

VOICES BEHIND THE VEIL: REPRESENTING BHAKTI

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Any effort to deconstruct/reconstruct women's discourse from the historical past would perforce bring up questions regarding methodology and frames of reference. Indeed the ways in which culture is constructed would also come to be scrutinized. Issues such as the authenticity of the woman's voice and the socio cultural framework of the utterance would also of necessity surface. Many questions such as: What is women's discourse? Would it exclude men, or would there be space for "the sympathetic male"? Is there a female nature? Crop up repeatedly. Which feminist theory, or what feminist tools would enable one to deconstruct and then reconstruct women's discourse from the past and study their relevance in the present context?

A cursory survey of the field of feminist aesthetics would bring into focus two divergent perspectives towards studies relating to women –1. Gynesis and 2. Gender theory. Of these Gynesis foregrounds the biological aspects of womanhood in any woman centered analysis. French feminists like Helence Cixous (1976, 1986) and Luce Irigaray (1991) place much emphasis on the physical aspects of women's writing and attribute it to female bodily expressions. They see fragmented discourse with space for gaps and disruptions as essential characteristics of women's discourse. They regard heteroglossic voices and multiplex diction as well as a tendency to be cumulative or repetitive and the tendency to employ metaphors of fluidity as essential to women's discourse. The repeated use of the continuous present as well as the taking up of a decentering point of view is considered another hallmark of woman's writing. (Such a linguistics state would automatically preclude men from women's studies) Greater emphasis of subjectivity and personalized narration in women's language as opposed to abstract and objective ways of expression would automatically deny the place of scientism and a systematic approach from the field of women's studies in general. Gynesis would in a sense lead to a certain amount of ghettoism and exclusivity with regard to anything related to women.

Gender theory on the other hand, is quite in opposition to such a purely womanish approach. It takes in to account socio-religious and cultural bias in the construction of gender attitudes. From the generalizations that encompass all women it moves toward theories that treat women in individual terms and focus on the individual acted upon by multiple socio-religious and cultural factors that actually constitute frames of reference for us. Gender theory denies that there is a female nature. Marilyn French, feminist aesthetician, in an essay entitled, "Is there a Feminist Aesthetics? Describes feminist art thus:

First sit approaches reality from a feminist perspective: second It endorses female experience. The feminist perspective is partly a reversal of patriarchal views . . . (it focuses on people as a whole . . . as part of a community.

(Aesthetics in Feminist Perspectives. Ed. Hilda Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer. Bloomington, Ind. 1993. 153-165.)

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In the context of this theoretical framework I enter into my discussion about the poetics of Bhakti (devotion) in women's discourse. Is there a woman's voice there? What are the socio cultural factors that led to the woman's religious experience? Did the woman find a voice there? If so, was it a purely woman's voice? Were there any common grounds through which the discourse of Bhakti included woman's experience? In order to foreground the woman's voice and the general features that bind the common woman's experience in spirituality, I look into the religio-mystical experiences of two south Indian women mystics of the medieval period through their poetics outbursts.

The writing of history as we know it has been primarily male-centred and excluded women automatically from the focus of attention. In a cultural framework where the woman's activity was constantly undervalued and devalued, and her presence ignored marginalized and unnoticed, such lack of mention could only be inevitable and in the natural scheme of things. As Kau Kleinberg in her introduction to *Retrieving Woman's history*, describes the process:

Historians searching for evidence about women's history have encountered the phenomenon of women's invisibility; women have been systematically omitted from accounts of the past. This has distorted the way we view the past; indeed it warps history by making it seem as though only men have participated in events thought worthy of preservation and by misrepresenting what actually happened. (Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society. Ed. S. Jay Kleinberg. Paris: UNESCO press, 1988.)

This veil of invisibility has kept aside perspectives that privilege women as well as women centred narratives from the mainstream of socio-political and religio-cultural discourse. Any attempt to recreate women's history or uncover hitherto invisible/hidden documents thereby assumes a certain revolutionary zeal. Susie Tharu and K Lalitha record a similar experience in their efforts to locate and collate women's writing in India. In their preface to their pioneering work *Women Writing in India*, they make specific mention of the problems in unearthing women's discourse and disentangling it from male centred literary history.

We read against the grain of literary histories taking special note of writers who were criticized or spoken about dismissively, or controversies that involved women. Social histories biographies and autobiographies we found often provided information that literary histories had censored.

