

Chapter 5

Body as Resistance: Re-Contextualising the Works of Female Bhakti

Poets

The idea of resistance has drawn critics and scholars from different fields including sociology, cultural studies, history, anthropology and political science. Later on, literature and fine arts also started to portray the voices of protest and resistance. It can be an action or even a strong statement against an authority or community. Mostly, protests are always pre-arranged, planned and organised and it is presented in a public space whereas resistance is not duly planned. It is covert and spontaneous. Haynes and Prakash in their Introduction to the book *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* defines, “Resistance should be defined as those behaviours by subordinate groups that contest hegemonic social formations but threaten to unravel the strategies of domination. ‘Consciousness’ need not be essential to its constitution” (Haynes and Prakash 03). No mass demonstrations takes place in resistance. In fact, they are modest and peaceful campaigns to achieve a particular aim and involves persuasion. Resistance literature is therefore a piece of writing that calls to resist against power and domination and thereby aspire to change the prevailing condition of the society to make ready for an empowerment.

The resistance of women is different from that of vigorous agitations or revolutionary protests by men. Resistances are always conducted by the submissive groups or the subalterns. These groups consist of women bounded by patriarchal codes, laymen, workers, peasants and son on. They always confront the dominant groups regarding their rights. Domination and resistance are interconnected. Domination paves

way for the rise of resistance. Haynes and Prakash mentions that the opinion that resistance of:

Subordinated peoples need not be dramatic or informed by conscious ideologies of opposition to seriously affect relations of domination. To use resistance in its more traditional sense would mean not to consider the very processes by which power is often tested and eroded by the actions of the subordinate and by which it reconstitutes itself in response. (4)

Resistance literature written by women is describing their own life and inner thoughts as the stories of their own century-old harassments and suppression they suffered. Eric Wolf in his book *Europe and the People without History* mentions about the position of women in the male dominated society where their “life is cheap and where slavish multitudes grovel under a variety of despotisms” (6) can be considered as the base for resistance. In the words of Helen Cixous as appeared in her work *Laugh of the Medussa*:

Woman must write her self; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away so violently as from their bodies for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history - by her own movement. (75)

A woman entering into the field of writing is actually an act of resistance. They write about their emotions, feelings, sorrows, anguish, agonies, miseries and so on.

Sometimes, these writers also try to trace the background history of female writing and get inspired from their predecessors. This act itself is a strong blow of resistance against the canonical writing. They take effort to discover and bring back the literary talent of the women of earlier times. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita points out that women’s writings have frequently been involved in fighting with the politics of gender issues and “have

deflected and refigured the course of dominance” (116). They mention this in the Introduction to their book *Women Writing in India*.

Also, apart from that Susie Tharu and K. Lalita mentions in their Introduction about the story of Bangalore Nagaratnamma, who in 1910, reprinted the classic *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radhika), the work of an eighteenth century Telugu poetess Muddupalani, a courtesan of Tanjore palace. “Nagaratnamma was a patron of the arts, a learned woman, a musician and a distinguished courtesan, and she approached her editorial desk with confident professionalism and admirable feminist partisanship” (Tharu and Lalita 3). But she faced several atrocities from the publishers that none of them was ready to publish it considering the work as adulterous. Muddupalani used *sringara rasa* (erotic pleasure) to fill her verses with descriptions of sexuality. The work of Muddupalani and the attempt of Nagaratnamma to publish the same were both acts of strong resistance. A woman writing of her sexual feelings was a taboo. The love between Krishna and Radha was considered as platonic, not erotic. Muddupalani herself traces her literary heritage to her mother and grandmother, who were poets. Tharu and Lalita writes:

Traditionally in such literature, man is the lover, the woman is the loved one; Krishna woos and makes love to Radha. Though Radha is invariably portrayed as longing for him, the narrative has as its focus his pleasure. Not so in *Radhika Santwanam*, where the woman’s sensuality is central. She takes the initiative, and it is her satisfaction or pleasure that provides the poetic resolution. With a warmth unmatched in later poetry, Muddupalani celebrates a young girl’s coming of age and describes her first experience of sex. In another section, Radha, who is represented as a woman in her prime, instructs her niece, Iladevi,

in the art and joy of love. Radha encourages her to express her desire and to recognize and value her pleasure. (7)

The physical celebration of love between Krishna and Radha is described in Muddupalani's work. She herself is in love with Krishna and cannot bear the separation from him. The struggles of the republishing of the book happened during nineteenth century India, under British colonial rule. The moralities of Victorian rule were against the expression of women's physical desire. Therefore, the attempts of Nagaratnamma to publish the particular book during those days have to be considered as a strong blow of female resistance against the patriarchal society.

Far before that, the female mystic saints of medieval India had explored this idea of resistance using their physical body. Human physical body was a matter of resistance and a celebration of pleasure. They communicated their emotional desires, intense love, and sexual cravings through their sensuous verses. This sensuality of the verses itself was a form of resistance. It was a social taboo during the medieval days where women come to the forefront of the society and express their internal desires using their physical body as strong metaphor. Celebration of body was a tool of resistance. They chanted, sung and taught people by accepting physical body and travelling beyond body, into a metaphysical stage. Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing like a Feminist* points out:

These mystics expressed a kind of desire for God that travels through the body and reconfigures it. Their desire was to attain the loss of maleness as sexualized powerlessness. A. K. Ramanujan suggests that 'the lines between male and female are continuously crossed and recrossed' in the lives of the Bhakti saints. They demystified the body and sexuality by dismantling the codes and conventions that 'sex' the body. Bhakti saints turned away from sex in the world

– not from fear or hatred sexuality, but because their sexual passion was invested entirely and in a disembodied manner, in the chosen deity as lover. (57)

When women saints like Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka and Lalleswari of Kashmir threw away their clothes, they were actually expressing the real ‘modesty’ of resisting as well as enhancing the sexual curiosity of humans, but never curbing it. When clothes are thrown away, it is this paradox that is portrayed. By exposing the differences between man and women and maintaining an indifference to that difference, they attain liberation. (Menon 58)

According to the legends of Tamil Nadu, Andal was born at Srivilliputtur, a small town in present Virudunagar district of Tamil Nadu during the mid-eighth century. The story tell that Vishnuchitta Alwar, a great Alwar poetic saint and the head priest of Srivilliputtur temple found the baby Andal in his basil garden, which reminds the birth of Sita in *Ramayana*. He brought up the girl with enormous fatherly affection, love, warmth and care, believing that the baby girl is his lord’s gift to him. It might be under the guidance of Vishnuchitta Alwar, Andal received her immense knowledge about Lord Vishnu, his ten incarnations and other related Vaishnava stories. Alka Tyagi in her book *Andal and Akka Mahadevi: Feminity to Divinity* points out that:

Myths about her say that her consciousness was so infused with the *samskaras* of *bhakti* and devotion from a very tender age, that when she precociously fell in love with Krsna *avatara* of Vishnu, she adored herself with the garland that her father kept for the temple deity. She must have felt that she had all the right to wear it. This act, which according to the sacred injunctions would be considered as an act of grievous sin, was given a legitimate sanction by the Lord himself who appeared in Vishnuchitta’s dream and commanded him that henceforth only the garlands worn by Goda (Andal) would be acceptable to Him. After this sign

of confirmation of reciprocation of her love from the Lord, Andal now was immersed in emotion of intense love for Him and craved for her union with her *ista*. (68-69)

This itself was an act of resistance from her real life. She felt that there is nothing wrong in wearing the garland her lord wear. She had submitted herself to her lord. She belongs to him. So there is nothing wrong in sharing the garland. Her emotional sentiments is attached to her lord.

G. Mohana Charyulu in his article, “Bridal Mysticism in Andal’s Poetry” mentions that, it will not be out of context to make brief note on the existing theories of the concept of God and how Andal herself identified with Lord Sri Ranganadha as her husband and wrote immensely powerful Bhakti poetry in Tamil by paving a clear path to Jeevatma and Paramatma (the Supreme God). “Mysticism is a religious practice in which people try to get knowledge of truth and become united with God through prayer and meditation” (94).

