



Finding the Roots of Feminist Movement in India: Analysis of Akka Mahadevi's Vachanas and the Power of Feminine Narrative in Social Transformation.

Ms. Sai Divya Darshan

Faculty of English,

University First Grade College, Mangalagangothri, Karnataka, India.

Abstract:

The Bhakti movement as a social movement challenged caste hierarchy, emphasised the possibility of salvation for an individual through good deeds and simple living. As a literary movement, it liberated poetry from classical clutches and made it accessible to the common man and aided in breaking gender stereotypes. The Bhakti movement witnessed the extensive involvement of women saints. These saints broke many established norms of society during their lifetimes and even went to the extent of discarding clothes and redefining the idea of the domestic and outside world. This paper explores the 'Vachanas' of Akka Mahadevi who was a 12th century Bhakti poet-saint, who did not conform to the traditional notion of femininity. It also elucidates the need for a closer understanding of literature from regional languages to bring about national integration and develop national consciousness, by paving the way to literary internationalism. In this context, the role of translation is important to bridge the gap between isolated regional literature and mainstream literature, to bring it to a wider reading spectrum.

Keywords: Bhakti poetry, femininity, spiritual eroticism, brahminical hegemony, gender, patriarchy, translation, regional literature, agency, identity.

Akka Mahadevi, holds a position of unmatched eminence in Kannada literature, being the foremost among poets of both genders. She is held with deeply felt reverence and esteem by the people, as the pride of Karnataka. Ranked among the great women saints of the world, she was a staunch believer in Virasaivism and was spiritually inclined from a very young age. Her life story shows that from early childhood, she remained detached with no interest in worldly pleasures or pursuits. She was an ardent advocator of Bhakti yoga (devotional path) and through her personal example, showed to the world, the power of devotion and its ability to transcend man's karmic cycle and grant him salvation. To achieve this, man has to go beyond his worldly identity and realise the divinity camouflaged behind the corporeal garb. Akka Mahadevi showed the world that women can be equal to men, even in spiritual pursuits. This proposition of equality of women in social and religious realms is what makes her one of the earliest Indian champions of women's liberation. The seeds of Indian feminism can be seen to have been sown from time immemorial unlike the Western Feminist thought which originated and evolved during the late 18th century.

Songs of 'Bhakti' sung by Bhakti poets are intimate and passionate, suffused with devotion to a personal God, and are intense pleas to align one's self to the beloved God, worshipped as the supreme cosmic divine. 'Bhakti' as a concept means devotion and surrender. It establishes the soul's harmony with the divine through love songs dedicated to the 'divine beloved'. Medieval bhakti poetry is the devotional genre of love poetry. The word 'bhakti' derives from the Sanskrit root 'bhaj' which means "to worship, have recourse to, betake oneself to", which literally means "attachment, participation, fondness for, homage, faith, love, devotion, worship, purity". Manager Pandey thus puts it rightly, "The Bhakti movement is a pervasive cultural movement which appeared in various forms of cultural expression including religion, philosophy, language, art and literature." Bhakti or devotional movement challenged Brahminical hegemony by subverting gender and caste hierarchy in the religious realm. Thus, it became a movement that can be considered as a leveller of the hegemonic caste structure in society.

Bhakti movement originated in South India as early as 7th century and aimed at propagating the idea that God pervades in all beings. It also believed that human beings could attain God through faith and devotion. The Bhakti movement that flourished across various literary cultures gave rise to the distinct genre of expression in Kannada called as the 'vachana', loosely understood as free poems or sayings. Vachana poets lay great emphasis on the unity of speech and action. They not only broke with the existing literary tradition, but also rejected social divisions, hierarchies, formal structures of learning and worship and pursuits of worldly pleasures.

Tracing the history of Bhakti movement in India helps us to trace the roots of Indian feminism as well. The women poets of Bhakti movement challenged the patriarchal fixities and helped to define their own truths to reform society, polity, relationships and religions. They broke societal rules and stereotypes that were deeply embedded in a society rooted in orthodoxy and male dominance. They challenged the orthodoxy and patriarchy through their songs, poems and ways of life. Bhakti movement brought religion and spirituality to marginalised classes, especially women as it believed in the truth that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. It was the medium through which the subaltern could establish a presence in the tradition bound, rigid social structure.