Women Writing in India. Ed. Susie Tharu and K Lalitha (1993) This tendency to devalue women centric perspectives or neglect them totally is merely one means of marginalizing the female voice. Another effective method of silencing the woman was the socio-cultural approach valorising silence as a desirable feminine trait. This consciously evolved tactic denied speech or expression to the "good woman", privileging the male entirely. Women were not expected to have an opinion at all. She was only expected to act to act in servile silence. If at all she did have an opinion, the well brought up woman was not expected to articulate it—particularly in public spaces or social gathering where she could be heard. An "opinionated" was usually treated with a certain amount of distaste and women who continued to express themselves despite social disapproval would be christened as shrews gossips or chatterboxes and represented as objects of ridicule and social ostracism. Only the silent, sweet-natured, caring the submissive (read servile) woman could be foregrounded as part of the mainstream culture.

While much of the world slipped easily into these stereotypical notions of woman in the socio religious context, India could boast of a uniquely woman centred religious outlook as part of its mainstream. The female deity was worshipped as Devi as well as the mother goddess, the Life

giving force, a source of immense power and energy. The ideal of the goddess as shakthi, the vital power was enenerated. She was the epitome of peace, plenitude and harmony in her various avatars as Devi, Lakshmi, Amma/Ambal and Saraswathi. She was also the violent, avenging and awesome Kali, the destroyer of evil and the preserver of justice. Both the harmonious and the violent aspects of the feminine were equally respected and worshipped. She was venerated in equal terms with the male principle and the concept of Ardhanareeswara where the male and female principles were fused together in equal measure was part of the popular psyche.

This preoccupation with the cult of the goddess remains strong even in present day India. But the veneration of female principle has not been translated into the prevalent socio-cultural values with regard to women, despite the religio-spiritual thrust. Elinor Gadon, the American researcher into women's spirituality, has recorded the process by which the goddess in most religious cultures has lost her value.

As history was written by the victors, goddess religion has been portrayed as heretical, bad, "of the devil", the alien other. Woman, identified with the goddess and her ways were also so branded and denied full participation in society. The transition was not just a gender change from goddess to god but a paradigm shift with the imposition of a different reality of different categories of being that deeply affected every human relationship. Woman, the female, the feminine, was excluded in this shift of consciousness. All that was most valued in the goddess culture, was revalued, given lesser priority, rejected.

(Gadon, E. *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol of Our Time*, New York: Harper Collins, 1989).

Such a paradigm shift has not occurred within the religious cultural space of India in terms of the goddess. But the woman as the female or the feminine principle in socio-domestic terms has come to be devalued and suffered rejection on many grounds in the socio cultural space. The contradiction though irrational is clearly true, and a study of the woman mystic would perhaps provide us with answers to the inevitable questions that arise out of the situation.

The religious sphere was one area where woman's work and participation received not only social sanction but active encouragement. From a very early age socio cultural pressures encouraged women to be devout and display religious fervour. In their personal lives and the domestic scene as well as in the larger religio-cultural frame where their active involvement was required, women were expected to be participants. Many women who were otherwise marginalized as social rejects found

acceptance and solace through religious involvement. Yet the question that recurrently comes up is – was it unconditional acceptance. Yet closer analysis reveals that even expression through bhakti gained acceptance only when the women concerned worked within the guidelines prescribed by a watchful patriarchy. When women found voice beyond the accepted canons their spirituality was immediately treated as deviant or they were raised into an idealized state beyond the range of the average woman. In Europe they were either burned at stake or (even later) canonized. But what was the situation in India? Let us examine sit through an analysis of the medieval period which experienced much religious revivalism.

The Bhakti revival in south India spreading over several centuries from the 6th to the 16th, like its counterpart in the rest of India foregrounded the common folk practices over the rigid and the classical. It broke across the rigid class structures and socio religious conventions and gathered within its fold several of the subaltern peoples such as the lower castes and women of all castes and classes. By structure revolutionary and revivalist at the same time, the Bhakti movement gained popular support and remained in the mainstay of the popular imagination for a long time to come. Designed as a protest against the upper class hegemonial order in religion through codified religious practices, rituals and scriptures, the movement gained much of its widespread following through orally constructed discourse. Hence it could be related to the Desi, or the Bhasha tradition rather than to the sclassical Sanskritic Margi tradition. The songs and vacanas were composed and “written” in the regional language as opposed to Sanskrit, thereby assuming greater access to the masses often untutored and unlettered. However, this wealth of literature shows the synthesis of Vedic, Puranic and Agamic (or Tantric) elements containing theological concepts, mythologies and religious observances with practices and beliefs arising indigenously in the region. Perhaps we could also read in these the fusion of the two cultural streams from the regional and the Sanksritic, reflecting the amalgamation of cultures that must have taken place centuries earlier. Of course the major thrust of the Bhakti narrative was towards the popularization of the once canonical.