The prominent 15th century Vaishnava leader and philosopher, Pillai Lokacharya mentioned in his text *Sri Vachana Bhushanam* that there exists nine different methods namely *pita*, *rakshaka*, *sheshe*, *bharta*, *jnayo*, *swamy*, *adharaha*, *atma* and *bhokta* to express the connection between a devotee and the God. Their unification is acknowledged as a kind of mystical wedding of Jeevatma with Paramatma. Again, amongst these nine methods of associations, it is the relationship between a husband and a wife have motivated numerous spiritually oriented female poets of India to express their visions, interpretations and outlooks about the conception of God. Andal (8th century), Akka Mahadevi (12th century), Muktabai (13th century), Janabai (13th century), Lalleswari (14th century), Mirabai (16th century) Bahinabai (17th century) and

several other poetesses and writers. From their point of view, the bride becomes the soul of a devotee whereas God becomes the groom (Charyulu 94).

This system of recognising Bridal Mysticism/ *Madhurya Bhava* (God as the groom and devotee as the bride) through love lyrics and emotional sentiments form the basis of Andal's resistance against patriarchal conventions. As a part of *Madhurya Bhava*, a devotee is free to express her sensuous feelings, internal desires, emotional desires and so on. This has a connection to the early Akam poetry of Sangham period, where the modes of love verses are associated with specific aspect of a relationship. For Andal, this relationship is her love and wedding with the lord. She rejoices over the unification with her lover. *Marutham*, the second tinai concept is interconnected here where the longing for loved ones are portrayed. The God associated is Mayon/Vishnu who is worshipped as Perumal or Tirumal. They perform 'Yadava' lifestyle of shepherds, denoting Krishna as a Yadava man and Andal consider herself as a maiden girl of Gokula in her work *Tiruppavai*. Andal directly celebrates the pleasures of her physical body when she is in love and the grief she feels at the time of separation. This is associated with the fifth tinai *Neythal* – separation and union. Here, by portraying the cultural backgrounds of her own landscape Andal is expressing her intense desire to unite with her lover. Her way of resistance is living as an Alwar saint in the Vaishnava devotional culture and protesting against the same. When the exact sense of the word poetry experienced metamorphosis to mention a very different form of devotion (*Madhurya Bhava*) her poetry itself was revolutionized. Physical desire and longing for the beloved were no longer suppressed. Her heart of devotion was the desire to unite with her lord. She immersed herself into the realm of physical body and expressed her stormy emotions. Sucheta Sankar in her work *Daughter's of Kali* mentions:

There can be no doubt that Sangham literature was an arena for repressive notions of chastity and submissiveness for women. The women poets had to follow the rigid literary conventions of the patriarchal Sangham. Failure to comply to the norms usually meant that the works were censored or considered unworthy of perusal. In any case, poetry was serious courtly business; a woman who wrote poetry was breaking taboos and ‘intruding’ into political and public space. (9)

It was from this restricted lineage of Tamil literature Andal emerges by breaking the shackles of Sangham cult and its inspirations. At the same time, knowingly or unknowingly the tinai concepts of Sangham poetry reflects in her works too. Herself being a woman, she started to compose verses of her own emotions and desires. Also, being an Alwar saint and brought up in a Vaishnavite tradition, Andal found her lover in her lord. She passionately started loving him and described her bodily desires in her lyrics. In *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* Andal sings:

O Manmatha! My voluptuous breasts swell
for that lord alone
who holds alone the flaming discus and conch.
If there is even talk of offering my body
to mortal men, then I cannot live. (Venkatesan 148)

In the above lines, Andal expresses her bodily feelings. She is not ready to offer her body to a mortal man, as it belongs only to her lord. She waits for that lord, discus and conch in his hand, her beloved. The verse deploys erotic sensibility of Andal. The verses are minimal but involves maximum intensity from the poet’s heart. It is an act of body and soul.

Myths about Andal says that she was really vested by several mystical powers that legends gifted. Even though downgraded as a woman, her Self was not considered significant sufficiently to be positioned at the heart of faith. This is exactly the rebellion in the verses of the female devotees. Andal says in *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*:

O ancient Kamadeva,
I painted the walls with your names,
your banner bearing the shark,

horses, attendants waving their fly-whisks, your black bow. (Venkatesan 148)

Sucheta sankar in her work *Daughter's of Kali*, opines that Andal's action bring around the Self as the originator of ultimate faith. She does so by regaining her power to compose more verses. The inscribed words were once the honour of the Vedas and the Puranas. Here, it is Antal who analyses, deconstructs and redrafts the 'Word of Faith.' (Sankar 11)

Andrew Schelling in his book, *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature* quotes, "She approached the image of Vishnu, embraced its feet, climbed into the Serpent couch, and vanished" (9). According to Sucheta Sankar, this entire absorption of the physical body into the Divine was the major example in the chronicles of Bhakti. It signified a contradiction at the temperament of Bhakti, and definitely in Andal's beliefs. The devotees can locate themselves only when they lose in extreme devotion. (Sankar 11)

Nacciyar Tirumozhi defines the passionate individual sentiment that the devotee senses. The entire composition is elite in its style. It was composed after *Tiruppavai* and defines about Andal's extreme long yearning to meet with her beloved as she feels deep agony, grief and anguish owing to the departure of her Lord. The expressions of such emotional sentiments by a woman saint were against the conventional social set ups of

her period. The whole work of *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* discusses about the celebration of her body. The initial stage of this begins in her earlier composition *Tiruppavai*, where she mentions the significance of physical purification by practicing ‘pavai nombu’ (vow) of Margazhi month. The significance of physical body and how the body acts as a tool of resistance against the patriarchal powers are exemplified here. The second *pasuram* of *Tiruppavai*:

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 alms to those in need. (Venkatesan 52)

Andal’s enlightened soul would find happiness only with its unification with God. The entire poem opens with an invocation to a full moon day of Margazhi month featuring the lion-like young vigorous son of Nangopala offering grace to his devotees. The above lyrics portrays the inner purification of maiden girls including Andal who is ready to submit herself to her Beloved. In fact, by portraying a whole maiden community of Madurai, Andal is indirectly depicting the resistance of a whole female community against the male dominated society. The vow they undertake by early bath and chanting hymns of their lord, they are expressing their intense love towards him. Since the vow is connected with the body purification, by undertaking the vow, they are celebrating their body. The celebration of their physical body finds voice in her poetry.

The manifestation of the inner emotions and desires of Andal are strongly depicted in her poetry. Her dream is to unite with her lord. Garland is a metaphor depicting their unification and marriage. These intense longing and thoughts about her

lover are filled with extreme love and dedication and she is intensely waiting for the arrival of her groom. This is the finest expression of Andal's *Madhurya Bhava*. "The soul in practice and experience of Bridal Mysticism goes through the harrowing experience of separation from Him (Vislesham) and exhilarating experience of union (Samslesham) with Him" (Charyulu 97). In the *Varanamayiram* segment of *Nacchiyar Tirumozhi*, Andal imagines about the customs of her grand wedding ceremony with her lord. But, when she wakes up from her beautiful dream, she feels the grief of separation. Charyulu mentions that:

He asks the sacred conch (Panchajanya) and asks it to relate the blessed experience of the taste of the lord's nectar-like kiss. She implores the dark rain clouds, birds, flowers and bees to be her messengers to Lord and asks them to bring Him to her quickly. After these painful efforts, she decides to put up with her sorrow and places her trust in the Lord's infinite mercy. (97)

Even today in Tamil Nadu, the *Varanamayiram* series of *Nacchiyar Tirumozhi* is still well celebrated and recognised as auspicious. It still has its fame. They are sung by people in Tamil wedding ceremonies. The magnificence of these melodious compositions lies in the feature that a young woman, even today, on the brink of her marriage, considers herself as Andal. In Tamil Nadu, costumes, make-ups and hairstyle resembling the images of Andal are still in trend. This is how Andal exceeds the test of time. The tall gateway tower (192 ft) of Andal temple in Srivilliputtur town is believed to be the official symbol of Government of Tamil Nadu today. These lyrics are still welcomed with huge enthusiasm. It is very significant in the whole text that these lyrics detail every key segments of her wedding in all its glory and prosperity. Andal has a dream and she sees her favorite love as her groom.

