohit explores longing across faiths and focuses on texts such as the "Gopī Gita" and "The Spiritual Canticle."[14] Neither of these texts looks at pain and longing as a powerful tool of transformation in a cross-cultural, universalizable narrative. This essay discusses the translated versions of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and the poems of Mirabai and Hadewijch. The readings and thematic analysis of these texts are grounded in hermeneutical methodologies. Non-home texts - texts originating from outside one's cultural or geographical contexts that are adapted or studied within a different tradition or setting - are approached with the same openness and interaction as home texts. While these texts are not absolute depictions of life in the Middle Ages, it is important to acknowledge their polyvalent nature.

Mysticism and its Social Relevance

The definition of "mysticism" lacks a clear consensus, and an attempt to provide a comprehensive definition might privilege one explanation over the other. In the context of this paper, the exploration is anchored in the conceptual framework of mystical theology and is understood as an attempt to "forge an unmediated relationship with God."[15] In a similar context, Marc De Kesel and Ad Poirters write:

> Mysticism is about love. The mystic follows an inner path to get in touch with God. This path run through the intimacy of his or her own soul. And the soul's activity is not theoretical thinking but desiring. Mystics long for God. They love Him.[16]

In William James's most comprehensive work *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature,* he writes that the mystical experience entails an ineffable oneness with the infinite, reaching "depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect."[17] He suggests four qualities to define mysticism: *ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and passivity.*[18] Ineffability is the notion that the experience is felt directly, and it is not transferable. Noetic quality implies that illuminations and revelations result in a feeling of oneness. Transience is the gradual fading of experiences because the mystical state is not sustained over a long period. Passivity entails that a fraction of recollection of mystical experiences always remains.

William James states that a mystic experiences the feeling of being held or grasped by a superior power. God percieved within and is relativized to the human psyche. That is to say, God is psychologized. L. E. Schmidt even argues that mystics "symbolized the representatives and the custodians of true[19] religion."[20] The discovery of an esoteric meant that mystics could often bypass communal worship and intermediaries such as priests and subsequently redefine religious experience to be individualized and intimate. Within this context, mysticism must not be considered antithetical to religion; instead, it works in tandem with religion to adopt a more profound, more "permanent way of life."[21] Against this backdrop of a movement aimed at democratizing access to God and religion, 'mysticism' as a theological movement, was able to surpass institutional barriers and thus fuel the rise of diverse mystical movements such as Sufism in the Middle East, the Bhakti Movement in the Indian Subcontinent and Christian Bridal Mysticism in Europe.

The Plague and the Emergence of European Bridal Mysticism

Mysticism emerged in Europe as a response to the anguish of the bubonic plague also known as the Black Death. The plague arrived by October 1347 and lasted till 1353. 20 million people lost their lives.[22] Demographic collapses disrupted entrenched hierarchies, particularly those of feudalism. Shortage in labor empowered the working class to negotiate their wages, which challenged rigid feudal structures that dominated European societies.[23] The Church, once the epitome of moral and spiritual authority, struggled to provide theological explanations or practical remedies for the scale of suffering and mortality caused by the plague. The disillusionment caused by institutional religion led people to follow personal spiritual experiences and alternative forms of religious expression.[24] Robert S. Gottfried writes:

> Aside from their profound sincerity, the most striking characteristic of mysticism and lay piety was the lack of need for a formal clergy to lead the way to paradise. Many post-plague Christians felt they could communicate directly with God.[25]

The question of sense-making arose as people witnessed societal displacement and a loss of faith. Could the emergence of mysticism in Europe be seen as a response to the collective trauma inflicted by the plague? The ecstatic experiences of mystics involved emotional and physical trials, which mirrored the collective pain of the masses. As mystics began seeking personal connections with God, certain groups of female mystics including St. Teresa of Ávila, began to express the soul's love for Christ, akin to a bride's love for her groom. These metaphors popularized bridal mysticism or *brautmystik* in medieval Europe. Spiritual journeys were portrayed as marriages to Jesus Christ.[26]

The emergence and evolution of bridal mysticism can be attributed to medieval interpretations of the biblical text *Song of Songs* (SoS) or the *Canticle of Canticles,* cherished for its allegorical depiction of divine love. The poem penned by Solomon became a cornerstone for mystical theology due to the influence of monastics such as Bernard of Clairvaux.[27] His commentary gave rise to a spiritual awakening realizing the soul's intimate union with God. In this mystical theology, Jesus Christ is depicted as the bridegroom. The devotee is depicted as His bride.

