

### Chapter 3

## **Desiring Devotees: An Analysis of Early Bhakti Poets—Andal and Akka Mahadevi**

The Bhakti movement, consisting of several devotional cults of many hues and colours, had an excessive influence upon the women lives of India. Many among them tried to do away with the various taboos, rites, rituals, pollutions and all other irregularities and dogmas that dominated the Hindu culture of medieval period. While some recognised the need for the equality of male-female gender, some others worked to strengthen the inequalities in practice. It is too complex to analyse and define all the various social, political and historical aspects of the movement which existed for many centuries during medieval period. But, a sheer effort to examine its nature as a mass pan Indian movement (despite all its regional differences and imbalances) that is accountable for refining the status of Indian women appears worthy. This chapter focuses into the major female poets of Bhakti movement and how they tried to create a space of their own through their lyrics, in a period where men and masculinity were considered as the strong and noble powers of the medieval society. The hostile situations of caste, religion, gender, culture and language formed several strong renaissance movements all along India. Bhakti was the basic root for all these widespread protests. All other renaissance struggles in India are either directly or indirectly connected with the philosophies of Bhakti movement. The establishment of English East India Company and the commencement of colonial rule made the medieval society more rigid. Consequently, the idea of renaissance emerged and this 'progressive' and 'radical' political programme is still considered as a pioneer to the arrival of nationalism.

Even though we face the lack of historical texts and records of ancient India, all these texts provide a better space for women and they claim a very high status for the females through often quoting the examples of Maitreyi, who is regarded as one of the most learned and virtuous women of ancient India and represents intelligent women in India, and Gargeyi, a brilliant philosophical scholar who made rich contributions to spread education and even surpassed men in her abundant knowledge. Moreover, the invocatory mantra of Atharva Veda addresses God as '*devi*' and the fourteenth book of this series completely deals with women, wedding, and other domestic concerns. Apart from that, along with men, women also attended religious ceremonies, because of the existence of 'Ardhanaari' concept (the essential other half of the man).

At the same time, the social dogmas like *Sati* and Child marriage is credited to the next period – Medieval ages – where India, for the first time witnessed political uncertainties and continuous wars, caste discriminations and deterioration of the status of Indian women. Texts like *Manusmriti* changed the entire aspect and openly stated that woman must be kept in complete dependence by the men and must be under their strict control. All along her life, she is never allowed to lead an independent life. During their childhood a girl should be controlled by her father, husband protects her in youth and during her old age, her sons.

Such kinds of stiff and social immoralities brought more and more deteriorations in the Indian society. It was the Brahmin people, who stood at the top of the caste hierarchy pyramid and carried the main responsibility of creating such a rigid and defensive social structure. They established several rites and rituals, rigid taboos on lower caste people (*Sudras*) and women of the medieval society. These social inequalities, conditions and suffocations faced by the common people of the period made them to strongly protest and unite under a same umbrella – Bhakti (Devotion) – a

religious movement that could wipe out all these existing injustices. The Bhakti movement while protesting against various socio-religious injustices also introduced new socio-religious reforms which in turn helped modern India to absorb and introduced most modern reforms for the Indian society in general and for Indian women and the untouchables in particular (Mullatti 2). Before entering into the poets in particular, it is important to analyse the social conditions faced by the women of those medieval ages.

The patriarchal beliefs always welcomed the birth of a boy child rather than that of a girl. Because, the custom of wedding always treated women as mere machines who were born to meet the whims and fancies of a man along with the domestic households. The marriage tradition treated women only as a tool of reproduction. They were subjected to be obedient to the other family members, especially to males. The husband was considered as the 'lord' of her entire life, and the wife should not have any particular likings, wishes, ambitions, etc. They never possessed any rights on their family properties and had no classes on religious studies. Child marriage was a common custom among all families. They were restricted to the four walls of their houses and had no particular wishes of their own. In the in-law's house, a newly wedded girl is considered as 'Lakshmi' (Hindu Goddess of wealth and richness) on the first day of her wedding. But from the very next day onwards, she becomes a chattel. The cruel system of 'Sati' and the conditions of young widows were really worst. If a widow disagrees to perform Sati, then her life was worse than being to hell. She will be regularly exploited and tortured by both the male and female members of the family.

The complexities of the rigid caste system were characterized by several prohibitions on intermixing, inter-dinings and inter-marriages. Even caste groups will have several sub-castes among them, and all of them will be forced to lead their own small life. The higher caste regularly exploited the lower castes and considered it as their

right and privilege. The lower castes were considered as untouchables. All these social dogmas prevailed in the society on the backdrop of religion and religious consent. And on the top of all these, excessive use of *karma marga* sin cleansing rituals by Brahmins left masses to a totally fatalistic and subjugated life (Mullatti 3).

It is in the Hindu holy book *Bhagawat Gita*, from where we get the first accurate explanation regarding the methods of worship. These specific methods are called as *marga* or 'ways'. According to Hindu religious beliefs, there are primarily three ways of worshipping God to commence any kind of religious doings to attain ultimate salvation or 'moksha'. They are namely *Jnana*, *Karma* and *Bhakti*. The first one, *Jnana* consists of the intelligent and rational attitude which can be found in Upanishads or other similar texts. *Karma* is based on the ritualistic methods. This can be found in Vedic texts, *Sutras* or *Shastras*. *Bhakti* (devotion), the third method was a secondary one that was present in a complementary approach in the other two methods.

It was during the 10th century that *Bhakti* – 'intense personal love, devotion and dedication to God' became a prime factor of worship. It was saints like Ramanujacharya and Madhwacharya, the early prominent Brahmin chiefs from South India who started using the *Bhakti-Marga* for the sacred activities. They declared that even though it is sacred, the extreme use of both *Jnana* and *Karma* will welcome socio-religious evils, exploitations and injustices to the society. Hence, the principal use of *Bhakti-Marga* was the initial protest of these religious saints. The second way of protest and resistance was the use of medieval vernacular languages to write religious writings, spread the religious methods, prayers and communicate with the masses. They rejected the use of Sanskrit, which was considered as the high class and sacred language.

For example, consider the example of Basaveshwara's rationalistic question regarding the role of a priest. A devotee prays God through *Bhakti-Marga*, only because

of his/her passionate love and devotion to God. Leela Mullatti, in the Introduction to her book, *The Bhakti Movement and the Status of Women* points out that:

So Basaveshwara questions, how can a Brahmin pray on behalf of the devotee (as was done till under Karma-Marga ritual)? According to him, a devotee's worship is of an extremely passionate, personal and intimate nature. Comparing such worship and the relation between a devotee and his God as a union between husband and wife, he questions, "how can love making between a husband and wife, like a devotee and his God, be done by a deputy – a Brahmin?" Thus Basava in particular and all *Bhakti* saints in general rejected the Brahmins' mediatory and superior role in the religious field. (4-5)

This development helped the Indian women to improve their status. The women, who were restricted inside the four walls of their houses were very illiterate, ignorant and superstitious by all means. Knowing this clear situation of those poor homemakers, the Brahmins and the other superior classes always found entertainment in exploiting them in all the possible ways they could. A Brahmin widow should either commit Sati or must complete shave off her head. In the name of preserving purity and virtuousness, they were allowed to eat a single meal a day. Some other women were asked to take strict vows like fasting on almost all the days of a week. They have to visit several religious shrines throughout their life. At times, they were even sexually exploited. Therefore, discarding the dominance of the Brahmin community saved women from these torturing to a very great extent.