Alka Tyagi in her book *Andal and Akka Mahadevi* points out that, “She is sharing her revelation with us through her song. Thus, the entire poem becomes a medium for expression of an experience of *bhakti* which is not acceptable to a *non-bhakta*” (71). In *Varanmayiram* segment Andal sings:

Surrounded by a thousand elephants, Nāraṇa
 my great lord strode through the festive streets.
 Every threshold was decked
 with bright banners and auspicious golden pots.

Such a vision I dreamed, my friend. (Venkatesan 163)

In the above lyrics Andal is dreaming of her wedding. It is the vision of the lord in her dreams. Every rite, ritual and customs of the wedding ceremony is described in detail by Andal. She is marrying her lord. In other words, an immortal lord is going to wed a mortal human being. This is against all the conventional beliefs of a society. Apart from that Andal describes her love not in a platonic sense, but erotic. An entire section in *Nacciyaṛ Tirumozhi* is dedicated to songs of desire. Andal ends the *Varanmayiram* segment by singing:

Kotai of the king of Villiputtur
 city of Vaiṣṇava fame
 wove this garland of pure Tamil
 of her dream for the lord of cowherds.

Those who perfect these two times five verses
 will find joy in their noble and fine children. (Venkatesan 164-165)

Archana Venkatesan states that the journey of a devotee from the stage of ignorance to merge with Lord Narayana requires *jnana bhakti*, which must undergo through the phases of great devotion defined by an inner image of a supreme god, where discerning

of knowledge occurs and if the devotee possess an intermittent and absolute vision of god then he reaches the state of supreme devotion, where the devotee accomplish absolute unification with the lord (Venkatesan 204).

Andal's *Tiruppavai* too showcases the experience of living in higher domains of consciousness. "The entire poem is a very complex work of art which enjoins in itself a highly symbolic design of a theological base" (Tyagi 71-72). The elusive characteristic of Alwar tradition and Vaishnava Bhakti is constructed in the whole verse in its full reach. Apparently, the lyrics are real pleasure and celebrations of the young maiden girls of Madurai in its complete level to take part in the yearly custom and accept the greetings, honor, blessings, richness and prosperity from the lord. A closer look of the poem represent the central content of the verse that is to melt the smaller sorts of desires into supreme level. The fundamental goal is the fusion with the Divine. For example, *pasuram* 26 of *Tiruppavai*, the maiden girls demands for 'parai drum':

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

In the above lines, the transcendence and accessibility of Narayana is portrayed. He is as beautiful as a dark gem which even beguiles his enemies. He is radiant and multifarious. Here, Andal asks for his blessings. They are internally and externally purified with their daily practice of vow. She portrays her lord Krishna as the one ‘who floats upon a banyan leaf’. She depicts her needs vibrantly such as conches, *parai* drum, *pallantu*, canopies and so on. She never begs or simply requests for them, but demands them. The power of her voice is manifested here. Andal herself thinks that she has the right to possess her lord’s favorite accessories including his conch. Hence, she celebrates her authority of being his eternal lover who has her personal rights upon her beloved. Andal manifests the mood of an extreme devotee and an immense lover. This way of declaring love in public by a female lover was an example of breaking the conventional cords of medieval society that hosted male patriarchy.

The poetic melody of *Tiruppavai* lies in expressing the image of *parai* drum that is expressed with multivalency that underscores the unique beauty of Tamil. The geographical location where the poem is set, is the rich town of Putuvai which is created in resemblance with Lord Krishna’s Vrindavan (*Ayarpati*). The place is rich with ample rainfall and suitable to herd cows. Their udders are always full and milk, ghee, honey or sweets flows over. The term *parai* also has its Sangham connection since the ancient Tamil kings of Pandya kingdom stayed accustomed in using the *parai* drums to summon their people at the times of war or to give announcements to the general masses. Hence the *parai* became an essential twofold symbol of heroism and courage and also a mighty tool to the media to pass on proclamations and to inform news in periods of war. The literal use *parai* drum her lyrics is therefore a strong symbol of resistance as they denote valor and braveness to fight against enemies and declare strong statements to the masses. In *Tiruppavai*, *parai* drum is a strong metaphor to announce her state of mind in

full courage to the public. The feminine existence of Andal beyond any doubt establishes the ecstatic feminine yearnings and the unending pursuit for surrendering themselves at the feet of a deity.

The *écriture feminine* of Helen Cixous places the physical body as the center of any action or creation. The body is wholly celebrated in its fullest forms. This human body is never considered as a social taboo, forbidden or treated as unholy. It is fascinating to signify that Andal can be traced as a pioneer for *écriture feminine* centuries past as she used her feminine body as a medium for the accomplishment of supreme devotion with great magnitude that was unheard from the part of a woman saint in the journals of Indian devotional poetry till then. In stanza 7, Andal invokes Manmatha by singing:

O Manmatha!

I cooked fresh newly harvested grain.

I offered you sugarcane, sweet rice, and flattened paddy.

And learned men praise you with great words!

Coax Tiruvikrama

who long ago measured the worlds,

to caress this delicate waist and these broad breasts

and great will be your glory in this world. (Venkatesan 149)

The above lyrics of Andal are erotic in the sense that she used her feminine body as a strong medium to express her closeness with the lord. She has prepared fresh food, offered sweets and rice to her lord and waits for his arrival. She suggests that if he takes care of her his glory in the world will last test of time. To take care of her not only means to offer blessings but also to unite with her physically. The usage of the terms

‘waist’ and ‘breasts’ in the above verse indicates Andal’s way of resistance against medieval patriarchal norms by celebrating the eroticism of her feminine body.

As *parai* drum forms the major metaphor for *Tiruppavai*, it is the white conch that triggers *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*. Conch is a strong metaphor to express her love for lord. The *Panchajanya* or the *Valampiri* conch is a divine element of respect. It is always seen in the hands of Narayana. Andal remarks her lord with conch as, “My perfect lord/ who holds the spotless white conch in his left hand (Venkatesan 159). The seventh segment of the entire poem discusses the significance of conch. It is the symbol of success and has greater proximity to the lord. Andal sings:

O Panchajanya!

Your food is the nectar from the lips of the one who measured the worlds.

Your bed is the hand of the one dark as the ocean.

Women everywhere scold you soundly

What you do is unfair. (Venkatesan 169)

As mentioned above, the unique peculiarity of the conch lies in its proximity to the lord as it tastes his sweet lips signifying the inseparability between both. As the entire verses speak about the inseparability of the god and devotee, the white conch is a perfect metaphor to draw the close relation between the two. It symbolizes the eternal union. Dr. Sarada Thallam in her article “Antal’s Contribution to Bhakti Poetry in Tamil Literature” points out:

Some of the lines may appear shocking to traditional thought. But a perception of the metaphysical co-text in the works only add to the depth and width of the *bhakti bhava*. Its expression in a uniquely female sensibility places Antal as one of the pioneers of women’s writings of India. (12)

Andal also connects the conch with her conch bangles. Andal speaks, “The conch he holds in his hand is dear to him/ Aren’t my conch bangles as dear to me” (Venkatesan 177). Here, in the above lyrics, she questions her lord for taking her bangles. These bangles are a metonymic symbol of lord. Sarada Thallam remarks, “Since the heroine stands unable to achieve a total union with the Lord, the conch is transformed into a poetic metonymy that both represents the Lord and his union” (13). The separation of the bangles resembles the separation from God. Thallam continues:

It is not merely the loss of the material possession of the bangle that she bemoans but rather for the loss of her “very life”. Her life undoubtedly rests with the Lord and the Lord is symbolized through the conch bangles. Therefore a theft of the bangles even by the Lord himself leads to a separation from the Lord for which she laments. The poems are intensely traditional while also being simultaneously subversive, since Antal is unconsciously posing a distinctly gynocentric tradition against the phallogocentric thought of Indian bhakti poetry, that only suppresses women’s voice. Having being “othered” in the Indian bhakti system her uniquely female linguistic identity subverts the masculine symbolic language and creates novel linguistic epistemes since Antal’s bhakti begins with the body, but does not end there. (13-14)

Andal creates a nexus between physical body experiences and supreme devotion. The realization of the human soul is not removed from the body, rather the libidinal force portrayed in these lyrics convey a new energy that gets discharged from the physical body and also finally transcends it to a metaphysical state. (Thallam 14) The usages of sexual metaphors are in fact poetic metonymies for the portrayal of supreme level of erotic love that lies within the heart of the poet. In the book *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess* Sarukai and Sankar remarks:

Andal's insistent and unquenched longing belongs to a different dimension: a singular comprehension of her sensory needs as well as the acute physicality of the godhead. For instance, in Song Eight she calls him The Supreme One while simultaneously demanding that the saffron paste she adorns her breasts will be smeared in his embrace. (Sarukai and Sankar 40)

Andal has undoubtedly created a fine gendered space for herself in spectrum of Bhakti cult. From very ancient days women faced several barriers to portray their modes of erotic sensibilities towards a male deity since the female gender was only allowed to devote themselves to their mortal husbands. This was a crucial matter of feminine chastity. Actually the notion of Bridal Mysticism gets questioned when medieval women like Andal lacked the autonomy to celebrate social, political and cultural freedom and celebrate the *purushothama* like male poets. To express devotion in the form of erotic sensibility was definitely a problem of unchastity. But Andal challenged these pre-occupied notions of society expressing her Bridal Mysticism. Andal blended the codes of feminine episteme with that of *Madhurya Bhava*/Bhakti. She holds a special place in Tamil literature as she showcased an iconoclastic poet as well as traditional. "In transcending all binarisms, she smoothly merged into the supreme spirit thus succeeding in her metaphysical quest" (Thallam 14).

Man-God relation is the central locus of all religions in the world. An ardent devotee is always attached to God by his passionate emotional attachment and ultimate faith in God. As the Alwar/Nayanar tradition of Tamil culture, Karnataka witnessed the emergence of Veerasaivism (Saivite tradition). P. Shailaja in her article, "Women Poet-Saints of the Bhakti Movement" points out, "According to Sri Ramanuja, bhakti is a kind of love that is constant and fearless" (49). The women saints of the tradition

replaced their mortal husbands with their favourite male lord. Like Andal in Tamil Nadu, It was Akka Mahadevi/ Mahadeviyakka in Karnataka that attracted people to the cult of female mystic life.

As an astonishing figure of Bhakti tradition, she went through life changing experiences and attained salvation through her single minded devotion. Akka was a complete rebel of her period who came out of the shackles of male dominated society and fashioned her own route to achieve her divine goals. Her domain action with a threatening lifestyle along with her powerful *vachanas* created numerous political, social and cultural revolutions. She used her body as tool of celebration and resistance. She tried to experience a physical unification with the lord *Chennamallikarjuna*.

Her spiritual identity is observed using the social scenario of the period she lived. She was born and brought up as a Lingayat girl worshipping her ishtalinga. Her passionate love to *Chennamallikarjuna* is the result of her sheer conditioning. Akka sings:

Night and day

in your worship

I forget myself

O lord white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 130)

The above lines make it clear how intensely she loved her lord. It was not easy to live inside the shackles of a tradition and fight against the patriarchy of the same tradition. Akka, being a strong Lingayat woman raised her voice against the male domination of her own tradition questioning the entire sect through expressing her personal feelings

and emotions. The physical body and celebration of its carnal desires became the major theme for her lyrical compositions. Being born as a young beautiful damsel, Akka remained unconcerned to her physical beauty. Her parents, even though being ardent Lingayat followers were not ready to accept their daughter who was going to accept the tradition literally. 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. (68)

The women of Veerasaivite tradition regularly explored powerful sensual pictures in their poetic compositions. They employed these sexual images and metaphors to depict their intense relationship and unbounded desire to unify with their supreme God, Lord Shiva. Rather, if a man uses such sexual connotations in his verses, then he might chiefly take on feminine as a crucial subject and may apprehend the physical desires of a maiden heart. He then should construct God as a macho being. Similarly, in case of female poets, it is very easier that the pictures, similes and metaphors of their sexual unification evolve certainly in their heart and accordingly they can further merely represent their manifestations of passionate desires more impressively than their male counterparts. This could be a primary intention behind Akka's verbal descriptions of bodily desires all along her lyrical compositions bearing in mind her *Chennamallikarjjuna* (Lord Shiva) as her husband.

Akka Mahadevi, during her entire life treasured to complete her passion and warmth with her 'divine' mate and not with any mortal human being. Her loving

husband was none other than her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna*. Her entire physical cravings were only intended towards him. Several times, her lyrical compositions depicts her physical submission to her Supreme lord. Even though several of her images find their expressions and space in describing a physical unification with God, they also indirectly mention about the sacred amalgamation with the God which she always yearned. The manifestations of her bodily cravings were a powerful blow against the conventional norms of macho medieval society. 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 sacred *vachanas* of Akka Mahadevi always attempted to portray the images of an adulterous love and passion to manifest the poet's intense longing, burning desires and all-encompassing unification with *Chennamallikarjjuna*, her beloved. It is at this stage where Akka for certain gets extremely intoxicated by her lunatic passions and hence easily submitting herself with no other advances inhibitions. She tried to use all the figures and forms of Mother 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)

Subsequently, the entire transmission of all her earthly love and yearnings, she naturally enters into the state of absolute transcendence. After entering into this fantastic peak of sexual transcendence, gender discrepancies becomes entirely worthless and the mystic poet, whether male or female, careless of their gender travels alone naked, expressing their nudity. To Akka, the whole material world was a large cage where the ordinary people become mere dwellers and so are simply classified into males and females. Henceforth she protests that people who only observe those dissimilarities seen in the outside gender however the self/spirit that survive inside of a human being is neither of a man nor of a woman. Accordingly, she powerfully questions the macho world about why they are staring at her sagging breasts and untied long thick hair. She questions why they stare at her physical body. This questioning was her powerful way of resistance against the patriarchic norms.

In spite of being in exceptional cases, the nakedness exposed by a man has never become a matter of great controversy as female nudity did. Myths and legends about Akka Mahadevi claim that she walked naked with her thick long black hair covering her entire body. When her nudity is questioned, she replies:

You can confiscate

money in hand;

can you confiscate

the body's glory?

Or peel away every strip

you wear,
 but can you peel
 the Nothing, the Nakedness
 that covers and veils?
 To the shameless girl
 wearing the White Jasmine Lord's
 light of morning,
 you fool,
 where's the need for cover and jewel? (Ramanujan 129)

The above lines are the most discussed and celebrated verses of Akka. They are directly against the social conventions reminding the society that there is nothing wrong in expressing the nudity of physical body. If a man is free to express it, a woman too can. Akka depicts the equality of gender and the multitudes of feminine body. She explains that human sexual body is not just an average physical entity, instead it is a powerful societal image, an ethnically celebrated exemplification which is distinctly designed by the social groups. According to the spiritual writings, a human physical body is something intrinsically corrupted, polluted, unhealthy, transitory, which is considered as the prison house of the spirit - the spirit that is fresh, clean and superior. These teachings further adds that body is also an embodiment of physical 'corruptions' and interruptions, an obstracter to one's transcendent development. Such opinions delivered by the spiritual treatises enlarged and societies easily start believing those impressions that the human body is something dirty and infected, hostile to the hygienic spirit and insignificant to the human mind. They considered it as an enemy which is to be disciplined, controlled and subjugated. Such incorrect percepts about human body have caused in losing its intelligence, strengths and natural instincts. Mystic poets like Akka

tried to defeat these notions and proclaimed that human body is not an impediment or of less significant to the human psyche. In opposition, it is a clean domicile of human intelligence, knowledge, emotions, creativity, enlightenment and so on. It is the human state of mind occupied with various emotions and ardent intelligence that delivers the opening for this possibility. Here comes the importance of poets like Akka Mahadevi. They found the intellect of questioning one's binary mind, submitting themselves by giving up all attempts, and therefore the qualities in the body gets quickened and bring forward the transcendence. Accordingly the strategy of controlling human body intended at building 'socially acceptable values' were powerfully opposed.

