

The Sacred and the Profane: Intersections between Religion and Literature

Beatus et Possessus: Sacred Rituals and Crisis of Faith in *Requiem for the Living*

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Abstract:

Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty (Kierkegaard, 1936). Faith which is the cornerstone of the religious life cannot be grasped by any means of concepts other than the religious experience of the faithful. The sacred rituals are the greatest example of one's faith in God. It is the symbol of highest form of love – agape – the love to God and love to thy neighbour. *Requiem for the Living* presents a “Mother of Faith”, Juana Mammanji (Grand Mother), the matriarch of a Luso-Indian household, who were devout Latin Catholics. The novella presents a chain of faith spanning through generations that kept the whole community together, left broken with the present descendant Osha. Mammanji becomes the blessed in her community by helping her family and community to live a meaningful life by following the sacred rituals while Osha was possessed by the specter of the glorious past, losing himself in his fallen state. Mammanji becomes the God's faith-ful by reviving her community with His sacred dictums as revealed through her when Osha becomes faith-less by abstaining from his path to be a beacon to his community. The customs and religious traditions of the community emerged out of Juana Mammanji from her lived-experience has been left with no heir when it comes to the present.

Keywords: Faith, Luso-Indian, Crisis, Sacred rituals, Lived-experience

Faith is a term with a wide range of meanings. In the narrow sense it is the irrational belief in a supernatural power; in its broader sense, it is the positive emotional state of an individual caught up in despair and in its broadest sense, it is the powerful expression of one's individual relation with God. I think I also need to distinguish here the distinction between faith and belief even though we use it synonymously in our day-to-day life. According to the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1936), what we mean by faith (religious belief) and belief (based upon proof) are two entirely different things. Faith is credible because it is sensible while belief is credible because it is thinkable a la Dane. What he means by this is the simple thing that faith needs no proof to believe while belief needs some sort of evidence to believe in something, in a sense belief is rational and faith is non-rational. The Dane argues that faith is not irrational, faith does not agitate against reason, but it transcends it. Faith in fact leaves no room for reason or certainty, it always remains uncertain. Kierkegaard (1936) avers:

Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God's objectivity, I do not believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so that in the objective uncertainty I am out "upon seventy fathoms of water," and yet believe (p. 215).

Faith arises from uncertainties to an uncovered possibility in life that is why it is called faith, because it cannot be explained by mere laws of reason, it goes beyond it.

Wittgenstein (1967) also argues in a similar trajectory in his *Lectures on Religious Belief*. "In a religious discourse we use such expressions as: "I believe that so and so will happen," and use them differently to the way in which we use them in science" (p. 57). He opines religion is a form of life, he avers the utterances that makes religious language game possible cannot be carved out of its context and placed in a scientific or philosophic language game. We cannot interpret the religious language game by alienating from it. We must play it from within to describe it.

The same is true of my reading of this novella. I am not alienated from the text or the text from me. It is the dialectical relation between the text and me that constitutes its meaning. Rather than approaching the novella

with a logical/ theoretical reading in the sense of certain pre-conceived method or methodology. The act of reading the fictional text or the dialogical relationship I have with the text itself would be the method in my interpretation of this novella. This phenomenologico-hermenutical method or descriptive practise conceived at first by Husserl, and later extended and polished by Heidegger and Gadamer, would be the approach I would be taking in this paper for an understanding of the lived religion – religion as it is experienced and felt by the religious believers – in the novella.

Requiem for the Living presents a “Mother of Faith”, Juana Mammanji, the matriarch of a Luso-Indian household, who were devout Latin Catholics. She with her *fides in deum* and *fides in se* revived and reified the fundamental Christian virtues of *amor et caritas* in her family and community through her faith-filled enactment of sacred rituals. The novella presents a chain of faith spanning through generations that kept the whole community together, left broken with the present descendant Osha. He has lost his faith in himself and thus his faith in God, as a result the rituals he attends has become something dogmatic and meaningless. Mammanji becomes the *blessed* in her community by helping her family and community to live a meaningful life by following the sacred rituals while Osha was *possessed* by the specter of the glorious past, losing himself in his fallen state. Mammanji becomes the God’s faithful by reviving her community with His sacred dictums as revealed through her when Osha becomes faith-less by abstaining from his path to be a beacon to his community. The customs and religious traditions of the community emerged out of Juana Mammanji from her lived experience has been left with no heir when it comes to the present.