Indian society being fundamentally patriarchal, women were marginalised and considered markedly inferior. Religious duties or expressions by women in the patriarchal society were restricted by brahminical monopoly. The bhakti movement created a space where one could have a personal relationship with God and removed all intermediaries rendering brahminical traditions and the pre-dominant role of brahmin priests insignificant. Spirituality provided Indian women with the liberty which orthodox and conformist Hindu society otherwise denied them. In reading Akka Mahadevi's vachanas we can peek into the role of women in the society of her times and how spirituality liberated and empowered women bound in the patriarchal confines. Translation plays a very significant role in bringing the diversity and richness of regional literature to readers across the world, thus breaking linguistic barriers.

In the preface to *Indian Literature in Translation*, Basavaraj Naikar opines, "India is said to be not a country but a subcontinent with a bewildering diversity of cultures, customs and languages. There are twenty-two officially recognised languages in India, in which rich literature has been produced at different phases of Indian history. But unfortunately, these language – groups have almost become linguistic islands due to fanaticism and lack of mutual communication. The only way to bridge the gap between these isolated islands is to translate the regional literature into a common language..." Translation of literature from regional languages into English brings about national integration and helps in developing national consciousness, paving way to literary internationalism. Hence it is important to understand Akka Mahadevi's vachanas from a global perspective to realise the depth and richness of literary consciousness created by the simple poems set in colloquial language carrying strong social messages for women's emancipation.

Akka Mahadevi's vachanas were infused with depth of meaning and lyrical beauty which penetrates the conscience of the reader, though set in a simple and spoken language style. Her life was a testimony to the power of courage and faith. Her struggle to prove that every soul, irrespective of gender, has a right to explore and reach the divine has placed her among the pioneers of women's liberation movements across the world. Her exemplary life of sacrifice at a very young age makes her different and unique from the other women of her times. Her poetry as Susie Taru and K Lalitha, says "For women, her (Akka's) work embodies a radical illegitimacy as she struggles in her poetry to go beyond much of Virasaiva poetry to include the struggles of her body, struggles against the pettiness of roles she is forced into as a woman, struggles against a man who is also a prince and a Jain, and against the social expectations that restrain her."

Akka Mahadevi rejected societal and patriarchal influences completely and her act of leaving her marriage with Jain King Kaushika, who forced himself on her shows her firm resolve to stand up against objectification of her body. She takes her clothes off and walks out of his home covered in nothing but long tresses of her hair. Her act of disrobing was done in defiance of her husband's obsession with her body. It is said that with rejecting a worldly life she also rejected 'shame' of the body and the 'burden of clothes' to protest against the world which treated a woman merely as an 'object' or 'body'. Akka Mahadevi writes;

"To the shameless girl
wearing the White Jasmine Lord's
light of morning,
you fool,
where's the need for cover and jewel."

(Translation of Vachana- 124, *Speaking of Siva*, A.K. Ramanujan)

These lines question the patriarchal adherence to norms of modesty ascribed to women which expects them to cover their bodies fully and protect them from male gaze.

"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?"

(Translation of Vachana- 124, *Speaking of Siva*, A.K. Ramanujan)

Akka Mahadevi's brazen expression of love to her divine Lord "Chennamallikarjuna" subverts the passivity of women by expressing her longing and her passionate feelings for her beloved. In a land where, especially women, expressing their love for the beloved was considered a taboo, women poets in Bhakti tradition expressed their longing in the most passionate ways through poetry and singing. It granted them agency to articulate the otherwise suppressed desires.

“She has lain down
with the Lord, White as Jasmine,
and has lost caste.”

(Translation of Vachana -294, *Speaking of Siva*, A.K Ramanujan)

Akka Mahadevi draws our focus on how women get ostracised because she asserts her love to her lover. Being outcasted or excommunicated from the ‘respectable’ societal space, a woman is expected to accept passivity as a mode of existence, having to be completely dependent on a man through whom her significance is derived. Her identity is associated with the male identity she is related to, whether it is her father, husband or son.