According to Akka, the physical body was not at all liability, but a sphere of happiness and celebration. It was the most direct tool to express her emotions and feelings, to resist the queries of patriarchy. Akka intellectually acknowledged the importance of human physical body and used it as a medium of expression. 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. (95)

The experiences of Akka Mahadevi can also be immediately connected with Bridal Mysticism (*Madhurya Bhava*) segment of Andal. But here, the rightfulness of the experience turns irrelevant. The beloved may not be a husband rather, he could be an illicit lover who passionately loves her. The way how Akka handled her sexuality is much varied than how Andal characterized herself and longed for the union with her Lord. It is further correspondent to that of a *devadasi*, than that of an obedient consort. 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)

Uma Chakravorty mentions that like Andal, Akka never denies the human body, instead, accepts it (Chakravorty 26). She asks the whole world to follow the same. Her direct way of expressing never makes her ashamed of removing her clothes and expressing her nudity. For Akka, moving naked and celebrating her body was a drastic method against strict social constrictions of her period. Rao describes, "Her decision to strip off all clothing is a refusal to be circumscribed by the notion of the vulnerability of the female body, a refusal to make compromises because of it" (95). In the above mentioned sense, it could be said that Akka defeats and suppresses the social menace it poses and could be the only female saint who had the braveness to do so. In short, she works inside the human body, not outside, as her other contemporaries.

In most of her early verses, Akka Mahadevi remarks all those symbolic representations from her domestic life, family associations, love, affection, physical

body, sex, etc., to specify or to communicate her feelings, distress and hurt that she feels at the time of detachment, her sacred struggles and mental dilemma along with her perpetual longing for her beloved to bond with him. The concealed implications of these pictures have a tendency to alter according to the flows ahead on Akka's religious track.

For Akka, her feminine body is neither a burden nor a curse which she has to control according to the societal norms: rather, it is the perfect seat that she could offer to her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna*. The body is the place where her search, her divine spirituality begins and ends in complete fulfillment. She uses the method of love poetry to convey her eternal yearning filled with warm desires to unite with her beloved. He is her eternal and illicit lover, for whom she is ready to break all the societal norms of a marriage (which she later did).

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.

Society interprets body as a venomous serpent that must be somehow controlled or defeated. The communal schemes and the prevailing procedures of the medieval ages considered physical body as something to be scared of. But Akka continuously tried to breakdown all such fallacies and identified it is a blessing to have bodies. Because, human body contains the exact superior component of illumination. They are the glowing spring of heavenly supremacy. But frequently man desires to hide their body or cover it gently. According to Akka, it is a great ignorance. Once the body-mind is cleaned of the vicious hungers, holiness initiates to express itself. Akka recognized the 'extreme beauty' of human nakedness. It is delightful, thrilling, enchanting and at the

same time, troubling. It may tremor or disturb others for the reason that it may highly intimidates and questions the traditional establishments and masculinity.

In eastern religions including Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, human nakedness is frequently related with *vairagya*, which exactly means pureness or non-attachment. The male nudity was easily accepted by the medieval society. It was even worshiped and purified to a higher degree whereas on the other side feminine nakedness was brutally criticized. Because of that the medieval community never recognized a man with long hair or clean shaved or who led an abnormal life from that of other males. Those men were strictly expelled from the conventional society. In contrast, if a female, who moves unclothed was treated as a strange being, or a serious threat to the society and its established conventional values. On this social milieu, Akka Mahadevi, who broke all these prevailing communal norms and wandered in all her nudity was a new experience. In the symbolic world, both male and female sexual signs carried diverse spiritual insights.

Akka Mahadevi, moved along the sacred pathway, true and honest to herself, courageous and supreme in spirit. Though she always dominates in her lyrical sensibility and rationality of her vocabulary, she also brings some exceptional mixture of complex notions. Akka's lyrics are a perfect winding of devotion and knowledge, of intense yearning and profound divine vision. Through her beautiful stanzas, she has left behind an amusing legacy of literary and spiritual heritage. She was wholly lost in the furious vigor of her passionate love for her beloved *Chennamallikarjuna*. The celebration of her spiritual splendor continues, motivates and inspires the other followers to arrive into that everlasting sacred margin.

The voice of a poet is the carrier of a poem. The verses may be composed by the poet orally and later put down into literal words. Apart from being melodious in its tone

it can be teachings to the society. Every poet represents the society he/she lived. Like Andal and Akka drew the socio-political images of early medieval South India, it was Lal Ded in North (Kashmir) who manifested the northern currents of devotional cult. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, Lalla was inspired by both Saivite notions of Hinduism and Sufi concepts of Islam. Her verses (*vakhs*) were teachings rather than melodious renderings of beautiful discourses of Bhakti. They were highly metaphysical in its heart. Lalla showcased the 'body beyond body'. In such ways, her *vakhs* displays a different genre in the cult of Indian devotional poetry. Those teachings were her manifestations of resistance against the traditional norms. Lalla found the meaning of Self in initially accepting the mortal body and then traveling to beyond body where the devotee achieves complete ecstasy. This is the state where human physical body becomes metaphysical. The consumerist attitude of man is questioned in Lalla's verses.

The verses of Lalla are characterized by various conflicting and polar images that seem indifferent. She intentionally used the methods of illogic, opposite, paradox and other non-casual concepts. These compositions do not follow a particular metrical style of other medieval poems, a story narrative style and are manifested using hard, burning, stark images and personal outcries. The narrative technique of Lalla was different from her contemporaries. The intellectual blending of Saivism and Sufism (both had equal influence on Kashmir valleys) marked her poetic excellence. Lalla developed a niche for herself to create a pathway that later inspired other Bhakti icons like Mirabai to take on a brave, fearless, courageous autonomy from the shackles of macho world.

Lal Ded used the vernacular Kashmiri dialect, the language of general folks to connect with the society. She rejected the usage of Sanskrit, the language of elite class.

Her use of regional language made her teachings easily comprehensible for the general public and created a universal appeal for her *vakhs*. Her verses are the voices of a woman. A woman can only choose images, metaphors and similes from her domestic life and surroundings. There are no elite Brahminical strategies. This choice of accepting language and concepts from the regional surroundings marked Lal Ded's mode of resistance against the patriarchy.

A woman voicing her Self was a very rare phenomenon in 14th century. Even so, it took place in the valleys of Kashmir when Lal Ded emerged as a mystical saint and her voices of resistance vibrated in social scenario. She was a poet, a teacher, a guide, a prophet and a woman with high intellect and wisdom that could transform the conventional society. Without negating the significance of physical body and its personal desires Lal Ded opened a world of accepting the metaphysical body in transcendence: the most ecstatic form of human Self.

The verses of Lal Ded portrays a disgust for the material world. She strongly believed that to attain complete salvation, one should withdraw from the world and the material temptations should have certain limitations. This underscores her strong resistance against the consumerist attitude of world. Her life itself was the best example to this notion of limiting the desires on crazy material delights. She asks to transcend body and soul. She says:

A king's flywhisk, baldachin, chariot, throne
pageants, evenings at the theatre, a downy bed.

Which of these will endure

or blot out the fear of death? (Hoskote 145)

The above lines makes the point more clear. No material pleasures of the world can discharge man from the shackles of death. Hence, there is no sense in following them. Instead, accept the celebration of body. Sing and dance in ecstasy. Be a mad lover of your favorite deity. The power of supreme devotion can takes you to the world of complete bliss. Here, she intellectually employs the economic elements of material life that provide worldly pleasure. But this worldly pleasure is not the one that helps to attain salvation. Resistance against the economic life is justified in the lyrics.

In another verse, Lalla portrays the celebration of true love which could help humans to attain salvation or transcendence. She says:

I, Lalla, came through the gate of my soul's jasmine garden
 And found Shiva and Shakti there, locked in love!
 Drunk with joy, I threw myself into the lake of nectar.

Who cares if I'm dead woman walking! (Hoskote 70)

Lalla was treated as an outcaste from the mainstream society as Akka Mahadevi was marginalised. Her defiance against patriarchy and its regulations always made her sidelined. Hence, she knowingly took distance from the mainstream and embodied herself with the mystical sphere. For a medieval woman like Lal Ded, it was too difficult to voice against the Brahminical hierarchy and the elite modes of social status. Still, she established a platform for herself. By seeking shelter in the mystical spectrum, she challenged the masculine world. she created a transcendental space of her own for the existence of her Self.