As it is clear that religion is always a pervading influence upon the daily life of Indian people, the entry of women into the sphere of religion and then becoming independent religious leaders is highly meaningful. Both male and female saints have at

many times asked the same question that is whether the Lord 'Atma' that resides in everyone belong to male gender or female gender.

These situations explains not only the freedom that the women acquired from their daily domestic confined lives, but also a revolutionary change that the medieval women were actually enjoying for the very first time. They enjoyed religious delights, intermixing with other caste and creed, and started to strongly face and react against the exploitations and discriminations that they face in the medieval society.

Such women wrote their lyrics in the 'language of the common man', people who were just like them who knew no Sanskrit. Therefore they selected vernacular languages with pure beauty of its idioms and phrases, which every follower can easily relate. These lyrics contained the spirit and simplicity of the colloquial dialects.

Freedom of expression meant that poetry came out of the respected courts and holy shrines and reached into homes of common folks and paddy fields where local women had their domestic lives. They brought their Lord to their private life – into their homes, kitchens, gardens, bedrooms and even to their hearts. They sang about the hardships of their life, disloyal husbands, cruel mother-in-laws, malicious sister-in-laws, and every time reminding their Lord to come and take part with them. There were many poems representing individual expressions of female desires. Even though they transferred their love, lust, hunger and yearnings to their Lord, their linguistic expressions are too human, constantly intimate and frequently, were, very erotic.

While examining the tales and legends of these female Bhakti saints who lived during various centuries, one could easily find several similarities in their lives. They were all very young in their ages, who easily recognized their unconditional love to their Lord and left their domestic life single minded, to unite with their Lord. When examined more closely, those legends about their lives often seem dreamy or impractical, occupied

with much fantasies and illusions, and eccentricities about how they observed themselves and their God. For an adolescent girl intent on getting wedded to her Lord, devotion sometimes becomes more erotic, while at the same time, for the intelligent mystic, everything including clothes, seems restrictive.

These female saints always had an intense yearning for the unification with their Lord. They were strictly concerned about the immortality of the soul that remains after death. They strongly believed that this immortal soul will soon merge with the supreme power. The soul was thus made up of divine love, sinless and unsullied in its compassion. These poetic saints had to powerfully fight to attain wide reception in a male dominated society. But their exceptional poetic talent and their stubborn perseverance of their saintly equality, made the medieval society to accept them at least half-heartedly. Their tales are purely personal narratives covering the extent of what it means to be a real woman.

The Bhakti movement had blossomed first from the south, especially from the Tamil lands (Tamizhakam) from almost 6th century AD. There were 63 Nayanars (Saivites) and 12 Alvars (Vaishnavites). But, among all of them, there were only two women Bhakti saints – Karaikkal Ammaiyar (Nayanar) and Andal (Alwar).

Andal was a passionate poetess of Tamil Bhakti movement. The legend of Andal is compared to that of Sita of *Ramayana*. She was born at Srivilliputtur, a village near Tirunelli, in Tamil Nadu during 7th or 8th centuries. During these periods, both the Alwar community and Nayanar community were busy with composing delightful songs and hymns of Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva. According to the tale of Andal, she was born as a baby girl in a basil garden of Vishnuchitta Alwar. He took the little baby and she grew up with her foster father in a spiritual surrounding. During her childhood itself,

she attained deep knowledge about the myths and legends relating to Lord Vishnu and his ten incarnations.

The name of Andal has two different meanings. One of them is ‘the girl who ruled over the Lord’ and the other one is ‘that which attracts’. It is said that the mental consciousness of Andal was purely captivated by the deep love and dedication she had with the Lord from her very childhood days. Several legends about Andal says that she finally achieved her long time determination by uniting with her Lord at Srirangam. In an article named “On Women saints” the author A. K. Ramanujan mentioned that unlike men, women often have to reject normative family life to pursue their spiritual goals. In some cases, it might be like that of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, where the husband and family accept such a rejection and allows the woman to pursue her path. On the other side, it may appear like that of Kannada saint Akka Mahadevi, where the transgression of the social norms is at its peak and no one sanctions such a decision. Archana Venkatesan, in her book, *The Secret Garland* points out that:

Antal falls somewhere in between these two figures – her poetry, especially the *Nasong of cciyar Tirumozhi*, is radical for its frank eroticism and disturbing images of violence. But her mythic life, enshrined in the hagiographies, presents a more comfortable picture, where the father aids in securing his daughter’s impossible goal of marriage to Visnu. (8)

*Tiruppavai* and *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* are the two major poems composed by Andal. Among them, *Tiruppavai* is a single narrative and delightful poem of thirty hymns. The poem describes the cheerful journey to the residence of Lord Krishna to meet him and to unite with him. The word *Tiruppavai* itself is composed of two words – ‘Tiru’ and ‘Pavai’ which means ‘a sacred vow undertaken by a girl’. It is considered as a spiritual poetry of highest order which comprises all the charisma, pleasure, simplicity, delight,



warmth and the strong intensity of a hymn, idyll, lyric and ballad. The splendour of the poem lies in the amusement and perfect fulfilment it offers to the general public, masses, folks, children, etc. It also offers great philosophical thoughts to the seekers of truth and the scholars of philosophy.

As a young girl, Andal had a profound understanding of myths and legends of Narayana and Vaishnava thoughts that influenced her poetic brilliance that she recounts in each incarnations and stories of Lord Narayana. Coupled with these allusive traits, she sings of her physical passions. Periyalwar, her foster father, is celebrated for her charming verses of 'pillaitamil' where the lord is cherished and worshipped as a child. Andal devotes songs of *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* to these childish aspects of Lord Krishna, where she constructs herself and Lord Krishna as childhood playmates. But when she enters into adolescent age, she starts to see him not as a childhood friend, but as her beloved lover. In the book *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess* by Priya Sarukai and Ravi Sankar, the authors point out:

But as she turns into adolescent, she begins to see him, not as playmate, but as her lover. His absence only provokes Andal into specifically explicit expositions of her body's need for his smell, taste, touch on her; she wishes to be consumed by He-Who-Rests-on-the-Cosmic-Ocean. It is important to note that body is not viewed as a vehicle that carries the mind and *atma* but is *itself* the site of illumination; the physical *is* the sacred. (39)

Such ideas were always prevalent in the entire verses of Andal where she regarded her body as a temple and her mind, being *sanctum sanctorum* (and the sensory organs likened to lamps lighting the temple that must be kept aflame in order to illuminate the body-temple).

In the poem *Tiruppavai*, Andal has re-created the heavenly atmosphere of Lord Krishna's Gokul. Her homeland, Srivilliputtur became Gokul, and she herself became the beautiful maid at Gokul (*Gopika*), who preaches her Lord. The *Bhagawata* story from epics is recreated by Andal. Her adaptation of the story provides a base for the setting of *Tiruppavai*. In stanza 2, 'Vaiyattu Valvirkal' of Archana Venkatesan's translation of *Tiruppavai*, Andal sings:

Kohl does not darken our eyes  
and flowers do not adorn our hair.  
  