Bridal mysticism did not directly emerge due to the influence of monastics such as Bernard. The origin of mysticism is closely linked to the religious climate and hierarchies created by medieval churches. Historian Lawrence Duggan has argued that the perceived inflexibility of the churches and their hierarchical structures may have influenced the rise of mystical movements seeking reform. He writes,

> The fourteenth and sixteenth centuries were perhaps the greatest in the history of Christian mysticism. Why? Historians have shown a marked tendency to link fourteenth-century mysticism with demands for reform, the urge to dissent, the need to escape from a confining church - in short, to associate it, if only by implication, with heterodoxy.[28]

Bridal mysticism was adopted particularly by women who were often, during the Middle Ages, "voiceless" or "voiced-over"[29] and engaged with physicality or material possessions.[30] Men who were considered to be closer to the divine were seen as possessing "power, judgement, discipline, and reason."[31] These androcentric systems restricted women from accessing spirituality. Women were systematically excluded from scriptural interpretation and preaching.

The European society also saw the emergence of nuptial or motherly metaphors. Female mystics spoke of Jesus Christ in the role of a mother and depicted divine relationships through "human connections (friendship, fatherhood or motherhood, or erotic love)"[32]. They changed traditional perceptions of "divinity, gender, and authority."[33] Women also asserted authority through prophecy and visionary work. They created a mystic ideal by integrating revelations with ecclesiastical dogma and became respectable interpreters of Christian theology. They ingeniously co-opted the perceived notion of physicality to transcend gender norms and access the male-dominated value of divinity through the figure of Christ. This articulation of spiritual experiences[34] gave women opportunities for "education, audience, and authority"[35] that were previously unavailable to them and secured both autonomy and influence.[36]

Emergence of Indian Mysticism

The mystical movement in India is linked to the 'The Bhakti Movement' which emerged around the 7th century in South India.[37] *Bhakti* is an act of "devotional surrender to a personally conceived supreme God for attaining salvation."[38] God is not just supremely sovereign and transcendent but also immanent and supremely accessible, a view that changed the way people subjugated by the caste system understood divinity. Through *bhakti*, God becomes omnibenevolent, omnipresent, and omniscient; he also becomes omni-beautiful. Its roots are in the ancient Indian scriptural texts ranging from the *Rig Veda* to the *Bhagavata Purana.*

Between the 7th and 10th centuries, in the modern-day South Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, *bhakti* went beyond its scriptural origins to emerge as a movement for equality, religious reform, and personal devotion. The ritualistic Brahmanical orthodoxy and hegemony were considered rigid, and *bhakti* was seen as all-accepting and harmonious. The origins of the movement are often linked to the emergence of mystics like the Alvars in South India who disseminated the ideology. In addition to the Alvars, the Saiva Nayanar Saints[39] also preached the ideology to various sects of society, regardless of their caste, class, or gender to achieve religious

egalitarianism. Mirabai sang, "Ram knows no high, no low,"[40] and he "cares for the fallen." The Indians developed "an averse attitude towards societal evils."[41]

Bhakti literature bears a recurring literary motif of cosmic interrelation or cosmic reciprocity between the divine and the devotee. A human becomes an anthropo-cosmic self,[42] a version of the self that becomes intimately connected to the human and divine dimensions of existence. *Bhakti* is the "unswerving devotional love that the human self (*ātman*) should cultivate towards the divine reality (*brahman*), who is Krishna, the stunning divine reality."[43] Mirabai's valorization is historic because she was awarded the highest form of devotion among eleven others for her "attachment of the deepest separation."[44]

Characterizing the Pain of Separation Across Indian and European Contexts

In *Bhakti* tradition, the relationship the lover has with the beloved is the most intimate form of personal devotion known as 'theistic Intimism.'[45] This relationship involves alternating phases of togetherness and separation. The divine is experienced as either present or absent. In Hindu devotional literature, this intimism is often expressed through the literary motif of the *virahinī,* a devoted wife or bride yearning to reunite with the groom or husband. The *viraha* bhakti positioned the doctrines of love and devotion to God as a necessity for humanity's salvation. salvation for humanity. Longing and yearning for God has been imbibed in Hindu society through historical texts such as the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* which exalts the *gopīs* or milkmaids, who were an embodiment of the highest form of devotion. An experience with pain/separation causes their ego-centric love, the idea that they own the Lord, to dissolve. They are granted the gifts of self-realization and annihilation of the ego. The *gopīs* use pain/separation as a medium to return from a fragmented world and recenter themselves in the Divine. Their experience makes them a supreme form of devotees.[46] Scholar of constructive theology Holly Hillgardner defines *viraha* as "love-longing."[47] Graham Schweig explains it as "being or feeling apart" along with "the intense longing of the lover to be closer to the beloved."[48] This experience of pain and pining is an attempt to restore the primordial connection with the divine forms.[49] In theology, in European mystical tradition, the *Song of Songs* (SoS), an Old Testament Book, echoed sentiments of love and longing for God. During the medieval period, Christian commentators adopted an allegorical approach in interpreting the SoS, identifying the bridegroom as Jesus Christ and the bride as the Church.[50] St. Augustine states, in his Confessions, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[51] While there is a lack of terminology that characterizes the *virahinī* motif in Christianity, concepts of bridal mysticism and spiritual union encapsulate the love-infused longing that underpins contemplation, prayer, and worship.[52]