The narrative of a faith-ful (grand) Mother and doubt-ful (grand) son in the novella opens our eyes to the transformative power of faith. It helps us to see how an individual can work miracles and act as a blessing in her faith state. It also cautions us on how the lack of a faith state – despair and doubt – can become a curse and disrupt the foundations of one’s relation with his community and ultimately *himself*. Osha consumed by his despair and doubt lives like a demonically possessed man severing ties with his family and community. **The aim of this paper is to understand the significance of religious experience and emotions arising from the practice of sacred rituals in giving a purpose and meaning to human life in the context of our narrative.** For this objective, the paper will gauge the sort of experience we call religious, and the emotions constituting such an experience –

faith, holy, love, and charity – from my reading of the novella. I will try to look at how the practice of sacred rituals and traditions in the religious life of the faithful accredits meaning to their life in the fictional work. The notions of *beatus et possessus*, and the difference between mystical and ritualistic experience in the religious form of life presented in the novella will be of peculiar interest in this inquiry.

Reading the Religious

The book begins with the life of Juana Mammanji, as revealed through Osha's description. Through the close narration we see the vibrant life, the community had under her auspicious presence and prudence. She is a devout Christian who is active with the religious traditions of the community. Religion, the root word *religo*, means “to bind fast” (Latin Dictionary, n.d.) and the term *cultus*, from which the word ‘culture’ comes, means “a form of worship” (Latin Dictionary, n.d.) For the early inhabitants of a place, their culture was the way in which they lived religiously, in close connection with one another and with their environment, the immediate presence in their life. In the below passage from the novel about Mammanji, we can see how she lived religiously in close relation with her brethren:

Everyone in the village respected and even feared Juana Mammanji. She even had a nickname: ‘Judge Nona’. Not just in the family, but in the whole parish, everything concerning what was to be done when a child was born or when someone died, or simply about things to be followed in every life...in all such matters, it was to Mammanji they turned for advice (Miranda, 2013, p. 5).

Juana Mammanji became the elder when her family and community needed her. She was the guiding principle of her community. The community lived according to the dictates from her mouth. For her people she was the chosen one of God. Her voice was the *vox dei*. But if we investigate into her life, we can see that everything was not that easy for her. She struggled with her life but in front of the hardships she faced, she took a leap of faith and it miraculously worked. Now her destiny is to help the others to do so. Kierkegaard (1936) avers, human life relies on a chance, on a certain possibility where our every decision count and relies on a “passion of the infinite”

– the faith – this passion is inwardly necessitated and is the crux of our movement, every infinite decision we make in our life we make it out of faith.

William James (1902/2002) opines: Wherever the interior prayer is lacking, there is no religion; wherever, on the other hand, this prayer rises and stirs the soul, even in the absence of forms or doctrines, we have living religion (359). Mammanji got the vigour to live a righteous life from her prayers. She lived a deeply religious life and set the model for others to follow.

Juana Mammanji, as her family and people lovingly called her, was a revolutionary Christian woman with her unique spirit. She formulated a co-dex for her community, she wrote down the prayers that ought to be recited and the etiquette of the rituals that has to be followed during the lent and holy week and distributed it among families. She headed from front the religious affairs of the family and her community. She cut the bread during *Pesaha* (Maundy Thursday), which was destined for the head of the house, Mammanji's husband Casper. She led the men during the *Devastha*, a midnight ritual during lent to cast off demons by chanting prayers. She sets the steps to properly conduct the ritual of burial. Mammanji did not just write the rites and prayers to be followed, but meaningfully ingrained those practises into the veins of her community. Her sphere of wisdom was so wholesome she took care of the spiritual needs as well as the material needs of the community. She was prudential in discerning the needs of body and soul. She cured the patients with epidemic using the traditional medicines, without charging them and sold the necessary items such as food and medicine to the people needed even when they were not able to pay. Juana Mammanji provided the moral and ethical code for her people not by forcing a religious dogma but by creating a belief system rooted in a more pragmatic approach. She was filled with faith and in her faith, she acted as a blessing to her community.