We do nothing that is wrong  
and speak nothing that is evil  
  
Instead we give freely  
and offer arms to those in need. (Venkatesan 52)

Blending nature as well as Bridal Mysticism, *Tiruppavai* becomes a beautiful musical composition sung by a little maiden girl in the banks of river Vaiga in Madurai. Here, Andal places Radha (Andal herself) as the maiden girl, river Vaiga as river Yamuna of North and Madurai as Vrindavan. The thirty days vow (*pavai nombu*) is a penance followed strictly by Andal that aims in the sublime unification with her Lord. In stanza 26 'Male Manivanna',

O great one, the color of a dark gem  
  
If you ask us what we need  
  
for this ancient Markali vow, performed even by our ancestors  
  
Listen, these are it:  
  
conches  
  
like your *pancajanya*, white as milk  
  
that makes the world shudder with its deep sound

a large magnificent *parari*-drum  
 chanters singing the *pallantu*  
 beautiful lamps, canopies, banners.  
 Lord who floats upon a banyan leaf  
 bless us with all this. (Venkatesan 76)

The mood presented in the above lines is of clean '*Madhurya Bhava*' which is absolutely an act of all other Alvars (or even their imagination), who belong to masculine gender. There lies many esoteric meanings in the above stanza. The conch here stands for 'Pranava' (AUM) that all human beings, irrespective of their caste, creed or gender, belong to the Lord. The drum is the symbol of 'Paratantrya' referring that all of us are directly or indirectly dependent upon him. It also signifies the meaner desires. The bath which the maiden girls are about to plunge into is the deep immersion of God's love. This stanza is one of the concluding portions of *Tiruppavai* and here the maidens are getting very closer to their Lord and the deity is addressed as Love-incarnate, person who possess boundless feelings, care and love for those who approach Him. *Madhurya Bhava* is clearly depicted here. Apart from the individual salvation that a single Bhakta achieves, a kind of complete liberation is attained by a whole community. The whole work is a quest for harmony and bliss. The waking up of the maidens in the initial stanzas can be a metaphor representing the waking up of Alvar saints by Andal or it can be again re-interpreted as waking up of the entire community or even the whole human race to gain salvation and blessings. The interest of the community was more important for the Alvar saints rather than their personal likings. It was one of their chief objectives. They tried to tie people to the ideas of love, kindness, harmony, warmth and thus show them the correct path of love and devotion for God. They always communicated the messages concerning equality and brotherhood. In *Tiruppavai*, not a

single friend of Andal is left behind. Each of them participates in the 'Margazhi bath' to attain salvation and unite with their Lord. The hymns of *Tiruppavai* falls under the category of *Madhurya Bhakti*. A noted example of this category can be seen in the Radha-Krishna love. It is the kind of love for Lord Krishna that one could have for a love or spouse. Here, lord is treated as the lover. For Andal, she is the devotee (Gopika) and Krishna is her lover.

Andal's legend has a great similarity with that of Sita in *Ramayana*. According to the legend, King Janaka finds Sita from a groove and the 'Balakanda' depicts that Sita was born from the womb of earth, not of an ordinary women. In the 'Uttarakanda', she was taken back to the earth by her mother. The same happens with the story of Andal – born in a garden and merged with her favourite deity. G. Mohana Charyulu in his article, "Bridal Mysticism in Andal's Poetry" points out:

She lived in an era where there were no women saints or poetess. She was the only women Alwar saint in South Indian history. The fact that the Alvars are from a variety of social strata that included Sudras and a women indicates how liberal the Bhakti cult has been towards class, caste and gender – the divisions which were helped by the larger pan – Indian tradition until then. (Charyulu 97)

The significance of Andal rises to the extreme when one analyses the socio-political situations of women during the medieval periods in Tamil Nadu. Even the birth of a girl child was not greeted with great pleasure. The middle class families found girls as a problem and many families grieved at the birth of a girl child. However, on the other side, the birth of a boy child was a great celebration for the whole family. The prime duties of a woman were to be a submissive wife to her husband and a responsible and caring mother to her children. They were mostly illiterate and were given no space to express about their rights and wishes. Marriage was considered as one of the prestigious

ceremonies and dowry was given in the form of money and ornaments. Polygamy was widely practised and widows were not permitted to participate in any occasions of celebration such as weddings, festivals and so on. Most of the widows therefore approved the system of *Sati*.

In terms of Vaishnava Bhakti, Andal is much related to Mirabai of Rajasthan in the usage of erotic terms to describe her intense love and desire towards her beloved. A. K. Ramanujan's essay "On Women Saints" considerably remarks that, "The chief mood of *bhakti* is the erotic (*sringara*), seen almost entirely from an Indian women's point of view whether in its phase of separation or union" (270). He additionally highlights the point that these feminine personae could be of three different forms: *kanta* (wife), *parakiya* (illicit lover) and *abhisarika* (trysting woman). What Andal intended in the end of her both poetic compositions is to perform the role of a *kanta* that could be attained only through the unification with the divine Lord. According to Andal, her physical body was a strong tool that leads her towards transcendence.

Her depiction of Bridal Mysticism (*Madhurya Bhava*) has no equal or parallel version till today. In her verses, Andal tries to include all her companion girls and asks them to take part in the ritual. This itself is a strong revival weapon. It can be interpreted as her call for uniting and fighting for the freedom for her expressions. The roots of South Indian feminism can be traced from the life and works of Andal. The theme of agency is widely accepted and praised in Andal. Her description of carnal love and desire for her beloved was a kind of severe shock to the 'moralists' and masculine powers of the period.

In the article "Spiritual Significance of Gopis of Brindavan" spiritual expert Dr. Prema Pandurang explains about the spiritual significance of the Vrindavan Gopis that comes in connection with the *Tiruppavai* lyrics of Andal. According to her the Gopis are

the real incarnations of God-love. As long as they kept their love secret, everything was fine. But later, it was exposed to the world. They tried to keep their devotion in complete secrecy and hence they were called as ‘Gopi’ that means ‘to be secretive’. They sheltered their Lord from revealing Himself or else King Kamsa of Mathura may send his emissaries to kill their Lord. Thus by protecting him safely, they enjoyed the presence of their Lord in several ways. Dr. Pandurang wrote, “With her eyes she drinks His beauty/ With her ears she drinks His flute music/ With her skin she enjoys divine touch” (320). She further describes that there are different ways to feel and enjoy the presence of God. Some people find Him in complete meditation whereas some others know Him through their knowledge and wisdom. There are some others who realize God through their physical bodies. Andal, who defines herself as a Gopi falls under this category. Her *Tiruppavai* is a celebration of the joy and happiness of the Gopis of Vrindavan, including herself. Even though they are interested in keeping their devotion in extreme secrecy, at times, overwhelmed with joy the maiden girls begin to sing. Those songs were not mere compositions of a poet, but they were the outcomes of their unending desire and devotion towards the Lord. Their true devotion of love emanates from their heart as sweet melodies. At some peak, this love is also dance. Here the Lord of Andal can dance well; he is a connoisseur of music and a melodious flute player. It is said that in dispassion (*Vairagya* mood) a disappointment is present whereas in love (*prema* segment) a hope is present. For Andal the process of yearning God is a mystery. Andal in a way, indirectly portrays the Rasalila of Krishna. Dr. Pandurang further describes:

The Gopi is not a person; she is a concept personified-she is devotion, surrender, beauty, creativity, imagination, humility, sacrifice, all put together. She has no identity of her own; she lives in Krishna; conscious of Him all the time. She

waits for Krishna to come into the world. She catches his Lila. She complains to Yashoda about little Krishna's mischiefs because she loves His divine mischief. She knows the impact of flute music and takes part in the cosmic dance. (323)