Mirabai and Hadewijch

Mirabai was born a Rajput princess.[53] According to Hindu ideals, she was bound by tradition to become a *pativrata*, a devoted loyal wife. As a child, however, she had promised herself to her eternal bridegroom, Lord Krishna. As she grew older, she became a fearless and passionate devotee and recited verses infused with love. She sang, "The fire of longing/ Is burning in my heart."[54] She cast aside her privilege to walk the ascetic path in the company of those ostracized by society. Her promise to Lord Krishna disappointed the family she was married into. She writes that her brother-in-law Rana sent her poison. The family's disapproval led her to sing:

> My mother in law said, I had ruined
> the family reputation
> Rana sent me a cup of poison and
> Mira drank it laughing.[55]

Modern literature has added new dimensions to reading Mirabai. In an interview[56] conducted with modern Rajput women, Lindsey Harlan inferred that Mirabai's devotion remains praiseworthy despite her non-conformation to the ideals of her 'earthly husband.' The Rajput women argue that her unwavering loyalty to Krishna redeems her unfaithfulness to her earthly spouse.[57] They assert that she remains a *pativrata* to Krishna. It seems only appropriate that Madhu Kishwar writes, "She is seen as a saint, as a mystic, as a fervent devotee of Krishna, as an anguished *virahini*, as one who gave up the world for God, and also as a rebel."[58]

Hadewijch of Antwerp[59] or Brabant[60] was a thirteenth-century Beguine.[61] Beguines were a group of women from different classes of society who came together to pray, live in religious communities, and engage in acts of service without the constraints of any ecclesiastical authority or permanent religious vows. While there is limited hagiography surrounding the life of Hadewijch, she is said to have headed a small group of Beguines.[62] Scholars have inferred that she was more educated than her contemporaries[63] due to her knowledge of Latin and French. Other aspects of her life remain obscured in mystery. However, with respect to her devotion, records are found in 5 manuscripts dating back to the 14th century or later. Her works were compiled in 14 visions, poems in a stanza and couplet, and 31 letters.[64]

Hadewijch's poems reflect a desire to experience love. She views mysticism as Trinitarian and Christological. Trinitarian Love Mysticism is a theological concept rooted in the Christian idea of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. She amalgamates Christian bridal mysticism or *Brautmystik* and courtly love poetry to produce a third genre called '*la mystique courtoise*'[65] or courtly love mysticism (*Minnemystik*), which aided her with the duplicity to express

"erotic and renunciatory energies."[66] However, Hadewijch is not restricted to a particular genre;[67] instead, the theme of love appears in almost all her works. Paul Mommaers states that she has used various terms to describe love. He writes:

> Karitate usually refers to love for men, for neighbor. Lief means the beloved; she employs the word either for Christ or for the soul (where it refers to the soul, we have translated it, for clarity, as "the loved one"). Minne, a word of feminine gender and belonging to the language of courtly love, she uses far oftener than the other two terms.[68]

Discussing *Minne* is central to an assessment of Hadewijch's work. The word emerged from the Middle Dutch term 'Mina', connected to the Latin word 'memini', which is to remember.[69] Jessica A. Boon states that *Minne* is a "vehicle for trinitarian theology precisely because it is a metaphor and thus functions as a single locus for a range of meanings."[70] The use of the word was popularized by the secular traditions of *minnesingers* and *trobairitz*, medieval poets who celebrated courtly love.[71] *Minne* is seen as divine love that is also the embodiment of a sovereign lady. It references the God or the beloved, the lover and love itself.[72] The multiple meanings and use of this word is reflected in the following verse of Hadewijch:

> Ay minne ware ic mine
> Ende met minnen minne v minne
> Ay minne om minne gheuet dat minne
> Die minne al minne volkinne.[73]

This translates to "O love, were I love, and with love, love you, love, O love, for love, give that love which love may know wholly as love."[74] The repetitions accentuate love's multiplicity. In this context, *Minne* as love becomes the medium through which *minnie* as God comes in contact with *Minne* as the lover. A lack of clear distinction allows the lines between all the loves to blur and allows their distinctions to come together. Hillgardner writes about this fluidity: "Yet the distinctiveness of Hadewijch's self-awareness is precisely its "intentionality": it is being directed inwards, but it is focused on something within which differs from the self."[75] This blurring of lines is also a remark on the rigidity of the mystical society that was androcentric. If the object of love is the same as the lover, then the gender of the one who loves is redundant.

