

MYSTIC POET SISTER BENIGNA Fr Varghese Paul, SJ

The greatest award for a writer is that his/her books crossing the limits of time and ages are read with appreciation by many generations of readers. Such a writer of Malayalam language is the mystic poet Mary John Thottam, better known as Sr Mary Benigna.

Some years back I have translated into Gujarati a Malayalam novel "Oru Sankeertanam Pole" (Like a Psalm) by a famous writer Shreedharan Perumpadavom. I learned from the novelist first time about the poet Sr Benigna. I wrote in the foreword of my translation that the novelist Shreedharan as boy went to the high school at Elengy. There the boy met first time Sr Benigna. She was a teacher in his school.

Before meeting the famous Malayalam poet he had already read and admired her two poetry collections like 'Kavitaram' (Garden of Poems), 1927 and 'Gitavali' (Beauty/Attraction of Poems), 1929. The novelist has written somewhere that when he met first time the mystic poet he stood there just staring at her.

After seeing Sr Benigna through the eye of my novelist friend I began to read her mystical poems in original Malayalam and its translation in English. But the incentive to write this essay came from a news item about Sr Benigna and the Dravida University in Andhra Pradesh. The University does study and research in five languages: Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Urdu and Malayalam.

When the University decided to start a new study centre, it decided to name the new institution 'Sr Mary Benigna Centre of Malayalam Studies'. When an institution is named after the mystic Malayalam poet outside Kerala, then it speaks volumes about the quality of her poems and of her popularity as a poet. It has also raised my curiosity to know more about the mystic poet and her poems. I am sure that it is also the case with many lovers of life and of literature. In Indian tradition there are four stages or Ashrams of life: Brahmacharyashram (Child-boy/girl stage), Gruhasthashram (Marriage-family stage), Vanaprasthashram (Senior Citizen stage) and Sanyasashram (Religious stage). Youthful Mary John Thottam already got a name as an upcoming poet while mastering her studies in Malayalam and Sanskrit languages and literature. When at the age of 29 Mary John Thottam joined the religious convent of the Congregation of Mother Carmel (CMC) she, as someone said, jumped from Brahmacharyashram to Sanyasashram.

When the news spread about the poet Mary John Thottam embracing religious life in a CMC convent, so to say, she disappeared behind the convent walls. Then some critics said that a hunter has caught a noble bird and enclosed her in a cage. This was the opinion of people who view religious life merely from an agnostic and secular point of view. The poet Sr Benigna's response to such people is remarkable from a spiritual and mystic way of looking at life. She wrote that, that Cooyal would not be caught in a hunter's net. No one can close her in a cage. That Cooyal lives in faraway Babylon Garden hanging above hills and mountain tops beyond the clouds.

Only a mystic and deeply spiritual person can describe her abode of heavenly bliss that her happy religious life is beyond the mountain tops faraway in a hanging Babylon Garden. There is a song in Gujarati which says,
"God is like the image of love;
God is like the image of bliss;
God is like the image of peace."

For the mystic poet Sr Benigna religious life is like God's image of love; of bliss and of peace. This is such an interior spiritual experience not easily understood by people, even by poets.

Gujarati poet Mirabai is famous for her devotional poems. We can sense her God experience in her devotional songs. In a hymn to Krushna she sings,
"I want only my God Gopal,
I am possessed by God's name."

Mystic poet Sr Benigna has written and published more than 10 books of her poems. Among them there are two epics (Mahakavya), 10 long poems (Khanda Kavya) and more than 350 poems. She has also written her autobiography entitled 'Vanampadi' (Singer in the Sky). Perhaps Sr Benigna's most famous poem is 'Lokme, Yatra' (Good bye, World). This poem is written when she entered the CMC convent. I have read the poem both in original Malayalam and in English with great interest and relish. The poem is written in metered verses. Here I would like to reproduce some extracts from the poem as it appears in internet.