“Not one, not two, not three or four
But through eighty-four hundred thousand vaginas
Have I come
I have come
Through unlikely worlds
guzzled on
Pleasure and on pain.” (Akka Mahadevi, ed. A K Ramanujan, 1973, p.117)

Body becomes a medium for spiritual exaltation in Akka’s vachanas. Her poems trace the body to attain the divine by breaking the conventional spiritual and devotional attitudes and beliefs. The body is not rejected, but it is celebrated and affirmed all through. Akka acknowledges the transcendental nature of human being and the ephemerality of the body. Her poems are infused with this ultimate truth of spiritual realisation. The spiritual expanse legitimises the erotic mysticism of Akka’s poetry and upholds the vastness and profundity of Hinduism. It helps a woman surpass the societal bondage which ties women down to domesticated spaces. This special shift and command on agency are a rarity in the patriarchal paradigm. This sanctioning of agency in a patriarchal space is possible only because Akka’s poetry is located in the Spiritual ambit.

Speaking of poets of Bhakthi movement, Niveditha Menon in her essay “Body” says, “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 and the loss of femaleness as sexualized powerlessness.” The sex/gender dichotomy is dismantled by the Bhakthi saints where the boundaries of the body is traversed recurrently. A K Ramanujan advocates that in the lives of Bhakthi saints “the lines between male and female are continuously crossed and recrossed.” The notion of ‘modest’ as a bejewelled possession, as an epitome of a woman’s virtue is contested by Akka Mahadevi who discards the very clothing that covers the body. However, Ramanujan endorses that the very act of discarding the clothes is paradoxical because, hiding the body with clothes, is a ‘way of resisting and enhancing sexual curiosity, not of curbing it’. The hiding of body using the clothes enhances the curiosity, while discarding liberates the sense of gender by exposing the difference between male and female. This act of liberation questions the normative of masculinity/ femininity and appropriate/ inappropriate sexual codes prevalent in the society.

Akka Mahadevi lived a revolutionary life, that created a paradigm shift in the way women were perceived and accepted both in the literary and spiritual domain. Her vision and thoughts have a deep influence on the modern Indian woman’s understanding of the idea of feminism. With the translation of Akka’s poetry the world has come to know about a powerful crusader for the freedom of choice for women and therefore the precursor to the feminist movement in India, even before the western world was introduced to feminist thought. Her whispers of rebellion were ignored by the patriarchal documentation which considered feminine narrative as inconsequential. Recovery of Akka’s works and translating them into English and other languages has brought to the fore one of

the pathbreaking movements for women's liberation from caste and patriarchal oppression, which was hitherto restricted to the vernacular literary domain. It has contributed in bringing about profound changes in the society that we are privileged to enjoy even today. Her poetry shows women's candidness in expressing the emotions like lust, envy, anger and spiritual quest by accepting her uninhibited sexuality as a part of a complete human experience. In going beyond the material mundane experiences and establishing a relationship with the divine lover 'Chennamallikarjuna', she transcends the clutches of patriarchal bondage that ties down women to restricted domestic roles. She is acclaimed as a renowned saint in India for her pioneering work as a spiritual leader and a social reformer.

Akka Mahadevi's contribution to Indian Feminist thought is progressive and politically defiant. Mukunda Rao the author of the book, *Sky – Clad: The Extraordinary Life and Times of Akka Mahadevi*, speaking of Akka says, "She stands for what can be achieved through the body. By rejecting female vulnerability, she treats the female form as a seat of divinity and not contamination. Many authors in the past have marvelled at this subversion of her own self and celebrating of sexuality." The female body, which is the source of stigma, oppression, conflict, prejudice and religious seclusion is liberated and elevated through Akka's Vachanas to the realm of purity, acceptance, tolerance and inclusiveness. Akka's life and her vachanas have thus transformed and elevated societal conscience from one based on gender division and discrimination to a progressive state of unity of people, irrespective of caste or sex.

References:

- Ramanujan A.K. *Speaking of Siva*. Harmondsworth England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1973
- Tharu, Susie and Lalitha K. ed., *Women Writing in India: 600BC to the Present*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Naikar, Basavaraj. *Indian Literature in English Translation*. Jaipur: National Publishing House, 2005.
- Pandey, Rekha. *Women From Subjugation to Liberation*. Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1989.
- Pandey, Manager and Tyagi, Alka. "Bhakti Poetry: Its Relevance and Significance". *Indian Literature* Vol 45 No Sugir6 (206) (Nov-Dec2001).
- Sugirtharajah, Sharada. "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns". *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol 18, No 2 (Fall 2002) Indiana University Press.