Minne becomes the primary medium through which Hadewijch's mystical experiences can be understood. When Hadewijch references God or love interchangeably, she suggests that God is not at the nexus of faith, God *is* love. God is the force that "touches"[76] Hadewijch. She identifies God as the Holy Trinity and not a transcendental being. The subjectivity and variety in her exploration of *Minne* suspend interpretation beyond the objective and subjective. Hadewijch perceives both entities to exist "with the implication that they are inevitably separated from each

other."[77] The subjectivism through which Hadewijch understands and categorizes the human experience mirrors Mirabai's universe of 'multiple identities.' Both these mystics resist confining themselves to a singular definition of their divine experiences and see the divine as inherently plural and layered with complexity.

Mirabai's Ecstatic Devotion

> Anguish takes me from door to door, but no doctor answers. Mira calls her Lord: O Dark One, only you can heal this pain.[78]

Mirabai presents herself as the epitome and perfect blend of love-longing, *kāma* or desire, and suffering. The name Krishna translates to "the one who attracts"[79] or "to draw, drag, pull, drag away."[80] This paradoxical meaning informs Mirabai's devotion, which Holly Hillgardner terms, a "passionate non-attachment."[81] The state of passion allows individuals to engage with their desires for love and union with a divine being, while detaching from the outcomes of this desire.

Mirabai's identity remains complex to this date. Nancy Martin terms the ambiguity around Mira's identity as "Multiple Miras." She describes how Mira's identity has been shaped and reshaped throughout history. It is "a narrative language spoken in a multitude of genres."[82] The historiographical uncertainty surrounding Mirabai earns her a fluid identity, allowing different people to understand her in multiple ways. This encourages interpretation based on personal experiences and beliefs. Mira's different identities experience suffering through different roles of a faithful wife, widow, and ascetic. Her variegated identity challenges notions of a "perfect" or "complete" identity. She rebels against the notion of being subjugated for a certain identity. Her disregard towards perfection segues into the argument that Mirabai's suffering and devotion enhanced her power on an earthly level, allowing her to undergo spiritual transformations.

In her book *Longing and Letting Go,* Hillgardner suggests that Mirabai internalized a "culture of separation" because she lived in Northern India, which made travelling difficult and subsequently led to separation from family and loved ones.[83] This context adds to the unique intensity of Mirabai's devotion, which oscillates between a desire to merge with the Lord and the ability to embrace the emotions that love-in-separation evokes. Separation and pain get new meanings through distance. Mirabai faced geographical separation and cultural syncretism.

Rajasthan, where Mirabai was born and lived after she married, was not an isolated cultural space. The Mughal Empire, under Akbar promoted the idea of a pluralistic religion (*Din-i-Ilahi* or divine faith) which blended Islamic, Hindu, and other religious traditions. Consequently, the proliferation of such syncretism facilitated cultural exchange between Bhakti and Sufi traditions. Mirabai's pain of separation parallels the Sufi notion of *fanā* (annihilation of the self),[84] where the soul's longing paves the way to experiencing the divine. The influence of such pluralism allows

Mira's poetry to go beyond sectarian boundaries and has broadened the appeal of her poetry. Mirabai's verse serves as a mediatory bridge between religious communities.

Mirabai's power as a mediator was solidified by her use of suggestive writing and divine references, that could question several social constructs. Friedhelm Hardy describes mysticism as an evolving "aesthetic-erotic-ecstatic mysticism of separation."[85] An example, in Mirabai's context, that reflects this characterization can be seen through the lines:

> He seems to speak sweetly,
> But never gives His love.
> I thought the affair would succeed,
> But He left me halfway and went off.[86]

Emotional pain and sensual longing are coupled with a paradoxical transformative experience. Aesthetic imagery lies in the description of heartbreak as the Lord spoke "sweetly." The erotic imagery is portrayed through the depiction of Mira's relationship with God as intimate, and the ecstatic experience lies in the premise of her disappointment. Mirabai's despondency and anguish become a form of devotion. The "unfulfilled" affair, or the halfway point between the presence-absence of God and complete communion with him, is where Mira finds herself immobile. Andrew Schelling argues that Mirabai's path is "Not a path to salvation, it seems the farther you travel it, the more hopeless your station, the more pointed the anguish, the deeper the desolation."[87] Mirabai's use of eroticism and divinity raises questions on several thought patterns. One cannot question her morality because her allegiance lies with God. Concretizing this idea, we must understand that in *viraha-bhakti,* there is no space entirely devoid of divine presence, nor is there space where the divine is fully possessed.[88]