One of the major factors that contributed to its profound success was the intensity of emotion and extremely personalized nature of its spiritual content. The Bhakti Movement and more specifically the Bhakti poetry while deeply religious and devotional, had a very physical and earthy aspect as well. Though celebratory and devotional, the poems reveal a very physical and sensual relationship between the bhakta and his/her Lord. Cultural historians like Friedhelm Hardy have drawn attention to

the physical aspect of their poetry when she describes the poetry of the Alvars as “a highly sensuous and sensual world of human experience,” thereby foregrounding the markedly erotic quality of their poetry (Hardy, F. *The Religious Culture of India: Power, Love and Wisdom*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 523) Though both male and female mystics brought in the physical and included the sensuous descriptions of the body it is in the poetry of the women mystics that the sensuousness reaches the peak of its emotional intensity.

Andal was the only woman among the Alvars, 12 in number, were devotees of Vishnu, who lived in the Tamil country of South India between the 6th and 10th centuries. The movement produced in its wake a large collection of songs in Tamil which earned for Hinduism a widespread following that stayed powerful for a long time. Andal’s songs the *Tiruppavai*, running to 30 verses and the lesser known *Naciyar Tirumoli*, a set of fourteen rhymes in 143 verses form part of the larger Alvar collection, called the *Nalayira Divyaprabhandam* (Four Thousand Divine Treatises).

Andal’s *Tiruppavai* is sung even today especially by young unmarried girls during the Tamil month of Margazhi (December/January) with the belief that it will bring them an early happy marriage. The Pavai vow undertaken by the maidens throughout the month required that they bathed at dawn in the chilly waters of a river or pond. While Manikkavacakar’s *Tiruvavai* (another religio-mystical poem on the same theme) describes the girls frolicking in the water Andal’s poem limits itself to the waking up of the Lord in preparation of the ritual. Andal who is also the protagonist of the songs and her *sakis* go to Krishna’s home and call upon his parents Nadagopa and Yasoda, his brother Baladeva as well as his cowherd wife Nappinnai to awaken him. The maidens then plead with Krishna “to bathe us now in the waters”. The term *neratal* or bathing can be interpreted at several levels. The purifying ritual of the bathing could be equated to the spiritual cleansing experienced by a bhakta of diving deep into her Lord. Here the meaning of the term Alvar translated as ‘one who dives deep (into the divine)’ brings into the poems a deeper signification. And the absence of the actual bath in the poems gives greater vehemence to this interpretation. Both Vidya Dehejia, translator and art historian, as well as Dennis Hudson interpret the terms *neratal* (bathing in the water) and *cunaiatal* (bathing in hilltank) as euphemisms for sexual union. According to Hudson, the goal of the maidens is

Intimate service to Krishna, which may mean sexual union with him

euphemistically referred to as a bath: 'bathing in Krishna', one may say is the goal—a relationship of service so total that there are no limitations whatsoever. (Hudson, Dennis. "Bathing in Krishna: A study of Vaishnava Hindu Theology". *Harvard Theological Review*, 73, 1980, pp. 5555.)

The sensuousness and the overtly sexual descriptions in the poem reinforce such interpretations. The descriptions of Nappinai in Stanzas 18 and 20 are directly sensual:

And maiden Nappinai with breasts
Tender and cup-like, red mouth, small waist,
Goddess of Beauty and fortune (St 20)

Your fingers so dexterous with the ball,
Red lotus hands with jingling bangles—(St 18)

The sensual expressions, through contrary to popular perceptions of religious discourse, nevertheless gave expression to a greater intensity of feeling. *Naaciyar Tirumoli*, the song of bridal mysticism is replete with the corporeal images of her love for her Lord for she sings

Know, Manmatha, I will not live
If my broad breasts, set apart
For that great God with discus and conch
Are bandied as meant for man
. . . St 4 P. 29

She sees her female body, her femaleness, as a reason for celebration, her beauty as a means to her goal and marriage or sexual union as one of the methods of reaching it. Such utterances in our own time would be termed womanist or feminist, yet perhaps fail to adhere to the depths of emotional fervour attained by the songs of Andal.