Dr. K. R. Vittal Doss in the second chapter of his book *Alwars and the Indian Vaishnavite Literatures* explains about Andal's *Madhurya Bhakti*. Self surrender is the most essential factor of *Madhurya Bhakti*. Andal accepts the Pratyaksa Kanta bhava of Bridal Mysticism where she considers herself as a maiden girl and loves Sri Krishna. She decorates herself and appears as a beautiful young woman who waits for her lover. She sometimes even behaves as the consort of Lord. This type of worship may create illusion as well as delusion. The Tamil Alwars were one among the pioneers who introduced *Madhurya Bhakti* literature in the later periods. Also, they were the initial poets who followed almost all the aspects of love found in the Akam poetry of Sangham period in the later *Madhurya Bhakti* lyrics (Doss 172). In the stanza 29, 'Cirrancirukale' of *Tiruppavai*, Andal sings:

Know this Govinda  
 We have not come here  
 for the *parai*-drum  
 For all time:  
 for this birth and every birth that follows  
 We are only yours.  
 We serve only you.  
 Direct our every other desire toward you. (79)

Here in this stanza, Andal's direct desire for the unification with her Lord is taken by a single overriding desire which is to be with her beloved and be with Him in all the coming births too. There are two important suggestions here – one that the devotee

values the togetherness with her beloved above everything else, and two, once the revelation has been experienced, all lowly desires are automatically shed off. (Tyagi 72-73)

In the stanza 5 ‘Mayanai Mannu’ Andal describes about the ‘purity’ of the maiden girls. She writes:

lord who plays  
 by the great unsullied waters of the Yamuna  
 radiant beacon  
 of the cowherd clan,  
 Damodara  
 who brightened his mother’s womb –  
 We are pure and  
 come to you  
 with these fresh flowers.  
 we sing of you  
 we think of you. (Venkatesan 55)

The purity referred in the above lines is not about the ritual purity or hygiene a girl should possess. It is the purity of intent and extreme love for Lord. The final destination of the flowers is to lie upon God’s feet. River Yamuna attained her self purity through the association of the river with Lord Krishna’s divine body even from the time of his birth. Similar to the girls who are purified by their intense love for their beloved, the flowers too are transformed by the extreme devotion of love by the worshippers.

In the stanza 8, ‘Kilvanam Velenru’ Andal sings about how the girls experience their God:

All the girls eager to go, have not gone



but wait for you.

We have come to rouse you

spirited girl

Wake up now. (Venkatesan 58)

Here, the girls possess a very single minded goal of meeting the Lord and specify that they are not ready to wait passively for his return. Rather, they have seized the initiative to accept Him. The intimacy between the God and devotee is mentioned. The girls meet Krishna to show their emaciated grown up bodies because of their separation from Him. Till this point, every girl has experienced Lord as her own internally, individually as well as secretly. But under the pretext of *pavai* vow, they wish to experience Him in public, with no secret codes but with the communal participation of other fellow devotees.

In the stanza 20, 'Muppattu Muvar' Andal indirectly describes about the unification with the Beloved:

Gentle Nappinnai

woman with soft breasts shaped like copper pots

lustrous red lips and slender hips

O Sri

Abandon your sleep.

Give us fan and the mirror

and command your beloved

to bathe us, this very instant. (Venkatesan 70)

The bathing act is a significant factor of taking a vow. From the Sangham point of view, bathing is a strong metaphor of sexual union (Venkatesan 121). Here, the sexual union further points out the unification with Lord. The bathing sequence is used

indirectly several times in stanzas 1, 2 and 3 symbolizing the immersion of maiden girls in Lord Krishna. Here, in the 20th stanza, this becomes a direct conception. The girls are at the door of death because of the separation they felt from their Lord. They manifested their emaciated bodies and only Krishna could save them. They ask Nappinnai, Krishna's consort, to command Him.

It is from this dark scenario, Andal emerged as a reformer and later as a 'Goddess'. She lived her life according to her own wishes. Autonomy and freedom marked her character. She herself took all the decisions of her life and lived according to that. In an era, where women were strictly restricted from expressing their desire and wishes, Andal openly wrote about her carnal desires and her unending yearning for her beloved. Her lyrical compositions delineate the different stages of a woman lover who is entirely trapped in the web of love. In *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*, she writes:

My breasts seek the gaze of the one  
 whose beautiful hand lifts the discus.  
 Bound tightly in a red cloth, their eyes  
 Shy away from the gaze of mere mortals  
 desiring none other than Govinda.  
 I cannot live here a moment longer.

Please take me to the shores of the Yamuna. (Venkatesan 181)

Andal begins *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* with an invocation to Kamadava and the mythical love story between Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Actually, *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* begins where *Tiruppavai* ends. The later text is a presentation of a ritual prayer or vow undertaken by unmarried girls to attain a virtuous husband. In *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* the desire never gets altered and the husband mentioned here remains Vishnu/Krishna.

In the Song 2, Song of the Sandcastles, Andal directly mentions how her beloved enter into heart. She sings:

You enter our courtyard  
 show us your lovely face, your sweet smile  
 do you intend to break our sandcastles  
 and our hearts well?  
 O Govinda, who leaped and stretched  
 to span and the earth and sky  
 if you embrace us like this  
 what will our neighbors say? (Venkatesan 153)

Here, in the above lines, Krishna enters house from the courtyard to embrace her physical body and to enter into her heart. Krishna enters without permission to make love with her, to wrest her beautiful bangles or to break her 'sandcastles'. These lines points out Krishna's union with Andal, where their two bodies become one.

In the first part of the *Song of Divination* (Song 4), Andal wishes to care the feet of her Lord. This act is a perfect example of an absolute surrender and service to Lord Vishnu, symbolizing the wifely duties of his consort Lakshmi. Andal wishes to unite with Him in an intimate and inseparable manner of wifely service. The following lines portray this image:

Scholars and gods bow before you  
 noble bridegroom, lord of Tirumaliruncolai.  
 If I should remain forever in that place where he reclines  
 to press and caress his holy feet,  
 Fall together, O *kutal!* (Venkatesan 157)

In the following verses of the entire song we see the picture of Andal playing the *kutal* game yearning for her exclusive unification with beloved. In the *kutal* game the even number specifies union whereas the odd number denotes separation. The word *kutal* means 'to come together'. The *kutal* asks to predict the union of Andal with Lord Krishna. The rhythmic meter (*kaliviruttam*) of the entire verse suggests the eagerness and long term desire for the union (Venkatesan 198). She ends the section singing:

Kotai of Visnucittan  
sang a song of the lovely maidens of Ayarpati  
of their quarrels and friendships, their intimacy and bickering  
of long waits and a *kutal* game. (Venkatesan 158)

Through the entire verses of the *Song to the Kuyil* (Song 5), Andal represents herself as a woman who is strongly tied up in the complete throes of unrequited love from her lover. This particular section of *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* has several delicate allusions to the old Sangham poetry. It uses the image of her pet-parrot and the messenger *kuyil*. In the stanza 5.8, Andal hints that a secret has been shared between her and her Lord. The stanza leads us to make believe that the same messenger bird was the witness to all the intimacies shared by the lovers. Andal wrote:

My clever and perfect lord  
whose mighty arms easily wield the *sarnga* bow  
between him and me  
a secret has passed  
that only he and I know.  
O delicate *kuyil* living in this grove  
amid these trees laden with sweet ripe mangoes  
ing your sweet song of summons

to my beautiful lord.