The halfway remains Mirabai's most specific poetic and symbolic expression. Using Greenblatt and Gallagher's aforementioned method of New Historicism, which emphasizes a 'sharp focus on neglected details,' Mirabai's poems that express her 'halfway' state can be understood better. For instance, she expresses two desires when she writes, "Mira says to her Lord: give me your presence or death"[89] and "The heat of midnight tears will bring you to God."[90] Existing in this middle unfulfilled path allows Mirabai to transform the meaning of a victory (communion). Her suffering and subjugation also become a victory because her narrative is her own. In *viraha bhakti,* therefore, the middle path becomes superior to attaining an end because it is in these spaces that the *virahiṇī* embodies the *gopī*. Her intentions are not to "lure [his] god" or to "overcome and dominate him"[91]; instead, the fruit of longing becomes longing. The irony of this path lies in the notion that the middle path's uncertainty leads one closer to God. In these spaces, longing is a non-stagnant force and union is stagnant. The absence of fulfillment drives the *virahiṇī* to seek the divine continuously, and subsequently, Mira's "whole life passes in longing."[92] The state of ecstasy is a consequence of the incessant pursuit. These spaces sustain Hillgardner's

idea of passionate non-attachment because the mystic is in love yet unattached to outcomes such as communion.

The physical upheaval of the body in a cosmic plane is also an important aspect of interpreting Mirabai's poems. The *virahiṇī* is propelled closer to God because she finds herself in a cosmology of movement and finds her body seems to be changed. A prominent example of this fluidity of existence that symbolizes Mirabai's closeness is reflected in the lines, "Like a lily blossoming under the full moon's light, / I open to him in this rain: every pore of my body is cooled."[93] Mirabai sings of a corporeal relationship with the divine where the lines between physical and metaphysical realms blur. In doing so, Mirabai hints towards entering a fluid relationship with God. The burning desire of her scalding body is cooled by the rain of the divine. The body is an important agent of rebellion. Mirabai's physical state, her tears, her trembling body, and other sensorial experiences become an opportunity for divine connection. It is in this context that Hardy argues that the role of a body in *bhakti* "fundamentally denotes an awareness which stubbornly defends the validity of the body, the senses, and the emotions in the religious context against the normative claim that solely the mind can play a positive role."[94] Moreover, Hillgardner argues:

> Mirabai does not become indifferently detached from the world as she writes and sings songs of communal longing. Rather, she boldly leaves her scripted courtly life in order to dive deeply and passionately into the wider, unknown world— "seeking him in all four directions." Viraha bhakti infuses Mirabai's world— and that of her divine lover, fellow singers, and readers— with passionate non-attachment.[95]

The physical pain experienced by Mirabai, when compared to Hadewijch later in this paper, reveals a transformation of her mystical experience not just in terms of proximity with the divine but also as protection and a source of respect and rebellion. The same is evidenced in Mirabai's poem, '*Don't Tell Me No, Mother*,' which reveals a powerful experience of Mirabai's *viraha,* vulnerability, and rebellion. She sings:

> Don't tell me no, Mother; I'm on my way to visit holy men.
> I know one with a dark face; I'm his; the rest are nothing.
> Where I live, everyone is sleeping; my eyes stay open all night.
> If the world doesn't admire the Lord, it is mad; what wisdom
> does the world have?
> What am I saying? The Lord is inside me; he's there instead of
> sleep.
> Some ponds have water only four months a year; but I stay
> away from those ponds.
> Hari's water pours down; that's good enough for my thirst.

> You say he is dark; I say beautiful. I am on my way to see his face.
> Mira's pain comes from separation; what she wants to do, she'll do.[96]

Mirabai's choice to defy her mother and wander to accompany 'holy men' is an exertion of her religious agency in direct contradiction with the rigid expectations of lineage and kinship. In the medieval period in India, women were expected to hide their faces behind a *purdah* or cover; they were barred from moving freely, and their duties oscillated between clan duties, marriage alliances, and reproductive responsibilities.[97] Mirabai experienced the first wave of separation from her family's political responsibilities, her husband's family, and, subsequently, feudal responsibilities, which restricted women to domestic, courtly spaces. She also experienced a second wave of separation through the love-longing from the Dark One (Krishna). Devotees like Mirabai bypassed hegemonic medieval traditions through personal connections with the divine.

During the Bhakti Movement, emotional vulnerability coupled with singing, dancing, Ras Līlas, Bhajans, etc.[98] became central forms of worship. In another poem, Mirabai sings, "I climb hilltops; I watch for signs of your return; my eyes are swollen with tears."[99] Mirabai recenters her devotion from scriptures to her body and emotions lying at the nexus. Love-longing/*viraha bhakti* does not exist alone as a metaphysical concept. It becomes a lived, bodily experience.