Lal Ded knowingly used dance as a crucial element in her *vakhs*. Dance represents the extreme state of ecstasy. A woman like Lal Ded dances when she is in extreme love with her lord. At those times, she becomes a blind lover of her lord who transcends herself into complete bliss. This was against patriarchal norms to accept lord in physical as well as metaphysical state. She says:

My master gave me just one rule:

Forget the Outside, get to the inside of things.

I, Lalla, took the teaching to heart.

From that day, I've danced naked. (Hoskote 97)

The so called Animal-body-rootedness is characterized in the verses of Lal Ded. Her verses discuss about the intense involvement and inseparability of physical body and inner soul. Here, 'dance' is a significant technique to denote the stage of ecstasy along with elements of human vocal growls, sighs, moans and even weepings.

After leaving her husband's home, the drastic step adopted by Lal Ded was to disrobe herself. She, like Akka, manifested the significance of physical body by expressing her nudity. There is nothing to conceal in expressing oneself. By residing upon the interior self, Lalla had experienced the genuine nature of things. At the very moment she realized this, she left the unnecessary baggage of traditions and conventions, the so called cultural signifier and clothes. The dawn of consciousness awakened. This awakening was against the patriarchal belief of the society she lived, which later outcasted her. The wandering nature and the nudity she possessed were the strong codes of disapproval and rejection against the patriarchal social conducts and

worldly associations including her domestic life within family and home. Neeraja Mattoo, in her work “Lal Ded: The Poet who Gave a Voice to Women” points out that:

She seems to have become completely unself-conscious; almost unaware of her body... she refused to be bothered by what the world would say when she went about naked. When she was asked whether she felt no shame at showing her body to all men around her, she asked whether there was a man around! To her ordinary mass of people was no better than sheep or other dumb animals ...who apart from the lord was a real man? (76)

Neerja Mattoo declares that nakedness of Lal Ded later became symbol and a strong sign of control that indicated the transcendence of her feminine body. She was only conscious about the ecstasy of her inner Self, not the pleasures of the material world.

The spiritual wanderings of Lal Ded in the above manner is a symbolic representation of the transgression of worldly customs and notions of gender that filled the internal psyche of general public from the ancient days and continuing even today. She knowingly rejected the material world and the consumerist masses that survive there. When questioned about her identity of being naked, she daringly replies that she feels no shame in expressing her nakedness that she cannot find a perfect mortal man in this world but could only witness dumb animals or sheep that gaze around. Lal Ded possessed high confidence in herself and the ultimate faith in her soul helped her to attain complete salvation and reach the metaphysical state of ecstasy. Her transgressing spirit as a woman increased with high potential. An eye could be always possessed to watch the realities around.

The verses of Lal Ded showcases that she was a strong woman who was extremely conscious about her bodily desires, emotions and thoughts. She suffered curses and disgraces from the surroundings for transgressing her inner spirit to reach the metaphysical state of ecstasy. But Lal Ded stood firm with her ideologies and nothing shackled her from her beliefs. She was well aware of the patriarchal world around her and knew how to resist the unwanted dominations and authorities that control human life. She sings:

I, Lalla, set out to bloom like a cotton flower
 The cleaner tore me, the carder shredded me on his bow.
 The gossamer: that was I
 the spinning woman lifted from her wheel.

At the weaver's, they hung me out on the loom. (Hoskote 40)

In the above lyrics, Lal Ded expresses coming to the world as beautiful and delicate cotton flower. But, still she received hard obstacles from the society. She herself felt internal needs to transmit the community assigned gender roles. She compares herself with a washing soap to set an example. She relates purification of her body and soul by cleaning the clothes with soap piece and then dashing it on the stone. Hence, she shreds her material life identity in comparison with that of a washerman's soap. The clean cloth is then cut into bits by the tailor. Here, Lal Ded took examples from the domestic life of common folks. Tailor, weaver or a washerman represents common masses, who are unaware of Vedas or Upanishads. They speak in regional Kashmiri dialect. Such examples or connotations were unseen during the ornamented poetry of medieval days. The simplicity in her language and the idea she conveys underscores her poetic intelligence. The 'washerman' in following *vakh* connects to the inner self that resides

within her body and aspires to achieve supreme bliss. They take part in actions that empowers Lal Ded to transcend her feminine spirit. Every cloth bit that shreds resembles that part of her individual personality which shreds down and her exact identity gets revealed to the world. Lal Ded as a loving daughter, as a submissive daughter-in-law and a dutiful wife gets shred from her life and she emerges as a free spirit to embrace world with love and bliss. Her body gets transcended into metaphysical state. This defines the resistance against the traditional norms of patriarchy. Lalla says:

First the washerman pounded me on his washing stone

scrubbed me with clay and soap

Then the tailor measured me, piece by piece,

with his scissors. Only then, could I Lalla,

find the road to heaven. (Hoskote 41)

Lalla always felt to elevate the women of her times from their simple domestic life to a sphere where they can express themselves. The medieval patriarchal norms deprived their autonomy and freedom and restricted them to mere domestic chores. The notions of self esteem or self empowerment should be taught to them. As part of it Lal Ded tried to create space for women in the socio-political levels, religious levels and even linguistic levels. These helped many other mystic saints of India to adopt their own pathway of freedom and express their Self. Lal Ded was a predecessor to Mirabai who followed her path of supreme devotion. Revelation enters Lal Ded's heart like the image of a beautiful moon flowering in dark water. She used symbols, metaphors, allegories

that are occult or esoteric. But the splendour of her verses attracts her followers with its intense wisdom and knowledge. Hoskote points out in his Introduction:

She celebrates perseverance in the quest, contrasting physical agony with spiritual flight and dwelling on the obdurate landscapes that questor must negotiate. Lalla's poetry is fortified by a palpable, first-hand experience of illumination; it conveys a freedom from the mortal freight of fear and vacillation. She cherishes these while attacking the parasitic forms of organised religion that have attached themselves to the spiritual quest and choked it: arid scholarship, soulless ritualism, fetishised austerity and animal sacrifice. (Hoskote xix-xx)

In one of her *vakh*, she says:

It covers your shame, keeps you from shivering.

Grass and water are all the food it asks.

Who taught you, priest-man,

to feed this breathing thing to your thing of stone? (Hoskote 61)

She continues,

Kusha grass, flowers, sesame, lamp, water:

it's just nother list for someone who's listened

really listened, to his teacher. Everyday he sinks deeper

into Shambu, frees himself from the trap

of action and reaction. He will not suffer birth again. (Hoskote 63)

In the above lines, Kashmir Saivism advises the transformation of every exterior observances into visual images and experiments in consciousness. Hence, “the idol is replaced by the mental image and the sacrifice of an animal by the deliberate extinction of lower appetites”. (Hoskote xx) She was a critic of ritualistic religious practices. Offerings, chanting hymns or prayers do not fulfil spiritual ecstasy. She continues her questioning of religious customs and idol worship in her other verses too. Lal Ded says:

God is stone, the temple is stone,

head to foot, all stone,

Hey preist-man, what’s the object of your worship?

Get your act together, join mind with life-breath. (Hoskote 60)

This is one among the most discussed *vakhs* of Lal Ded. She again questions the idol worship and priesthood. Idol is something made up of mere stone from the head to foot. She asks the relevance of worshipping such a concept. Also, if man can access God within his/her innerself by supreme love and devotion, then there is meaning in priesthood. Priests are the mediators between man and God. If an ardent devotee can access God within his/her heart then there is no point in priesthood. This is a strong defiance against patriarchal norms religious practices. Lalla explores the inner Self of human being rather than moving towards outer religious customs. The intense dedication and love the devotee possesses can attain him the grace of God and enjoy the ultimate bliss. Lal Ded says:

Whatever my hands did was worship,

whatever my tongue shaped was prayer.