Make him return to me quickly

Then you will witness what I do to him. (Venkatesan 161)

The sixth decad, *The Song of the Wedding Dream*, is the most popular of the entire text. It describes in detail the wedding of Andal with Lord Vishnu with every specific association s. Even today, this stanza is sung in Brahmin Srivaishnava marriages, and the bride and groom are considered as the living embodiments of Andal and Vishnu. The decad begins with entry of the groom to the city and ends with the couple celebrating the grand ceremony in an elite tour around the adorned city streets on elephants. The wedding takes place after a long term of separation between the lovers. Andal sings:

We were smeared with vermilion and cool sandalwood

then he and I together rode on the elephants

and circled the festive streets

They drenched us in fragrant waters.

Such a vision I dreamed, my friend.

Kotai of the king of Villiputtur

city of Vaishnava fame

wove this garland of pure Tamil

of her dream for the lord of cowherds. (Venkatesan 164-165)

The next decad, *The Song to the White Conch* (Song 7), as the title suggests focuses on the conch of Narayana. Andal praises the conch, which is unique in Alwar literature. Here, here lord is addresses as Madhava and Madhusudhana. The conch stands as a strong symbol of union (conch) as well as separation by portraying conch bangles. In Indic sense, bangles represent a woman's loss and separation, which is explained in

Song 9 – *The Song for the Conch Bangles*. Conch is always interpreted as something very close to Lord Vishnu. She asks:

Are they fragrant as camphor? Are they fragrant as lotus?

Or do these coral red lips taste sweet?

I ache to know the taste, the fragrance of the lips

Of Madhava, who broke the tusk of elephant.

Tell me, O white conch from the deep sea. (Venkatesan 166)

Andal once enjoyed this sweetness of her beloved's conch in his lips. It is also something that is always inseparable from the hands of Vishnu like those inseparable figures of a bedchamber. Likewise Andal is also inseparable and unbreakable from her beloved. Even the solar disc of Narayana gets separated from his hands when he dispenses the disc from his hand for a significant mission. On the other hand, the conch, at any circumstance, never leaves his hands. Moreover, when he needs it he never dispenses it away as the disc. Instead, he brings the conch closer to his lips, which denotes the greatest intimacy he has.

The eighth song, *The Song to the Dark Rain Clouds*, is also a messenger poem similar to decad five. The messenger poems are a common genre of early Indic poets made famous by *Meghadoota* by Kalidasa. In these lines, Andal asks the dark rain clouds to act as a messenger to inform her lover about her loneliness and suffering due to the long separation from Him.

O clouds that spill lovely pearls

What message has the dark-hued lord

of Venkatam

sent through you?

The fire of desire has invaded my body

I suffer. (Venkatesan 168)

As per the Indic literary scenario, the rain or rainy season denotes union and an absent hero invariably promises to return before the coming of the monsoons (Venkatesan 208). Here, her beloved might have promised her that he would arrive before the monsoon falls. So, when she sees the dark rain clouds she mistakes that her beloved arrived as he promised. The word cloud *megha* (Tamil-*mekar*) represents a class of servants, who precede a king. She therefore finds the appearance of clouds as the announcement of the nature to her king's arrival. Here, Andal can be compared to Sita, who was imprisoned by Ravana in Lanka where she waits for Rama. When Hanuman observed Sita crying he consoles her worries and fears promising the arrival of Rama to save her. Her tears were like dewdrops on a beautiful lotus petal. In the case of Andal, there has no one to turn to and eventually her sufferings of separation are greater than that of Sita and she is in need for her beloved's quick grace (Venkatesan 208).

Andal asks for the physical touch, care and attention from her Lord. This song is one of the most sexually explicated lyrics of Andal. She frankly expresses her strong desire and yearning for her beloved. A woman like Andal who is steeped in the discipline of ultimate devotion, who regard Narayana as her lover, blossoms when united with him and fades when separated from him. Here she chose *sringara* (desire/love) to portray her unending longing for Him (Venkatesan 209). Andal sings:

O clouds bright with lightning  
 Tell the lord of Venkatam  
 upon the lovely chest Sri resides  
 that my supple young breasts  
 yearn everyday  
 for his resplendent body. (Venkatesan 169)

She further expresses her intense desire to unite with her Beloved in the twelfth song – *The Song of sacred Places*. She expresses her strong desire and willingness to meet and unite with Him in ecstasy. She calls her Beloved as Govinda. She asks him to take her to the shores of Yamuna – the real ‘Ayarpati’ of Krishna. Andal asks:

My breasts seek the gaze of the one  
 whose beautiful hand lift the discus  
 Bound tightly in a red cloth, their eyes  
 shy away from the gaze of mere mortals  
 desiring none other than Govinda.

I cannot live here a moment longer.

Please take me to the shores of Yamuna. (Venkatesan 181)

Here, Andal becomes active and asks her mothers to take her to the places of Lord Krishna and thereby unite her with Him. She realizes that she had completely fallen under the love web of Krishna. She was caught by the disease of separation. All her previous efforts to unite with her love failed miserably. Even though she is happy to unite with Him, Krishna has not yet arrived. Hence, she goes to meet Him to his place. But her excessive suffering had robbed her physical strength and unable to make the too lengthy and difficult journey, she asks her mothers to take her off. She asks them to take her and leave her at His doorstep. It is not clear in the lyrics that who these real mothers are. Sangam poems tend to portray a natural mother as well as foster mother. Often in these poems, the mother will always mistake her child’s illness for some type of possession by God and summon an exorcist to cure the child (daughter). In Andal’s lyrics it is signified as love-sickness and possession by God. Andal sings:

O dear mothers no one understands  
 this disease. But do not fret.



The one dark as the deep blue ocean  
 can soothe away my sickness  
 with a simple caress of his hand.

He is that very one,  
 who climbed the *katampa* tree on the river bank  
 leapt and danced upon the crest of Kaliya  
 and created such a battle scene.

Please take me to the shores of that river. (Venkatesan 181)

In the next section, *The Song of Desire*, Andal's anger, misery and fury has reached its peak. She threatens to tear out her breasts and fling them into her Beloveds chest. This image resembles Sangham poet Ilanko Adikal and his text *Cilappatikaram* where in climax episode, the heroine Kannaki, who gets angry at the king of Madurai for killing her husband, passes her vengeance on the entire city by ripping out her breast, flinging it into the city and then consigning it to high fire flames. Here, *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* derives a Sangham literary influence. Andal speaks:

I melt. I fray. But he does not care  
 if I live or die  
 If that stealthy thief, that duplicitous Govardhana  
 should even glance at me  
 I shall pluck these useless breasts of mine  
 from their roots  
 I will fling them at his chest  
 and staunch the fire scorching me. (Venkatesan 185)

Further, breasts are the physical (bodily) metaphors of great intoxication and devotion. She threatens to rip out of her breasts to make her Beloved understand her internal

sufferings. Apart from that, she throws it to his chest and not to the ground which specifies that her mental relief gets cured only with the lovely embrace of her Lord. She continues:

What is the purpose of future penance  
 if in this life, I cannot serve my Govinda  
 in small familiar ways and end the anguish  
 of my swollen and tender breasts?  
 Let him enfold me to his perfect chest  
 or let him stand before me,  
 face me and bid me farewell.

I will accept even that. (Venkatesan185)

Through the lyrical composition of the whole poem, Andal makes her lord Vishnu as her only way and goal. Her unrequited love, despite of her complete reliance upon Him she was unable to sustain her life and *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* was its result. Narayana, who already knew about her love and desire further troubles her by not granting her wishes. Still, when she firmly continued to insist upon their union, the love and desire for him got matured and entered into *parama bhakti* and he finally accepted her.