A mystic in anguish of delayed deliverance develops a dissatisfaction with conventional structures or religiosity that fails to alleviate pain. The intensity of this pain leads mystics to find spiritual relief and ecstasy outside social institutions. Historical accounts of saints such as Jiv Goswami reveal that male saints denied receiving female saints like Mirabai as visitors since they were afraid it would cause them to abstain from being celibate. There were instances of male saints approaching Mirabai, demanding to have sexual relations with her because Krishna willed it.[100] Mirabai, thus separated from her family and finding no true acceptance among the holy men, was left with no earthly family. Lord Krishna became her only respite. Her devotion gives her power over men which allows her to overcome hierarchies.[101] *Viraha* and *pain* allows individuals to transcend social constructs and move beyond static formulations of society.

Hadewijch, The Courtly Mystique

Hadewijch is regarded by Paul Mommaers as "the most important exponent of love mysticism."[102] She is credited with taking mystical courtly literature to its pinnacle.[103] Hadewijch rejected the obligations associated with life in a nunnery. The women who were part of the Beguine movement diverged from vows and carved a self-organized life, which permitted the inclusion of manual labor, education, or teaching as per their preferences.[104] Hadewijch along with other Beguines created a feminine space that blurred implicit private-public lines or boundaries that had been imposed by existing conventions.

Hadewijch was viewed as the "Mistress" (Vision 1: P. 185)[105] of the group and her leadership was met with opposition. Paul Mommaers affirms that this was either due to the strict standards she had laid out or her growing influence. She was eventually exiled from her community as "means were devised to send her companions away from her."[106] Historiographical evidence shows that Hadewijch, much like Mirabai, ultimately was left with no family. Mirabai was cast out of her familial home and never fully accepted by the ascetic community.[107] Despite embodying forms of resistance by rejecting societal norms, the women fell short of a formal family.

Hadewijch's earthly rejection intensified her passionate desire for divine presence and made separation a spiritual discipline. Her love-longing observes a path called the *noble unfaith* which appears in her verse:

> …nevertheless this noble unfaith can neither feel nor trust
> Love, so much does unfaith enlarge desire. And unfaith never allows desire
> any rest in any fidelity[108]

Through the theological concept of noble unfaith (*edele ontrouwe*),[109] she lets go of her faith not in the sense of disbelief or abandonment, but in an act of passionate longing and capitulation. In a society where women were excluded from formal theological education, Hadewijch's depiction of love-longing carved an individualized spiritual authority. Her aim is not to possess or unite with *Minne,* but to exist in a space of longing. Within this space, lies a dynamic of infinite expansion of desire, which for Hadewijch becomes the essence of union with God.[110]

There are two tools that Hadewijch employs: "love experience"[111] known as *ghebruken*, which means to enjoy, or love's fruition (the conjunction 'or' is used because Holly Hillgardner writes 'Love's fruition' and Paul Mommaers writes 'to enjoy'); and *ghebreken* which means to be wanting/to fall short. Hadewijch's spiritual journey oscillates between *ghebruken* and *ghebreken*. *Ghebruken* is denoted by spiritual fulfillment, satisfaction, and eternal bliss seen as the fruition of divine love. *Ghebreken* is the soul's awareness of its separation from the divine. It is reflective of the human condition of incompleteness; however, Hadewijch does not associate *ghebreken* with negative emotions, but a feeling which deepens desire and propels the soul towards seeking the divine with greater passion.[112] Paul Mommaers draws attention to a phrase penned by Hadewijch, "to be wanting in enjoyment, that is the sweetest enjoyment (*dat ghebreken van dien ghebrukene dat es dat suetste ghebruken*)."[113] The feeling of wanting in a state of bliss helps lay out the "entire structure of the narrator's relationship with *Minne*."[114] It is a cyclical process of joy in pain and union. Hadewijch describes the experience of suffering and passionate desire in a *vision*:

> For this is suffering, pain and misery and living in great new grief of soul,
> and to let everything come and go without grief and to have no other taste

> thereby than sweet love, and embraces and kisses. (*Vision 7; trans. by Hart, pp. 280–81, adapted by Saskia Murk-Jansen*).[115]

Hadewijch experiences a state of misery and a want of affection, as though this painful state can only make the sweeter experience possible. This vision, in its entirety, emphasizes the spiritual gift of experiencing Christ's suffering rather than physical pleasure. Hadewijch experiences pain and thus union, through an identification with Christ's humanity, which is His suffering. Before sharing Christ's glory, a devotee must share his earthly pain; accordingly, Hadewijch suffers fully and is strengthened by it. She then describes this suffering as the ultimate satisfaction (*ghenoeghen*).[116] As Hadewijch experiences satisfaction through the recognition of Christ's humanity, she also desires *Minne*.