Mystery, Miracles and Rituals

There was a sacred day in the community's almanac where everyone piously prepared for Juana Mammanji's spiritual revelations. It was the special occasion on which Mammanji had her mystical experience and made spiritual revelations. She was aware of the solemnity of this sacred occasion and prepared for it both mentally and physically, so did the whole community. Mammanji wears her particular vests and ornaments destined for that

day, she attends the special spiritual services in the church and prayfully prepares, while her family and the community devoutly anticipate for her transcendence to the divine, and gather round her with pious hearts. The mystery of that day was the transcendental experience Mammanji attained on the river side and her ability to involve a large enough crowd in the inscrutable experience she has. The event of the day where everyone's attention turns towards Mammanji started with a ritual bath in the Water:

After church, Mammanji would head straight to the riverside. There too people would be waiting with the utmost devotion. Mammanji would enter the water wearing all her ornaments, immerse herself completely, and leave the river, dripping wet. Her return trip to the house and the crowd gathered there was a sight worth seeing (Miranda, 2013, p. 9-10),

Mammanji imagined herself to be a light to her community. Her *faithful* act brings together the people gathered around her in communion; rekindling their faith under her presence. She provided hope to their community. And what gave her strength to bring together everyone in communion was her mystical experience – her personal experience of God. The sacred ritual she practiced was a manifestation of that divine union amidst the public. It acted as a testament of God's divine presence for the people around her and made their faith formidable. This is how Osha depicts Mammanji's mystical awareness, which is made manifested to the general public, during her sacred rituals: "Clicking her fingers in a particular rhythm, dancing to the tune of a strange song which no one heard before, sung in a melody no one could imitate, in words no one understood, she would walk home from the riverside" (Miranda, 2013, p. 10). Wittgenstein (1998) avers one's religious experience stands outside space and time, it is not factual, the ideals does not exist in this world, neither does it exists in its own but is found through the concrete experience of the individual and it is through the action the ideal is brought into this world. For something that stands outside space and time it is difficult to find words to express it. Mammanji's dance to the song no one has ever heard and the words of the song which she only understood and its visible enactment as a ritual performance reflects the Wittgensteinian findings on religious experience. There is a significant difference between the individual transcendental experience and its visible

manifestation as a ritual performance. Let us look at Osha's description to know what it is:

On her way, she would stare at each and every one, checking if everyone was wearing their *ventheenjas*. If anyone was caught without one, Mammanji would spit on their face with a loud cackle! Then she would make detailed predictions about everyone's future. Make proclamations in answer to the queries of the anxious. Prescribe offerings. She would scold those who were lazy about attending prayer and church, those who slept at those times without observing *esthi*. Then, humming that same tune, she would lie belly down on the dishes set on the table. Mammanji would not taste even one of them...After a while she get up and lie on her back, on the full length plantain leaf that would have been cut and laid out in advance. She would then slip into a deep sleep, as if she had lost consciousness (Miranda, 2013, p. 10-11).

Here we see the distinction between the mystical and ritualistic experience more clearly. Mystical experience is personal and the ritualistic experience is inter-personal. Sacred rituals were an immediate experience of the holy for her while it was a mediated experience to the others through her. The sacred rituals were an externalised performance of Mammanji's inner-religious emotions. In her most profound experience her face would glow, like the divine grace has come down upon her from heaven. In that tranquil state of mind, she prophesied and guided the community to stick to the sacred dictums. Ferran (2019) avers the emotions such as holy, faith and love (as in the personal relationship with God and brotherly love) are solely religious and take much more of higher value than our ordinary emotions because they are the most sophisticated and refined mode of emotions which demands a passionate commitment from our part. Mammanji's ritualistic behavior may seem like an insignificant thing or non-sensical stuff to a non-believer because it does not heed to her reason. But it does heed to the "passion of the infinite" within those surrounded her. For Mammanji's family and the whole crowd who were present on the occasion to view and attend the ritual ceremony, Mammanji's mysterious acts were testimonies to the presence of "Holy".

The people who were inspired by Mammanji's mystical experience, which is made concrete by the enactment of sacred rituals, stood before her

with awe and reverence. Osha describes how the others perceived her mystical state as follows: “How brightly Mammanji’s face would glow at those moments, as if she had been transformed into someone else! When she woke, Mammanji would say she recalled nothing of what happened” (Miranda, 2013, p. 11). Mammanji’s transcendental experience led to the formation of her community’s belief and creeds through the practise of sacred rituals. The mystic experience she had was ineffable for words but the actions and words from her during that deep spiritual state were interpreted by the pious people as sacred actions, and the commemoration of this event by the people made it a ritual. The mystical awareness is a form of consciousness only accessible to the mystic but the effects of her change of consciousness was manifested in her face and bodily gestures. Everyone gathered around were able to apprehend change in her face, and the heavenly aura around her, because their minds were attuned to the ritualistic setting. The people may not have understood “what it is like to be” in that state but they see her mystical experience to be true because of their common faith. Here is a statement from the novel resonating this sentiment: “Mammanji and everyone believed it was from this ritual that she got the strength for everything after Casper Pappanji’s death, Or even before that” (Miranda, 2013, p. 11). Mammanji emits an ethereal radiance for those who perceived her through the eyes of faith during her sacred rituals. They were made aware of their ephemeral nature in her presence during her mystic state. Dewey (1934) states that ideal is but an imagination of the real. The beliefs or creeds of any religion contains a symbolic significance that is verifiable to a general public experience. The people gathered around perceived the ‘holy’ in the Mammanji’s new apparition because the solemnity of the situation demanded it to be perceived ‘holy’. The religious emotions such as holy, sacred, etc. are higher emotions directed at a person, an object or an event which is of significant value to the religious believer (Ferran, 2019). People believed in the sanctifying and healing power of her rituals and the religious traditions she invented. And it is through their common faith they perceived the God within her and attenuated with the sacred emotions such as holy and divine.