As referred before, the Bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu had two streams – Alvars and Nayanars. In Karnataka, the trends were some more complicated. There was a movement working for the reformation of traditional Hinduism. Parallel to this, there was another violent energetic movement which continuously revolted against the Brahminical hegemony and the age old rituals. This movement was led by a group of a new sect called Lingayats or Veerasaivites. The founder of the movement was Basava and the movement had other famous literary figures such as Allama Prabhu, Siddharama and Akka Mahadevi.

The movement was purely against the Brahminic domination and their corruption of lower class which was purified in the names of sacred rituals and rites. A quest for equality, liberty and fraternity and the ‘unprivileged’ sections to the access of power control, economic share, social status, etc., were the major aim of Veerashaiva movement. The central aim of the movement was ‘human relationship’ and to establish this, they rejected the norms on purity and contamination between the Brahminic people and non-Brahmin ones.

A shining star of Veerashaiva movement other than Basava and Allama Prabhu is Akka Mahadevi, who lived during 12th century. She was born at Balegave in the Shimoga district of Karnataka. She lived, walked and wandered all along her life singing and spreading the vachanas. The Kannada writers who critically analysed and explained her vachanas, consider those lyrics as the most finest and pure forms of poetry in Kannada language. Also, the socio-political critics have considered Akka as a significant and powerful voice of Karnataka against the Brahminical disorders and social system. Even today, the critics consider her as one of the greatest voice of Karnataka literature along with her contemporaries such as Basava and Allama Prabhu. All of them together laid the foundation stone for the birth of Veerashaivism – the brave and heroic devotees of Lord Shiva.

Among the women writers, Akka Mahadevi always stood as a problematic figure. In the book *Sky-Clad*, Mukunda Rao describes,

Her spirituality tended to be asexual on one hand, but also appeared to be trapped in the sexual imageries of feudal and patriarchal structures on the other. This dichotomy doesn’t itself to an emancipatory cultural politics. However, a significant number of women writers and activists, who rightly recognise the powerful subversion of aesthetic categories in her poetry and her life lived in

defiance of the tradition, have no issues in seeing her as a complete rebel, who refused to conform to established social and religious norms and challenged conventional notions of sex and gender. (Rao 9)

Akka Mahadevi was such an astonishing figure who was a spiritual searcher who underwent a life-changing experience during her very initial period and achieved fulfilment and eternal salvation using her single minded devotion. She was a complete rebel of her times, who came out of the traditional framework of the society breaking every features of conventions and traditions and shaped her on pathway to achieve her goal. Her dominant actions, the radical and threatening life style along with her strong and intense vachanas fashioned several social, political and cultural revolutions. In Rao's translation, Akka sings:

Sagging breasts, untied hair  
 sunken cheeks and withered arms,  
 Brothers,  
 why do you leer at me?  
 I'm a woman who has lost  
 caste and pride,  
 is dead to the world  
 and become a devotee.  
 Fathers,  
 I'm a woman who uniting with Chennamallikarjuna  
 has lost status and pride. (Rao 126).

Legends about Akka say that she started worshipping Lord Shiva and displayed strong religious proclivity. There must have been a spiritual teacher for her during her early ages. She grew up as a highly determined person who fearlessly responded to the

spiritual calling. All along her adolescent ages, she spent her life preaching Shiva and composed many vachanas. According to many scholars, she was yearning for the unification with her Lord. She calls her beloved as *Chennamallikarjjuna* (Lord White as a jasmine flower). She considered herself as his wife. Her vachanas are filled with rasa and other aesthetic emotions. They are intensely classical. She writes:

Like the colour in the gold,

You were in me.

I saw in you, lord white as jasmine,

The paradox of your being

In me

Without showing a limb. (Ramanujan 119)

also,

Lord Chennamallikarjjuna

what did you find in me

that you come to abide

in the middle of my palm. (Rao 127)

Both the above quoted lines describe the themes of Bhakti and transcendence in Akka. Here, the poet describes that her Lord abides inside her palm and she can see him. This proves the transcendence of her devotion. Akka believes that Lord resides in her mind and body and therefore she is unified with him. Akka defines this in a more philosophical manner that through Bhakti, one could attain salvation and God eventually come and resides in the mind of a devotee. Her intense love for Lord Shiva can be seen in the following vachanas translated by A. K. Ramanujan:

I love the Handsome One:

he has no death  
 decay nor form  
 no place or side  
 no end nor birthmarks,

I love him O mother, Listen. (Ramanujan 134)

The search for her lord *Chennamallikarjjuna* re-established the gentle and warm energy of her poetic genius. She explored the never ending complexities of human soul. She always wandered for more and more altitudes of imagination and never stepped back or stopped her searching with absolute brilliance and curiosity. She was quite sure of the fact that man can never be wholly satisfied or pleased through his self-discipline and understanding. An extra personal approach to the Lord is must and it lies through complete passion and the noble love that removes almost all the interruptions that the ego shapes between God and devotee.

Akka Mahadevi's spiritual personality can be examined with the societal scenario features of her age. It is quite obvious that it was her domestic context that prepared her to be a strong Shiva disciple. A study of her poetical stanzas proves that her in-depth devoutness to her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna*, is an outcome of her sheer conditioning. Each child who was born and brought up in a Lingayat background of Karnataka, was taught to the conception of Sarana-sati and Linga-pati (the devotee herself assumes that she is at a specific mood of a modest and loving wife towards her Lord (husband)). Their wedding advocates the association of the devotee's individual soul with that of the universal consciousness (union of *Jeevatma* and *Paramatma*). A devotee attains the state of mind at the highest peak of emotion where the devotee herself becomes an egoless surrender – *sarana*. Akka Mahadevi, throughout their life

followed this concept and accepted Lord Shiva as her husband. She herself betrothed to him. She happily wrote:

Night and day

in your worship

I forget myself

O lord white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 130)

She was raised up as a young attractive damsel, like a magnificent diamond that is ignorant of its physical worthiness, she remained unconcerned to her bodily beauty.

Regardless of the condition that, the parents of Akka Mahadevi were actually Lingayat followers and therefore was absolutely aware of the Linga-pati and Sarana-pati notions still found it actually very awkward to accept their own daughter was going to accept this concept literally. The conventions of Lingayat notion, actually consider the significance of getting married as well as supports and encourages it. Leela Mullatti in her work, *The Bhakti Movement and the Status of Women* points out that:

The vachanakars looked up marriage as a key institution that should help man to enjoy all physical pleasures and worldly desires in a regulated and rational manner. According to them, more repression or rejection of these desires can never help for spiritual development and realization. (Mullatti 68)

The Veerasaivite women constantly used powerful erotic imageries in their lyrical compositions. They used these metaphors to describe their strong relation and boundless desire to unite with the supreme God, Shiva. Instead, if a man uses sexual descriptions in his lyrics, then he might primarily take on femininity as an important subject and may comprehend the desires of a feminine heart. He must then construct God as macho character. But in case of women poets, it is easier that the images, similes and metaphors of their sexual union originate certainly inside their heart and consequently they can

further simply represent their expressions of passionate desires more strikingly than any other male saint poets. This could be a chief purpose behind Akka's description of physical desires all along her compositions bearing in mind her *Chennamallikarjjuna* (Lord Shiva) as her husband.