> May Love herself make you experience / How with love one loves in Love,
> May her nature make you understand in fiery longing / How one sees with longing in longing.[117]

Longing or pain in separation is not simply an emotional state as hitherto believed. It is an epistemological one conceptualized as the "epistemologies of longing,"[118] seen in the initial lines of the couplet when Hadewijch puts forth a non-dualistic vision where *Minne* (Love) and spaces of longing become indistinguishable and therefore, mutually reinforcing. Hadewijch believes that longing is a type of *eros* or sensual love that amalgamates the human experience of grief, entanglement, love, and suffering. Her love-longing marries joy and sorrow to propose a spirituality that embraces emotional intensity as a path to reach the divine. As separation intensifies, boundaries between *Minne* and longing collapse. It can be argued therefore, that longing is not just a byproduct of separation but a divine state in itself. The middle space of separation becomes a means to reconcile with and understand God's nature as the infinite. Hadewijch dwells in the dual experience *ghebruken* and *ghebreken*, which Murk Jansen describes as "sweet abandonment."[119]

Hadewijch's experience of 'sweet abandonment' is not merely restricted to the emotional spaces of longing. Her theology emphasizes experiencing the divine through the body. She sings:

> I could no longer recognize or perceive him
> outside me, and within me there was no separation. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference.[120]

Hadewijch utilizes the body as a vessel to experience an intimate connection with God. In Vision 5, Hadewijch writes God "flows through in our oneness." She surpassed the medieval tradition that prioritized intellectual contemplation over physical sensation in mysticism and she used sensory and bodily experiences of touch, taste, and satisfaction when speaking about divine

connection. Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror,* writes about abjection, a process wherein the boundaries of identity are dissolved to create simultaneous experiences of oscillating attraction and repulsion.[121] In the context of Hadewijch's mysticism, the abject exists in the liminal space between the self and the other world; the body becomes the abject—one that is essential for experiencing God but also a reminder of the mystic's earthly limitations. Her body brings her closer to God, yet serves as a reminder of the earthly limitations which separate her from God. This is evidenced again when Hadewijch writes in Letter 6:

> With the humanity of God you must live here, in the labors and sorrows of exile, while with the powerful eternal God must you love and rejoice within in a sweet comfort. For the truth of both is one single satisfaction (ghebruken). And just as the humanity pledged itself on earth to the will of the Majesty, you must here with Love pledge yourself to both in one.[122]

Abjection propels mystics to confront what is excluded; the pain of separation transforms the mystic by creating room for a new identity. There are several historiographical sources to analyze Hadewijch's work. Caroline Walker Bynum's book *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* discusses how female mystics used bodily metaphors to materialize their spirituality because they were excluded from intellectual theological traditions.[123] Others include St. John of the Cross's *The Dark Night of the Soul* a phase of spiritual development during which individuals experience a sense of divine absence and pain which no matter how strong always purifies them.[124] Peter Brown's work on a 'Cult of Saints,' which argues for the belief that the veneration of religious saints led to increased social cohesion is also a good resource to understand mysticism and its social currents.[125]

Hadewijch's rendition of a sweet abandonment redefines separation as an active and fertile space, in which pain and desire are intertwined. This redefinition of pain recharacterizes longing itself as an epistemological tool, a way to understand the human condition and the nature of God. Instead of treating emotional and physical experiences as secondary to intellectual contemplation, Hadewijch focuses on the body and its desires, thereby using the personal narrative as a source of knowledge.

A Historicization of Spiritual Pain and a New Narrative by Female Mystics

The expression of pain emerged across time in various mystical contexts. In Sufism, poets like Rumi sang about spiritual pain invoked after divine-absence. They also mentioned the state that followed: A love-sickness that defeated the ego and caused *fāna or* annihilation. Buddhism too acknowledges *dukkḥa* or pain as the first of the Four Noble Truths. An idea of 'pain as power,' as explored in this paper, emerges across cultures.

It can be argued that human love in separation romanticizes or idealizes suffering, portraying it as redemptive. This critique, however, misunderstands the symbolic and transformative role of pain in the spiritual context. For Mirabai and Hadewijch, pain is not suffering in the literal sense meaning physical pain, but it is a pain that arises from an incompleteness or absence of God. Love-longing moves away from passive suffering and moves towards the *active agency* of the devotee. For instance, in Hinduism, *Radha,* Krishna's chief mythological consort, is not a passive sufferer but an autonomous figure who uses her longing and manifests love through dances and music to achieve an ecstatic religious intimacy. Female mystics were able to transform pain and make it a personal individualized anthem. Mirabai's rejection of societal conventions in the lines "I don't wear jewelry anymore / I don't bind my hair."[126] infuses her followers to see pain as an active personal choice.