The context of Tiruppavai has Andal and her sakis pleading with Nappinai Krishna's wife—to wake up the Lord, and part with Him for a short while in order to allow them to fulfil their Pavai vow. The 30 verses of Tiruppavai are full of admiring physical descriptions of the Lord, the epitome of manhood, his handsome physical self, his heritage, his exploits as cowherd, protector of the helpless, vanquisher of evil as king and as mischievous lover. The repetitive use of the refrain *Ellorambave*, contributes much to the continuity as well as the musical quality of the poem, reminding us everytime of the pavai vow in which context it was written. Yet the ritual is treated in sensual terms rather than the purely metaphysical

and through this air of aesthesis, spirituality is achieved.

The subdued physicality and the sexual suggestions seen in these poems become more overt and insistent as she moves towards the next set of poems, the Nacciyar Tirumoli. The tone becomes more personal and intimate and the emotional fervour is deeply intense and passionate. The poet-mystic is direct and frank in her outcry of physical longing for her divine lover, as she calls upon him to “fulfill my womanhood”. The sakis and others recede into insignificance as the songs develop and become the expression of the individual’s solitary plea for union with her divine lover—a highly personalized expression of her devotion. Perhaps it is the violent emotions, the repeated references to the pain of separation and the use of explicit sexual imagery that has made this set of poems less popular in common religious usage in comparison to her other poem Tiruuppavai, which is ritually and devotionally sung in the temples even today. In fact only the sixth song of the Nacciyar Tirumoli starting with the phrase “Varanamayiram” is recited at Vaisnava weddings in South India for its devotional quality in bridal mysticism. This section contains a gloriously detailed description of the Nacciyar’s dream in which she finally weds her Divine Lord. The ceremony with all the rituals preceding the nuptials is described in elaborate detail, beginning with a procession of elephants moving through the ritual bath and purification, the ceremonial welcome, the chanting of vedic mantras and the traditional wedding rituals. None of the physical and conventional features of a traditional marriage are denied in this projected vision of the bhakta’s union with the divine in an ecstasy of religious mysticism.

Thus the mysticism of the medieval period had a revolutionary quality by means of which it could give voice and include within its fold several of the people marginalized by the conventional society of the period. Women of all castes and classes, those considered

socially insignificant and the thus far inferior castes came to be foregrounded in this system and gained social acceptance. Yet this is not to state that the social acceptance came without any opposition. Here one has to take into account legends and oral descriptions handed down through the generations as legitimate historical proof of their having existed.

Hagiographical accounts describe Andal’s adoption by Vishnuchitta or Perialwar, one of the prominent Alwar saints in the first half of the 9th century. *The Srivilliputtur Sthala Purana* describes the birth of the goddess Bhudevi on earth as fulfilment of her wish to experience the bliss of longing for the divine in an earthly body. The divine child was found by

Vishnucitta, a priest at the temple amidst the sacred tulasi bushes around his home. Naming the child Kotai, Vishnucitta raised her as his own daughter, tutoring her in the tradition of devotion and mysticism. From a very early age, Kotai or Andal saw herself as the bride of the God she worshipped and completely rejected the notion of an earthly lover. She adorned herself with flowers meant for the deity and spent hours pining for and awaiting her divine consort. Here she came in for much earthly chastisement, even from her adoring father as wearing or even trying on the flowers kept aside for worship of the deity would amount to sacrilege. Consequently, Vishnu is said to have appeared to Perialwar in a dream and announced that the garland worn by Andal was especially dear to him. Henceforth the first puja at the temple at Sriovilliputtur, performed at dawn omv;ves the transfermce of the garland worn by Andal the previous day our the reigning deity Vishnu. This extraordinary ritual, which continues even today goes contrary to all traditional sastric conventions. What would have been cosnidered polluting under traditional parameters, is under this system of Bhakti treated as acceptable and even lauded and the protagonist of the legend was given a new name *cuti-kotuha-nacciyar*. Yet before she gains acceptability in the conventional sense, she has to undergo much social ostracism.

Similar social ostracism is recorded by hagiographical accounts on the Virashaiva saint Mahadeviakkia as well, the severity of the disapproval recorded through the oral discourse of her poetry.