According to Akka, her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna* is shapeless. But in several circumstances, she defines Lord in definite and discrete forms that comes to her mind. To those who are very close to Akka, she teaches them to recognize and get familiar with Lord Shiva and at the same time asks them to inform her if they could find any definite shape for her Lord. For her unending desire for her Lord, there lies no difference between day and night, dream and reality. All along her life, she enjoys the sparks of complete Bhakti and it is this devotion that makes her unique and different from other spiritual reformers of her time. In the words of Akka, freedom or 'moksha' is always inferior to devotion. She becomes closer with her Lord when she encounters and overcomes all the hindrances on the path of devotion. To define her vachanas, they are the sayings and responses of her mind to the worldly matters and fear of survival. The poetic sense of her lyrics lies in its depth and can only be accessed with a quite serene mind filled with meditation.

Akka Mahadevi, during her whole life cherished to complete her love and affection with her 'divine' husband and not with the human one. Her saintly husband was her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna*. All her bodily yearnings were intended at the Supreme God. At times, her poetical stanzas spoke about her carnal sublimation to the divine being. Though her imageries find enough space in explaining a bodily association with the God, it further indirectly states about the spiritual merger with the God which she constantly intended at. She wrote:

He bartered my heart,



looted my flesh,  
 claimed as tribute  
 my pleasure,  
 took over  
 all of me.

I'm the woman of love

For my lord, white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 125)

The lyrical compositions of Akka Mahadevi attempted to depict the pictures of illicit love to express her profound, passionate and all-encompassing association with Lord Shiva, her beloved. It is at this point where Akka certainly gets highly intoxicated by her madly love and therefore easily surrender herself with no other further inhibitions. She tried to use all the similes and descriptions of nature which, according to her, was permeated by her beloved. For example, she wrote:

You are the forest  
 you are all the great trees  
 in the forest  
 you are bird and beast  
 playing in and out  
 of all the trees

O lord white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 122)

After the whole transferal of all her earthy love and yearnings, she consequently passes into the stage of complete transcendence. Entering into the superior height of sexual transcendence, gender variances becomes totally worthless and the saint poet, whether man or woman, regardless of their gender walks alone naked. For her, the entire world itself was a huge cage where the common people becomes occupants are categorized

into males and females. Henceforth she protests that people who only notice those dissimilarities seen in the external gender however the self/soul that exists inside of a human being is neither of a man nor of a woman. Consequently, she strongly queries to the macho world that why are they watching at her sagging breasts and untied long thick hair. She questions why they stare at her physical body.

In spite of being uncommon, male nakedness may have not aroused such higher controversies that female nudity did. Akka Mahadevi walked naked with her thick long black hair covering her nakedness. When questioned about her nudity, she replied:

You can confiscate  
 money in hand;  
 can you confiscate  
 the body's glory? (Ramanujan 122)

Akka Mahadevi explains that human sexual body is not just an ordinary substance, rather it is a strong social paradigm, a cultural illustration which is clearly fashioned by the human society. According to the religious treatises, a human physical body is something inherently imperfect, contaminated, diseased, transient, which is considered as the prison of the soul - the soul that is clean, perfect and superior. These discourses further adds that body is also an embodiment of carnal 'corruptions' and disruptions, an obstruction to one's transcendent development. Such notions delivered by the religious treatises expanded and societies easily start believing those notions that the human body is something contaminated, opposing to the hygienic soul and minor to the human mind. They considered it as an enemy which is to be controlled, disciplined and defeated. Such wrong perceptions about human body have caused in losing its intelligence, strengths and natural instincts. Saint poets like Akka tried to defeat these notions and announced that human body is not an obstruction or inferior to the human psyche. In contrast, it is a

perfect abode of human intellect, knowledge, love, imagination, enlightenment and so on. It is the human consciousness occupied with different emotions and ardent intelligence that delivers the opening for this possibility. Here comes the significance of poets like Akka Mahadevi. They found the intellect of questioning one's binary mind, surrendering themselves by giving up all efforts, and hence the powers in the body gets accelerate and brings the transcendence. Consequently the scheme of controlling human body aimed at constructing 'socially acceptable values' were strongly opposed.

According to Akka, her body was not at all a liability for her and she found utmost happiness in the celebration of her body. For her, body was the strongest tool to directly express her mental emotions and yearnings. She wisely realized the significance of her body and found it expressed in her verses. Hence, she never wanted to discharge from every hindrances of expressing her feminine body, but rather she walked out in nakedness, in defiance of all social norms, and ultimately moved beyond all binaries, comprising male-female, and devotee-God. Mukunda Rao in his book *Sky-Clad: The Extra Ordinary Life and Times of Akka Mahadevi* points out that:

It is in the state of separation which is felt intensely and acutely by bhaktas – hence agony, also the urge to transcend the separation – that bhaktas, especially women bhaktas, deploy imageries of love, forlornness and sex. These convey their deep urge to overcome the agony of separation and transcend the divisive consciousness. (Rao 95)

The experiences of Akka Mahadevi can also be directly associated with Bridal Mysticism (*Madhurya Bhava*). But here, the rightfulness of the experience turns irrelevant. The beloved may not be a husband itself rather, he could be an adulterous lover who passionately loves her. The way how Akka handled her sexuality is much different than how Andal defined herself and waited for the marriage with her Lord. It is

further similar to that of a *devadasi*, than that of a dutiful consort. In Rao's translation, she writes:

For hunger, there is the town's rice

in the begging bowl.

For thirst, there are tanks, streams, wells.

For sleep, there are ruins of temples.

For soul's company

I have you, O Lord. (Rao 123)

All along her stanzas Akka yearns and craves for him to make her Lord, her eternal beloved lover or husband. A real fight might be taking inside her mind. She could be haunted with deep pain of longingness as well as separation.

She describes herself as 'a shameless girl'. She asks to the patriarchal society:

O brothers, why do you talk

to this woman,

hair loose,

face withered,

body shrunk?

O fathers, why do you bother

with this woman?

she has no strength of limb,

has lost the world,

lost power of will,

turned devotee,

she has laid down,

with the Lord, white as jasmine,

and has lost caste. (Ramanujan 135)

Akka, in a conversation with Allama Prabhu replied that one cannot confiscate other's glory of their physical body like money or other material wealth. Clothes can be stripped off, but nakedness cannot. In her lyrics, she wrote:

To the shameless girl  
wearing white jasmine Lord's  
light of morning,  
you fool

where's the need for cover and jewel? (Ramanujan 139)

According to Mahdeviyakka, her physical body was not a limitation to her act of consummation with her beloved. To her, it was the 'gendered' physical body that stood as a chief societal hindrance, a social conditioning, or a superimposition, which is polluted. Hence it must be cleansed to travel into the outside world of opposites and along with that, all other dishonest appearances of the mind is healed from all contaminants, and therefore there is no more space for the pollution of human body.

Akka Mahadevi was an amazingly drastic personality who dismissed all the societal norms and conditions of the period. She left her husband, family and all her personal bindings with the material world only to attain salvation and unite with her beloved. Therefore her verses always consists of her deep and passionate affection for her Lord who she lovingly call as *Chennamallikarjuna*.

It is said that she took part in many spiritual discourses with her contemporaries such as Basava and Allama Prabhu. Most of the time, the core of the subject will be focused on religious philosophy and the need of ways for attaining spiritual enlightenment/salvation. Even though she selected a mystical life style and wandered all along her life, she was critically questioned several times for her nakedness as a woman,

even though such a condition was normally acceptable for a male saint. During those medieval days, her non-conventional and non-conformist ways of lifestyle was always a matter of debate and they only started to accept her high religious passion, a kind of rigorous devotion, and her mental strength that she possessed all the way along her spiritual life.