Mirabai's rendition of suffering through lines such as "To love a Yogi, O Sister, is to love only sorrow"[127] or "My mind no longer wanders—love holds it hard. Now I'm chained. Who knows my pain, except him?"[128] see pain as the rightful consequence of devotion. There is a strong sense of acceptance of pain. Hadewijch writes in Letter 6 "but with the mighty, eternal God you shall love and jubilate within in sweet surrender. And the truth of both is one single enjoyment."[129] Hadewijch acknowledges the inevitable two-sidedness of the union of pain and delight. She empowers these beguines and offers advice to engage in unmediated experiences of God ("Look after yourself and make good use of your time. And be faithful and grow up with us. They would like to pull you away from us to them. They break their hearts over our exceptional faithfulness").[130]

Each mystic, Mirabai to the royal family and Hadewijch to ecclesiastical authorities, subverted societal norms and became figures of nonconformity. Mirabai is still exalted today as a symbol of resistance. Her socio-cultural impact extends beyond poetry, with temples erected in her honor, women gathering to sing her songs, and Bollywood films venerating her legacy.[131] In contrast, there exist little references to Hadewijch other than her writings.

Scholars of gendered Hindu metaphysics such as Kumkum Sangari reveal a longing to be intertwined with the female. She argues that *maya* or illusion is a central force in creating separation between the divine and the devotee. She sees *maya* in this context as feminine, however, this "femaleness" goes beyond the boundary of gender and serves as a universal metaphor for the soul's condition (all life may be presented as yearning and yearning as the human condition).[132] Mirabai's *viraha* bhakti underscores an "active passivity,"[133] wherein the devotee desires to maintain a relational distance from God rather than achieving a complete, self-extinguishing union. A common metaphor for expressing this is 'She does not wish to *be* the sugar, instead she wishes to *taste* the sugar.' Mirabai does not want to be absorbed in the divine presence, rather, she aims to individualize God by relating to God as herself.

Sangari infers that *viraha bhakti* draws inspiration from the earthly life of devotees and transforms longing and emotional labor into metaphors for devotion. *Viraha* bridges human and cosmic realities of sufferation and pain and makes longing a universal act of devotion.[134] Hadewijch writes in her couplet poems, "...Love does not allow [desire] to have any rest."[135] Hadewijch's longing ultimately leads her on the path of wisdom. The incompleteness of her fruition is the "sweetest" part of her journey. / Both mystics used the power that longing gave them to carve space for themselves in the middle spaces of their spiritual experience. In letting desire and grief, love, and suffering, and knowing and unknowing flourish simultaneously, the female mystics were empowered to respond to marginalization in their communities.

Hadewijch's longing is reflective of the tension between institutionalized scholasticism and mysticism. By centering her desire and emotional ecstasy, she moved the focal point of worship from dogmatic intellectualism to individualized and relativized spiritual experiences. Mirabai's strife represents the emergence of personal devotion over Vedic ritualism. During this period, she emphasized an intimate, relational approach to the divine. Longing for Krishna becomes a practice that humanizes and personalizes divinity. Both mystics overcome an experience of cultural and spiritual dislocation through longing. As religious movements lost their stronghold in an atmosphere of inadequate social conditions, longing provided a stable spiritual framework in periods of uncertainty and offered a method of devotion that did not require external agents because spiritual and personal agency could coexist.

Female mystics redefined the act of yearning/longing into an active agency that bridged the devotee and the divine. Their ability to find theological power in pain not only reshaped their individual experiences but has also inspired broader communal shifts within respective religious and cultural contexts. As Mirabai and Hadewijch challenged dogmatic intellectualism, they offered a mode of worship untethered from external control. Perhaps the lesson of Mirabai and Hadewijch is that the soul's deepest ache for connection, expressed in the middle spaces of longing, is not a void but a birthplace of infinite possibility.

Mirabai and Hadewijch cultivate and expand their respective religious identities. Their experiences with separation and desire offer a lens through which traditional notions of identity (dogmatic and rooted in exclusivity) can be decentered. This decentering does not fragment or narrow their identity, instead, it creates a space for pluralistic, relational understandings of devotion and interreligious dialogue. Their practices embody what might be called an ethic of passionate non-attachment: a state of longing that binds without possessing and deepens connection without reducing diversity.

Mirabai's *viraha bhakti* and Hadewijch's *Minne* destabilize rigid theological and cultural frameworks. Both female mystics exemplify what comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney calls the "hyphen"[136] of religious identity, a space where traditions remain in a tensile relationship.

Their longing—passionate yet non-possessive—offers an opportunity for interreligious dialogue by engaging people in mutual vulnerability and dispossession. Longing and pain serve not as barriers, but as bridges to divine connection and self-transformation. In the mystical traditions of Mirabai and Hadewijch, pain has transformative powers. Their embodied experiences of love-longing challenge the dichotomy of presence and absence, creating a middle space where divine ecstasy and human incompleteness coexist. Longing bridges human and divine realities and dissolves gendered and institutional boundaries. The pain of separation became a powerful, communal language of resistance and spiritual transformation across socio-cultural contexts. The universal language of longing and the transformative power of non-attachment hold the potential to bridge divides, nurturing deeper connections that transcend individual, communal, and cultural boundaries.

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