Virasaivism or the Lingayat Movement was a twelfth century Bhakti revivalist movement in the land of the Kannadigas—now Karnataka. Inverting the traditional paradigms of power the Virasaivites reached amazing mystical heights and were able to restructure the society of their time. Their advent marked a turning pointing the social spheres. Their advent marked a turning point in the social spheres. Their presence brought down caste barriers, as well as gender and class distinctions. The Lingayat saints which included Prabhudeva, Akka Mahadevi, Basavanna, Allamma Prabhu, and Cenna Kesava, along with their followers and disciples on the path of the spiritual quest constituted themselves into an assembly called the Anubhava Mantapa, or the hall of Mystical Experience where they held their dialogues or discussions of a religious or mystical nature. Their discussions primarily of an oral nature have been collected and recorded by their followers in two great works—the *Prabhulinglile* and the *Sunyasainpadane*, and their individual poems have been handed down to us as the *vacanas*, the poets themselves being called the *vacanakaras*. (The very term *vacanakara* is a derivative of *vacana*, prioritizing the *vacanas*) The

idea of gender discrimination and inequality was challenged by their spokespersons. Both the male and female mystics rejected the conventional approaches to gender. In a *vacana*, Goggave, a woman *vacanakara* says:

They call one a woman if one has
breasts and a braid;
they call one a man if one possesses moustache and a loincloth.
Is knowledge of these twain *rvlale* or Female?
0 Nasthanatha.
(Goggave 6, in Hiremath 1968, 185)

Similar sentiments are expressed by the male *vacanakaras* as well. For instance Jadara Dasimayya disregards both gender and class as part of his spiritual quest. In a *vacana* he critiques contemporary society thus:

Did the breath of the mistress
have breasts and long hair?
Or did the master's breath
wear the sacred thread?
Did the outcaste, last in line,
hold with his outgrowing breath the stick of his tribe?
(Ramanujan, 1973)

To him breath signifies the living soul of the *bhakta* which cannot be classified in terms of class, caste or gender. In the Virasaiva scheme, they sought to do away with the notion of pollution, one of the main means of marginalisation. By doing so, they could also do away with a great deal of the social ostracism that accompanied the concept. Thereby taboo on the woman and members of the lower castes while performing or participating in any ritual or worship became inoperative.

Vijaya Ramaswamy, in her recent study on women, society and spirituality in South India (*Walking Naked*, IAS, 1997) has identified a list of 34 women saints among the Lingayats. She notes the "visible tension between the rejection of patriarchy at the physical worldly level by these women and their use of the patriarchal mode at the metaphysical level to express this very rejection of convention. For instance, Akka Mahadevi, perhaps the most well known woman among the *vacanakaras*, makes use of conventional notions of family in this *vacana* when she states

I have Maya for mother-in-law
 the world for father-in-law three brothers-in-law like tigers, and the
 husband's thoughts are full of laughing women no god, this man, and I
 cannot cross my sister-in-law.

(Ramanujan, 1973, v 328)

Yet the depths of devotional fervour and the revolutionary content of their poetry as well as their spiritual aspirations cannot be contained with the merely conventional.

I would like to take up the poetry of Mahadevi akka as a case in point. Mahadevi was undoubtedly the most powerful and appealing of the Virasaiva women mystics. In her *vacanas*, she has expressed her devotional fervour in terms of *sati-pati-bhava*, or the feeling of the lord as husband and the bhakta as consort. Her *vacanas* point to the yearning for spiritual fulfillment through the attainment of *samarasya* or harmony between between the *linga* and the *anga*. As in much of Bhakti poetry, her verse took on the form of the *nayika-nayaka* discourse, where she placed herself as the *nayika* waiting impatiently for her errant or wayward Divine Lover. The *nayika-nayaka* mode was one of the major poetic devices employed by the Bhakti poets regardless of gender, but in the case of the women saints, the relationship, described is more intense, the discourse gynocentric and the physical overtones more real. In her poetry, Mahadeviakka makes use of very strong sexual imagery in her seeking for the ultimate union with the Divine. Here her imagery is startlingly bold and intense and there is no attempt to gloss over or cover up the sexual, but is blatantly direct in her descriptions of the body.

In our embrace
 the bones should rattle
 in a welding, the welding mark even should disappear
 The knife should enter totally when the arrow enters, even the
 feathers should not be seen.