When her family and community were living in chaos, she instilled in them a vigour to form a coherent order in their life and she got the power to do it solely through her practice/performance of sacred rituals. Kant (1998) avers morality is what we ought to do. It is prescriptive because it demands a

rightful conduct from the person under any circumstances. When doubt and uncertainty fuelled by chaos was reigning people's life Mammanji faithfully took the mantle of an elder to lead them. For Mammanji and those who believed in her it was God himself acting through her in times of the ritual showing the infinite Beings' dominion over them, so that they may follow His rules manifested through her. The invisible presence of the divine is made actual through her visible actions. The purpose of this ritualistic experience was to demonstrate the *visio absoluta* through enactments. Mammanji through her ritualistic experience created the actual from the apparent. The enactments helped the community seek answer for their moral dilemmas and helped them to stick to the religious way of life even if they went astray, it ensured the survival of community based on rules. Bergson (1935) talks about the two sources of morality in his book *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. For him morality is either habitual or reformed. The moral rules as given through the religious practices is learned by the community through its habitus or reformed and renewed by a saintly figure when the community comes to a moral dilemma. Mammanji through her charismatic appeal and the ritual enactment sets the rules to be followed by the people in her community. The sacred rituals made the individuals with no common thread of ordinary emotions belonging to a common faith. They were all united in *fides* by Mammanji's zealous and zestful proclamation enacted through her rituals.

Blessed and Possessed

The novel's narrative suddenly turns the lens into the present after the rich and lively relations of the community under the able leadership of Mammanji. Osha's fascination with the lost past through the symbolization of a golden key runs the narrative in the later sections. He realises the decomposition of his community's *cultus* in his *living*. The religious traditions passed on by Juana Mammanji is on a standstill when it reaches Osha. He is dubious about his ability to be an elder to his family and community, and his *lack* to be an able leader to his community consumes him. The recurrent motifs in the novel – the search for a hidden lock and a lost key – signifies his anxiousness while confronting the nothingness of his lifeworld. It signifies an absence of something which he zestfully yearns – to live an authentic life as Mammanji lived. The ghost from the past haunts him and possess

him. The embodiment of that possession is the golden key. The key symbolizes belonging to a household, losing the key means closing the doors of your belongings to ever. In Osha's case, with the loss of key, he loses his sense of belonging to a household – a home, a family, to his kinship and his community. His mind lingers in the past and is lost in there, he cannot form genuine bond with his family. His father's irresponsibility nor his mother's scandalous affair bothers him. He brushes it off with a general apathy towards life. This indifference towards the people in his life reaches its zenith when he passes over Ida, his own sister, in the streets and when he deserts his wife Jacintha over the lost key. He did not care about anything happening around him anymore.

Beauvoir (1948) talks about "sub-human" as a mode of being, where people sever connections with the rest of the community and make themselves distant from others. It can either happen through a deep traumatic event in once life or because of the dread about life which consumes one. They treat the world as insignificant and dull. Osha's state of being as a sub-human is caused by his lack of a place where he cannot return.

There is a recurring theme of "Hiraeth" in the novella, a nostalgia for a place where you cannot return. Osha's obsession with the key and his separation from *tharavad* is inter-related. His family's exodus from his ancestral home was the cause of his deep longing and it took the shape of a trauma, something vexing and painful with time, it is expressed throughout the novel with the metaphor of golden key and hidden lock. They represent the only thing he cared in his life, his ancestral home and the traditions. He was disturbed by the loss of the sacred prayer sheet transferred by the fathers in the family. It was a curio of the sacristan tradition kept within their family. It went missing from Franso, Osha's father, who does not care much about their traditions. He could neither find the prayer sheet which was passed through generations like a family treasure, nor could he find the lock of the home which he could inhabit. He is a man without home and life. One who is sickened by his dreams of a "Home" – a sick soul possessed by the love for his past.