She was only just sixteen years old when she challenged the – then existing societal conditions of marriage and family. She happily removed all the codes and norms of conventional society, including her personal attire and walked naked. She courageously asks through her vachana:

People  
male and female,  
blush when a cloth covering their shame  
comes loose.

When the lord of lives  
lives drowned without a face  
in the world, how can you be modest?

When all the world is the eye of the lord,  
onlooking everywhere, what can you  
Cover and conceal? (Ramanujan 131)

Though her love is divine, the vachanas often transgress the boundaries of divinity and tend to be human, and even carnal (Pillai 90). At the same time, her verses reflect the emptiness of samsaric life and always pleads for a spiritual transcendence.

During those periods, the nudity of a male was well accepted (even today) by the society whereas the nudity of a female was a complete taboo. Because of this condition the social status and life style of a man was well recognized and he had the ultimate

freedom to choose his life. Whether live as a sage (sadhu/sanyasi), should have long hair and beard or else want to be clean shaved, should live as a householder or as an earning member and so on. But women never enjoyed such a complete freedom to choose their way of life. A nude woman walking over the street was considered as abnormal, pervert or else as a hazard to the society. It was in this backdrop, Akka Mahadevi lived as a nude and wandered as a nude and lived her life entirely as an exceptional and unique personality.

She was never a teacher to any of her disciples and never cared for any rites and rituals of the tradition. Like her contemporary Allama Prabhu she was never a firm believer in ‘Ashtavarna’ (the eight spiritual coverings namely Guru, Linga, Jangama, Padodaka, Prasada, Vibhuti, Rudraksha and Mantra) nor a disciple of Shatsthala doctrine. For her, “Bhakti was the path, her inner voice the guru and, she promptly moved from bhakti to arivu – awareness that all is one” (Rao 68). She never believed in following a particular path other Veerasaivites. She had no any special principles, phases or degrees to reach and achieve progress. She went through all the ways that her heart asked her to go and explore. She with utmost love and devotion to her Lord, walked all along the ways single-mindedly discharging all the ‘unwanted’. She walked from a Saguna Brahmin to a Nirguna Brahmin.

Riding the blue sapphire mountains

wearing moonstone for slippers

blowing long horns

O Shiva

when shall I

crush you on my pitcher breasts

O lord white as jasmine

when do I join you

stripped of body's shame

And heart's modesty? (Ramanujan 317)

The concluding lines of the above vachanas are the best examples of depicting strong sexual imageries in vachanas. This indirectly points out the intense longing of Akka for the mystical union with her *Chennamallikarjuna*. Here, in the method of Bhakti, the physical experience of her human body is indirectly joined with the transcendental. So the soul of the person speaks through his flesh. Rao explains:

The body, as Akka would say, is not only the 'house of passion' but also the 'home' of the Divine. So the physical continuous to be the base, even when, at some point during this journey, her Lord Chennamallikarjuna, with 'white teeth' and 'matted curls', metamorphoses into Nirguna, or the aniconic one, who has no attributes; and finally, into the nirakara, one with no name or form. (Rao 13)

Another important feature that is discussed with this is the presence of Bridal Mysticism in the works of Akka Mahadevi. She, as similar to the legend of Andal felt that she is the prime consort of her beloved *Chennamallikarjuna*. Her 'earthly' husband was only a choice of societal norms (whom she left later) and her real spouse was her Lord Shiva – the lord of the peaks. She happily writes about her wedding:

Decorating the canopy with emerald and gold,

the column with diamond and rubies,

they performed my wedding

Our people performed my wedding

Tying the sacred thread around my wrist

Showering holy grains

they married me to Chennamallikarjuna. (Rao 19)



Here, Akka with great pleasure and happiness describes her wedding with her Lord. She depicts all the rites and happily joins hands with her beloved. As it is the wedding with her Lord and as the groom is from the mystical heaven, the canopy is entirely decorated with gold and emeralds and the columns with precious rubies and diamonds. The bride here is in a stage of utmost happiness.

Here, the poet describes the theme of Bridal Mysticism. Such a concept is not only linked with female bhaktas. Sometimes in several verses of male saint poets, one could find Bridal Mysticism where the poet carefully considers themselves as the female (bride) and God as the male (groom). In the divine province, the feminine section portrays the perfect embodiment of love and the perfect surrender to the Lord. “In Bhakti culture or spirituality, the sense of separation from the Divine or, say, duality or divisive consciousness, is portrayed as viraha, the separation of the woman from her beloved” (Rao 19-20). This is sometimes referred to as Nayaka-Nayika love where the individual or the soul, the Jeevatma takes the feminine form and the Paramatma, the Supreme reality takes masculine gender.

She composed several vachanas – the vachanas of her agony and despair – where she lived as an earthly wife to Kaushika and managed all the inescapable wifely duties, even though she was intensely yearning for her beloved.

Husband inside, lover outside

I can't manage them both

This world and that other,

Cannot manage them both.

O Lord Chennamallikarjuna,

I cannot hold in one hand

Both the round nut and the long bow. (Rao 23)

Here it can be easily described that this union with her earthly husband might be a drastic bad dream for Akka and her inner soul might have definitely looked and searched for her beloved. A family life is never regarded as opposed to or antithetic to spirituality.

Legends of Veerasaivism mentions around sixty female saints lived during 12th century in Kalyana and the nearby locations. Vachanas of almost thirty saranes have been found. Among them, twelve of them were from the lower class and eight were unmarried. All of them certainly points out that under the new spiritual atmosphere of Veerasaivism, women strongly broke the age old convictions of tradition and found new pathways equivalent to that of men.

The emergence and empowerment can be easily witnessed by their refusal of five types of pollution (*pancha sutaka*) – pollution at the time of menstruation, pollution by caste, pollution during child birth, being in a widow state and finally death. All these were strictly imposed on women by the thoughts and ideologies of Brahminism. These women saints created lyrics that were straight and fiery like an arrow pointing to its target. Into this phase, Akka fearlessly arrived and fought for her philosophies. Mukunda Rao explains this as:

Into this staggeringly complex, revolutionary yet mystical, world of saranas and saranes, walking naked, trudging hundreds of kilometres from Uduthadi, through forest and no man's land, through villages and towns, Akka Mahadevi arrives in Kalyana. She comes to meet Allama Prabhu, Basavanna and other saranes, and takes Kalyana by storm. It is startlingly illuminating chapter in the history of twelfth-century Shiva saranas – indeed in the annals of Indian spiritual narratives – that is hardly known outside of Karnataka. But within the state, there has been considerable study of her life and vachanas, and her incredible story continuous

to be passionately narrated, discussed and debated by feminists and writers, activists and spiritual leaders to this day (Rao 47-48).

From this analysis it is evident that the presence of body in the lyrical compositions of Akka Mahadevi act as a powerful metaphor and a synonym of resistance. There is a clear distinction between the deity's body and the devotee's body, yet there is a craving for togetherness. One may locate this as a philosophical/ spiritual unification with the idea of God. Still, there is immense possibility of reading the text as a powerful resistance against the patriarchal society. It is to be noted that Indian feminist writing is not an offshoot of the Western academic discourse on feminisms and female body, as writers such as Akka Mahadevi had used several powerful imageries of body even during the medieval era.