That was Siva's secret teaching:

I wore it and it became my skin. (Hoskote 66)

Lal Ded declares that her body is covered with the teachings and prayers of her Lord. This signifies that her nudity is covered by her lord. The intense love and dedication that she expressed to her Lord becomes her clothes. It is her Lord's love and grace that covers her. She showcased her strong way of resistance by expressing her inner desires without negating the existence of physical body and travelling beyond the body to a metaphysical state and attaining supreme ecstasy and bliss. She considers her physical body as the centre of all her experiences of self refinement. It is through the acceptance of physical body one could travel into the metaphysical state. Hoskote points out:

... she asserts the unity of the corporeal and the cosmic, as achieved through immersive meditation and the Yogic cultivation of the breath. The subtle channels and nodal points of the Yogic body for a basic reality for her, its terrain as real as the topography of lake, river and mountains that recurs in her compositions. (xxii)

It was the sacred seeds of Lal Ded that paved way for the emergence of other mystic saints in North India. The most noteworthy among them is Mirabai of Rajasthan. Her divine attachment later became an indispensable part of her personal identity and her affection towards her Lord Krishna made her a mad lover. He was her sole refuge. She had ultimate faith in Him. The love towards him extended to an intense state where she recognised Him as her husband. She sings, "Meera's Lord is the courtly Girdhar" (Alston 47).

Mirabai's nature and devotional intensity was slightly different from that of Lal Ded but the mental strength she possessed was more rebellious in the spectrum of female mystics. She evoked an open challenge towards the conventional patriarchal norms of medieval society its, rituals, customs and traditions. She had no fear in declaring, "Mira has dedicated herself to Girdhar/ And roams about in ecstatic mood arising out of deep love" (Behari 43).

Mirabai manifested her love towards lord in the form of *dasya bhava*, especially in the verses of entreaty. She has expressed *dasya bhava* in many of her poems especially in the verses of entreaty. She is immersed in the divine love of her lord and dreams of her unification with him. The theme of conjugal love encircles her verses where she never forgets the divine identity of Lord Krishna.

The spirit of her defiance attained its highest peak when her passionate love was questioned by the society including her royal family. She belonged to the lineage of conservative Rajputs who were basically Kali devotees. She was living in a patriarchal society where the chastity of a woman was responsible for the honour and dignity of her family. Society has clearly marked limits that shouldn't be crossed. But Mira questioned these strategies and walked out of these shackles in quest of her lover. She never showed interest in adhering to these codes of patriarchy. She stepped out from the usual expectations of a woman and wandered all along her life wishing to unite with her lover. Her lyrics were the expression of her inner self to manifest her passionate love towards Lord Krishna as well as questioning the barriers of societal codes. Today, Mira gained a global status as a powerful woman who went in search of her love and autonomy (Wasia 331).

In Krishna Subramaniam's translation, she sings:

I have no father, no mother, no relatives or brothers

I have broken family ties; who can do anything?

I have spoken of my love through my tears

Servant Meera has fallen

in love with the lord. (Subramaniam 34-35)

Mira is regarded as an embodiment of wild spirit of passionate love and a strong agent of this devotional rebellion. She never feared to raise her voice against the social anarchies at multiple levels. Her poetry had the backgrounds of an aristocratic family and an elite genealogy. Still, Mira stood for the women in general, for the women of love. In the above lines she remarks that she had broken all her domestic relations and portrayed her intense love through her tears. Mira has submitted herself to her beloved that none can separate her from Him. Through expressing her passionate love, Mira discards the bounds of patriarchy by confirming to her statement that supreme devotion to the lord is the base for all. It is the devotional spirit that granted her that courage to fight against the traditional norms of medieval society. Wasia Mushtaq in his article, "Religion and Literature: A Poetic Interface" points out about the rebellious Mira:

Meera was not a reformer, nor was she a preacher and neither did she establish any sect of believers. She was like many other humans who are caught in the web of this material world and who desire liberation from the social clutches. To her, religion became the means of achieving this liberation. She united herself with Krishna and attained salvation but the path that she took wasn't easy. There

were many stages that needed to be crossed in order to arrive at the ultimate state of Mystic union. (332)

Mushtaq closes the article by directly appreciating the resistance struggle of Mira towards the medieval society. Mushtaq states:

Fundamental to her poetry is her revolt against the hegemony, her suffering and surviving in adversity. In her tale, lies a veiled fervour of resistance and challenge to the status quo. There lies a potential that can readily be developed by any alternate community as people identify with her character and plight in different ways. Her values, hopes and aspirations speak to and for the people in wide ranging cultural, religious and social situations. (334)

Mira as an ardent devotee and Mira as a poetic intellect are brilliantly merged so that it is essential to study her poetry to discuss about her religious statements. The poetry of Mirabai is filled with *Madhurya Bhava*/Bridal Mysticism like that of Andal and Akka Mahadevi which grants her the permission to express her internal desires, physical cravings and bodily pleasures. This ardent love towards God permitted her the voice of being a mystic rebel the patriarchal norms of society. Devotional poetry was her tool of resistance. Mira never preached any special principles or doctrines or developed a special devotional cult. Instead, she accepted all the lovely facets of ardent devotion and practised them in her real life. She believed that she will be raised from the pangs of death and rebirth when she unites with Lord Krishna who is her sole lover and savior. Mira consciously uses phrases such as 'I will', 'I will not', 'I do', 'I am' and 'I have' in her verses. The employment of such phrases marks the internal strength of Mira. These phrases finds expression in her verses to establish her feminine strength and autonomy.

It was not easy to develop relations outside the family and such associations are always forbidden for a medieval woman.

Mira was strongly criticized for her social behaviours. But nothing could shackle her ideologies that she refused every disgraces and dishonours of the conventional norms by addressing that she belongs to her lord. Krishna Subramaniam translates:

The big palace is bolted I have turned away from it

I have nothing to do with the worldly matters

I have nothing to do with the officials

To gain the Lords grace, one can give up

The entire treasury. (Subramaniam 136-137)

In the above lyrics she displays her broken associations with the material world. She declares that the worldly matters never bothered her and she can do nothing with it. But, by supreme devotion and complete submission one can attain the grace of God. She is a wandering mystic who wishes ultimate unification with her lord.

After fighting with the domestic structures of her patriarchal family, she then had to face the oppositions from the society outside. She mentions about 'people of the world' in her lyrics, and draws the associations they had with her and discusses about the conventional fashions of the society. She never received positive reviews from the patriarchal society. They questioned her for her erotic sensible verses. But for Mira, the expression of this eroticism was the expression of her Self, the way of her resistance against the macho world outside. She intellectually noticed the priorities of the society and spoke against them. Hence, she herself kept a distance from the mighty world and

took abode in supreme devotion. She joined the group of mystic saints and found happiness in living with them, singing her songs vibrantly, with its beauty and splendor.

Krishna Subramaniam translates:

Unreal are the rubies and pearls

Unreal are the glitter and glamour

Unreal are all ornaments

Only the love of the beloved Lord is real. (Subramaniam 169)

In the above verses Mira portrays the unreal world around her. Actually her defiance is against this unreality. For an ardent lover and devotee like Mira, the entire world appeared as a false notion excluding the supreme power of devotion. The love of God is only real. In fact, Mira is speaking against the atrocities of the society where real love and affection perished and all the exterior settings are notions of falsehood or unreality. God and his love is only true and real. In another verse, Krishna Subramaniam translates, “The ignominy cast on me is sweet to me/ Let everyone speak ill of me or scandalize me/ I shall walk my wonderful path” (Subramaniam 88-89). The above lines explains that she stood unaffected to the society’s abuses and curses. She even enjoyed the ignominy that was casted on her. She says it tasted sweet to her. This sweetness is because of her passionate love towards her God. The ardent devotion of Mira burned within her inner Self as the fearless spirit of rebellion. This devotional power granted her the power to question the social systems. But, never in her mystic life did she used brutal words to confront her opposites. Her inner soul was still unaffected of their curses, disgraces, abuses and rebuking from them. The devotion in Lord Krishna granted her the religious right to select her individual pathway of freedom. She declared Krishna

as her exclusive lord, which was revolutionary in itself, against the social constraints of medieval period. Mira stood firm in her spiritual ideologies and created popular ways of resistance and rebellion against the macho domains of patriarchy. She left aside all her domestic bondings and sang. Krishna Subramaniam translates, “When I am not interested in big lakes/ Why should I care for small pools/ Even ganga and jamuna are of no use to me” (Subramanian 136-137).