Osha is nostalgic about the paradise he is lost like the first man. He has lost his faith in his world where he was left without nothing to inhabit and thus fail to live his life authentically in the present. Eliade (1959) talks about home as the "holy place", "A space has been provisionally consecrated and cosmicised by the primitive man when he inhabits it," he avers, "All symbols and rituals having to do with temples, cities, and houses are finally derived

from the primary experience of the sacred space” (p. 58). *Thara*, the etymological root of the word *tharavad* in Malayalam means sacrificial altar or ground. *Tharavad*, Osha’s ancestral home, was the sacred place where Mammanji’s sacred rituals/practices took place and the ground from which family’s traditions sprout. This is how Osha presents his *tharavad*: “It was Juana Mammanji who built the imposing *tharavad*, one sees today with mortar and laterite stones; a house with facing windows and doors large enough for souls to come and go easily; with a verandah, a large hall, and an attic” (Miranda, 2013, p. 2). Osha’s ancestral home was inhabited not only by humans but the souls of their ancestors. He felt a blissful ecstasy while being in Mammanji’s room after being separated from the *tharavad* as a child. Osha was able to revisit the place and live with her memories, with an abiding peace and joy, the only meaningful event that he could experience in a life which he considered meaningless. He describes his most sublime moment as follows: “In that moment, I was experiencing a calm, safety, and peace which was unknown to me. I felt like Home. In this house, in this room, I wish I could live with Mammanji” (Miranda, 2013, p. 46).

Mammanji was able to create an impact and imprint her memories on the people of her times as well as the posterity, through her faith-filled life and sacred rituals; once we reach the end of the novel, we see everyone are convinced of Mammanji’s divinity and worship her as a saint in the church with due reverence. The ideal that Mammanji made real lives on, yet somehow Osha could not find that ideal from his real life. He was caught up in a tantamount of chaos and could not reinstate the order in his family like Mammanji did. When it comes to the end of the novel, we see Mammanji is accepted as a saint among the local community and is venerated into the larger Roman Catholic Church. She is not the saint of the locals anymore but of the whole catholic world. The Shylocks among them had started to print her photos and make money. Here we see the community diverge from its original spiritual roots. Spirituality has become a business now. Mammanji through the practice of sacred rituals used her spiritual gifts for the welfare of the community, but now it has come to an end. James avers, “Churches, once established, live at secondhand upon tradition; but the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine.” It is from such an occasion that James avers a religious or a faithful’s life should be assessed by its fruits. That is how they affect their life and those around her. Mammanji is a paragon of what truly religious means from the novella.

Conclusion

To be religious means to have faith in times of uncertainties as Mammanji has shown with her life. The sacred rituals Mammanji enacted was borne out of her faith. When one fails to see the mystery of faith behind the ritualistic tradition it becomes meaningless. It is in one's personal experience with God, the essence of the religious rituals has to be sought. The community is in crisis of faith because the progenies forget the dynamic and progressive aspects of their traditions and clings onto the archaic and static aspects of it. Like Mammanji, for every age, for every time, in the moments of crisis an Oracle has to be born – an oracle who would fill the heart of their people with the faith to lead a good life. The community's faith which is embedded in its ritualistic traditions need to be reformulated and reinvented whenever it comes to a crisis. Sacred rituals of a community are recollections of the spiritual experience of the humble beginnings of a community. They set the stage for the community to form a coherent structure of its own to lead a religious life. The formlessness of the Luso-Indian community in its beginning has attained a form with Mammanji's religious practices and visionary actions. The myth of Juana Mammanji exists because it will inspire the posteriority to do the same in times of uncertainties. But Osha shuts the door for his Mamma (mother) and others in his faith-less state. His alienation from his family is linked to his alienation from his *religio*.

Faith is the cornerstone of one's religious convictions and the meaning behind the sacred rituals in the novella. It connects and build communication among the community. The faithful dialogue between God and oneself, and oneself and thy neighbor embedded in the acts of rituals fosters the spirit of the community and brings in life. The Luso-Indian community's traditions and rituals are on the deathbed in the present because Osha failed to act in faith – in communion with others. Osha forgets that crises can happen but what counts most is the faith to re-born again in the flames of crises like Mammanji did, he failed to take inspiration from the greatest testimony of faith in his life – his own Grandma. Osha failed to see the only truth that could have set him free – to be religious means to be faithful – to God and one's own people.

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