As you can see, in the beautiful poem young poet Mary John Thottam expresses her inner feelings as she says good byes to everyone and everything, which she held dear and near to her heart up to her leaving home at the age of 29 years. Her home, school, village, relatives, neighbours as well as many people and many things find their expressions in 'Lokme, Yatra'. In the poem we can admire not only its beauty but also her wide vision of life, her love for the whole creation, her deep faith in God. We see that she has love for everyone and everything but hate for none. Her poem also reveals her self-sacrificing character and deep spiritual experiences of God.

It is remarkable that in her good bye poem she even says good bye to her pen, the symbol of her creative literature. It indicates her total detachment from everything including her name and fame.

In the context of Sr Benigna's good bye poem I recall another poet well known in English literature, John Hopkins, a Jesuit poet. Hopkins wrote many poems while he was a student. A few of his poems were published in newspapers and magazines. But before he entered the Society of Jesus, he burned all his poems as a sign of his total detachment. Still as a Jesuit he continued writing poems; but not many of them were published in his life time. But his anthology of poems was published after his death and he was instantly proclaimed as a great poet in English literature. Today he is acclaimed among the best poets in English.

In the case of the mystic poet Sr Benigna, two collections of her poems were published even before she entered religious life.

An eminent critic in Malayalam, poet Ulloor has written the Preface to Mary John Thottam's poetry collection 'Leelavati'. In it the eminent critic Ulloor writes, "The beautiful girl called 'Mary' is not a mere Christian women but something more. She is a power in the literary cultural traditions of Kerala and of India. The beauty and quality of her poemsestablishes her as a power more than any Hindu woman well established in the main streams of Malayalam and Indian literature."

A Malayalam literary critic V G Thambi has divided Sr Mary Benigna's poems into three types in his article published in 'Satyadeepam' weekly dated June 18, 2014. The first type of poems is about herself, her spiritual life or her relation with God. Her poems of second type deal with the world; and the third type speaks about the relations with herself and with people. In the article poet Thambi has critically analysed a poem 'Atmavinte Snehageetam' (love-song of the soul).

'Atmavinte Snehageetam' is the poetic expression of her soul. It is in fact, a love-song. The spiritual bliss of her soul is expressed in the poem. Here we see the beauty and the grandeur of her poems. The poet feels the pain and sorrow of leaving home and the people in her village. There is the pain of separation from her dear and near ones. We see in the poem in the spiritual dryness of lover, whogoes in search of her beloved. In her autobiography Sr Benigna has written that she has taken 10 years to complete the long poem 'Atmavinte Snehageetam'. She begun to write it in 1926 and completed it only in 1936.

Literary critics like V J Thambi say 'Atmavinte Snehageetam' occupies the central position of all poems composed by Sr Benigna. She has said that poetry is an activity of her faith. What is this faith? For her faith is a name of a great will-power going after the Perfect from whom one is away. Thambi says that this type of poems which are overflowing with inner happiness is rare in Malayalam language. Obviously like the English poet Milton Sr Benigna create poems within the confines of her faith.

Thambi further says that Sr Benigna's poems adhere to Christian faith and offer wide scope and vision to Malayalam literature. Bible principles are the centre of her poems. There is deep spiritual love-relationship expressed in them. Sr Benigna's poems seek the Cross and keep intimate love-relationship with the Cross. She spreads this love story of the Cross through creative expressions. Thus, Thambi says, "The greatest achievement of poet Sr Benigna and of Christian spirituality is the spiritual literature in Malayalam."

In Indian literature well known poet Rabindranath Tagore is known for his spirituality and mysticism. Similarly we can see in Sr Benigna's poems deep spirituality and mysticism. This spiritual depth and deep mysticism make her poems eternal with lasting values. So no wonder that Sr Mary Benigna is known as mystical poet and a university study centre in Andhra Pradesh is named after her.

Last Changed : 01-04-2016

Next Change : 15-04-2016

Fr. Varghese Paul @ copyright 2016