Her verses portrayed a collective form of resistance and this was associated to not only the medieval women, but also the outcasted and subaltern people of the time. Mira never showed interest to be a part of any particular devotional sect and incorporated together people from every corners of the society irrespective of their caste or creed. These followers comprised up of people from elite classes and the laymen of the society. The attitude of Mira was to not be a part of any particular clan “she wants to belong to the world and to leave her work to the world rather than to her Rajput lineage- opens up the possibility of co-authorship by diverse sections of subaltern classes” (Bhatnagar and Dube 10). All the critical studies conducted on Mirabai showcases her as a mystic rebel, who is madly in love with her Beloved and remained a live tradition of rebellion, protest and resistance against patriarchal codes. Mira consciously refused to stick onto any such conventional or ritualistic practice of medieval society and emerged as a strong violator of the conventional system. Krishna Subramaniam translates, “Yes! I will give up my life for Him/ Because of you, I have given up/ Worldly modesty and family restrictions” (Subramanian 126-127). The above lyrics shows that she had submitted herself to her lord. It is the intense love and passionate desire on Him that made her to discharge all her domestic affairs and accept a life of a mystic love saint. She is ready to give up her body and soul to Him. Such an ardent lover cannot adhere to the social norms of family associations.

The eroticism in her lyrics sometimes makes her extremely rebellious in describing personal desires and physical cravings. But these bodily desires forms the crux of her resistance. To openly speak about her feminine body and its pleasures categorized Mira as a feminist poet of medieval India. The intense longing for her lover, the passionate love towards him, the grief of separation that she bears in her heart and such themes make Mira's love poetry more rebellious. These verses make Mira a mad lover. For example, she sings:

How bitter is the carnival day

with my lover off travelling.

O desolate town,

my small bed in the attic lies empty.

Rejected and lost

in his absence, stumbling under

the pain. (Schelling 169)

In the above lines Mira depicts her grief of separation that she feels when Krishna is not with her. At the same time, the verses produce images of erotic sensibility of a woman. She mentions about her empty bed indicating that she is in want of Him. She cries with mental pain in the absence of her lover feeling complete rejection and getting lost at his thoughts. Her mental anguish is pictured in the verses. Such lyrics of erotic sensibility were taboos in her period especially from the side of a woman. Here, Mira portrayed her rebellious mystical character publicly expressing her personal desires about her lover, who is the Divine God. Even though texts like *Bhagavata Purana* mentions about the

love relations of Krishna, his love is recognised as platonic. But for Mira, this love is intense, passionate and erotic. In Mira's verses Krishna is not a platonic lover. The same is explained in her another verse:

Dark One

how can I sleep?

Since you left my bed

the seconds drag past like epochs,

each moment

a new torrent of pain.

I am no wife. (Schelling 173)

Here in the above lines, Mira feels the intense grief when Krishna is not with her. She is sleepless as her lover left her bed leaving her alone. The seconds seems like hours, days or months. She says each moment the torrent of pain increases. The verses depicts the bodily separation she felt when he left her alone. Such personal cravings are common in Mira's lyrics. The desire to unite with the lord is her central aim. Her lyrics points out to this divine unification she waits for. A large number of Mira's verses are filled with combined taste of bitter-sweet joy of remembrance. She curiously speaks about the experiences she had with her love and the genuine nature of their love. At the same time, she laments with grief at his departure. Mira mentions in her other song:

Yogin, don't go -

at your feet a slave girl has fallen.

She lost herself

on the devious path of romance and worship,

no one to guide her.

Now she's built

an incense and sandalwood pyre

and begs you to light it.

Dark One, don't go -

when only cinder remains

rub my ash over your body

Mira asks, Dark one,

can flame twist upon flame? (Schelling 174)

The above poem indicates that Mira already submitted herself to her lover. She declares herself as a slave to him. She wandered along the paths of deep passionate love and ardent worship that helps her to achieve ultimate salvation. She demands her Lord to light her pyre with sandalwood and rub the ashes on his body. This act indirectly reveals the unification of body in physical life and the life after death. She wish even her ashes gets merged with her lover's body so that her soul can reside in him always. It's a flame upon another flame. The verses portrays her resistance to the patriarchal norms wishes to unite with her lover after her death. It defines that there is no meaning in practising rituals like Sati (which she denied in her real life) and if the love is eternal the lovers can

join even after death. Here the ashes get merged with the divine body of Krishna. Their relation is so deep that death never makes them parted. It is not exhibiting the chastity of your physical body by a religious custom that makes you purified, but it is the in-depth devotion, the ultimate faith in the lord and eternal love towards the lover that sanctifies human and takes to the state of complete ecstasy. In another lyric Mira sings, “Listen, my friend, this road is the heart opening,/ Kissing his feet, resistance broken, tears all night” (Bly 182). In the above lines, Mira confirms that she broke the norms of society. She declares that she kissed her lover’s feet. Her heart opens to embrace her lover. There is no meaning in resisting her physical desires. Her love for her Beloved is eternal. To express her love, she broke the chains of society. Her mode of social resistance finds expression in breaking the resistance of her bodily pleasures, manifesting her passionate love and longing for the unification with her Divine lover. Here, resistance towards society sprouts out of breaking her resistance of emotions and desires. B. V. Ramana in his article “Mirabai: Devotee of a Noble Order” points out:

Mira was among the earliest Indian women to violate the laws governing her class and royalty in refusing to follow the convention of Sati, on the death of her worldly husband. She deeply felt that she had been a companion of Lord Krishna through ages. She believed that in her previous life, she was one of the several Gopikas or milkmaids in Vrindavan, in love with Krishna. (102)

The above quote adheres to Mira’s refusal of patriarchal notions of accepting Sati after the death of her husband. But Mira, who already placed Lord Krishna as her eternal lover and immortal husband could never attempt Sati, moreover it was a cruel form of medieval anarchy and social dogmas. She herself believed that in her previous birth she was a milkmaid maiden of Vrindavan who eagerly listened to the melodious flute player

and danced with his musical notes in ecstasy. Such an eternal lover cannot adhere to Sati. Madhava Hada in his book *Meera v/s Meera*, mentions this notion:

Meera's devotion had a great mass appeal because she rejected the power play and ambitions despite hailing from an aristocratic family, and she did not conform to patriarchal dictates, in spite of being a woman in medieval India. So, her circumstances were unique, much like her devotion. She was not keen on accepting established institutions or values, she was unmediated by conventional forms of devotion or intermediaries. Her love for God was impassioned and liberal; ethereal yet grounded. Her feudal lineage enhanced her popularity; something which was hard to contest by her contemporaries. (147)

There is no doubt that her aristocratic royal lineage enhanced her immediate popularity among the devotees and general public. Such a royal aristocratic woman from a patriarchal family emerging as a mystic rebel itself was an act of resistance from her real life segment. She always accepted unique style in her life, devotion as well as in her poetic intellect. This made her to easily discharge the medieval institutional norms and accept a spiritual life of freedom and autonomy. This life of boundless autonomy, fearless attitude and discharged social norms served as the base of her spiritual resistance.

Apart from her lyrical sensuality, she used, Braj Bhasha, the regional dialect of Rajasthan to compose her verses. This was a strong tool of resistance that in those periods, the devotional texts were only composed in Sanskrit, the elite class language. But Sanskrit was not accessible to the peasants, laymen and other general masses of the medieval days. They were denied of Sanskrit education. The regional dialectical

compositions of Mirabai helped them to comprehend the verses easily and it provided a universal appeal to her poetic excellence.

Spirituality acted as a suitable platform for the female Bhakti poets to express their Self and deny the social norms. Mostly, all the sacred texts strengthened the principles of complete surrender enjoined upon the female submissiveness, her chastity and surrender to the male. Even, the patriarchal norms, rites, rituals and customs from the use of purdah system to the attempt of Sati exploited the status of women in the society. The medieval society never provided any single opportunity for female autonomy of expressing their Self. It was only with the help of devotional sphere that they could break the chains of imprisonment and liberate their soul. They challenged the patriarchal conventions by expression their individual Self. The female saints, hence, emerged and represented a specific emotional configuration, manifested a specific societal association and were later of evoked as distinguished subalterns. The extreme devotion and underlying currents of feminism helped them to create a metaphysical or transcendental world mysticism and love that broke all the shackles of traditional societal codes. This feminine spark helped women in later days to develop a space of their own and give womanhood a new form distinctive from mere domestic roles like daughter, wife and mother. The area of women studies later developed with the seeds laid down during the medieval period.