(Chennaiah, 1974, 39)

Hagiographical accounts extol the extraordinary physical beauty of Mahadevi, popularly addressed as Akka meaning elder sister. They record that the king was so besotted by her beauty that he was intent on marrying her. But Mahadevi was so devoted to the idea of the union with her Divine lover that she could not even tolerate the suggestion of such

temporal marital relations. Ironically enough, throughout her life, she was tortured by human beings who took interest in the beauty of her physical body. As a protest against being treated merely as an embodiment of sex, it is said that she discarded her garments and walked out of the palace naked. Later as a concession to the people around her, she chose to wear her hair as a cover over herself. Evidences of this story are apparent from the texts of her *vacanas*. But she refused to accept wide-spread notions of gender and the societally acceptable notion of the woman as the other, the temptress. Evidences of these ideas are manifest in her *vacanas*. For instance in one *vacana*, she states

'To a male ascetic, Maya takes the shape of a female ascetic: to a man she is a nun, a man to a woman, a woman to a man 0 chenna mallikarjuna, I am not One to fear this Maya of thine. (Menezes and Angadi, 1973.v 143)

Such fierce rebellion would naturally have its earthly consequences. She was called up by her guru to explain her deliberately rebellious act of discarding her garments and walking naked. At the Anubhava Mantapa where all the great ones gathered to listen to her defence, she justified her stance in public and also gained great respect in the tradition of *jangamma*, the ever moving. She was able to completely invert traditional ideas of gender in spirituality, when justifying her need for abandoning clothing. She retorts in an almost light-hearted vein, when she says

To the shameless girl,
Wearing Mallikarjuna's light, you fool, Where is the need for cover
and jewel?

(Ramanuja, 1973, v 129)

Yet the other members of the august gathering were able to discern the serious concerns of Mahadeviakka and quick to voice their encomiums. Prabhudeva records his perception of her spiritual journey in a *vacana* thus:

Shedding her corporal traits,
She has become united with the linga
She has become
Herself, the Supreme Light.
I say hail to the majesty
Of Mahadeviyakka, who has,
Shedding the sense of self and other
Become one with the Linga itself,

In Guhesvara Linga.
(Prabhudeva, *Sunvasampadane*, IV, XVI, 58)

Mahadeviakka was thereby able to completely subvert conventional notions of gender in her teachings as well as by precept. Her approach was truly revolutionary and even sensational, but could achieve the desired results. Despite opposition from her own people and widespread social disapproval, she could, by her discourse through her *vacanas* as well as her actions, bring to the popular her own notions of gender which was singularly deviant from the conventions of her own time. The tensions that were created by such subversions are evidenced in the poetic language of her *vacanas*. In the explicitly sexual terms in which she describes her relation with her spiritual lover, she is unique and has been able to achieve a reordering of prevailing definitions of gender. Through both her words and her actions, she not only succeeded in voicing herself and giving due emphasis to her ideas but even rewrote gendered spirituality and created a new concept of gender for public notice. It is herein that we become aware of the revolutionary nature of her life and work.

Feminists of all variant attitudes, have with one voice foregrounded the need for the private to be brought to public knowledge with regard to women's issues. In their very act of speaking out in a culture that silenced and marginalized the woman's voice, the woman mystics were revolutionary in their outlook. Through their discourse, where they interpreted and codified their personal experiences, in spiritual terms, they were able to find recourse to a unique mode of expression. *Bhakti*, with its adoption of a personalized tone and stylization of emotion in terms of the *nayika-nayaka* dialogues, gave these mystics an ideal situation to exploit their need for discourse. By its very nature of relating to the Divine, on an experiential plane, this form of devotion broke new grounds irrespective of class/creed and achieved much widespread acclaim. The position of the *bhakta* on a passive and submissive level in contradiction to the Spiritual, which was placed in a position of power, thereby replicating the woman's position in the socio cultural strata, made this mode ideally suitable for women to express themselves. And by exploiting the situation to its very limits and making public their spiritual their private emotions and desires, these women did take up the "feminist" - deals. But the language of their- poetry and their social behaviour were often contradictory to each other thereby creating a spiritual dialectic. The dynamic tensions between their language and action, was, to a great extent, responsible for the native force of their poetic discourse. In the poetics of *bhakti* the woman's domestic role was in a sense accentuated and publicized in the socio-

religious context creating a whole new mode of expression from the woman's point of view. By making use of oral discourse rather than the written, they subverted even the need for literacy in either the speaker or the listener. And within the given parameters, she was freed from mundane domesticities and even venerated on account of her public position.

But the true revolutionary content of their discourse has not yet been fully underscored. It is only when the women mystics are seen in the context of their socio-cultural ethos that the picture becomes clear. It is true that the V'irasaiva ethos allowed much scope for gender sensitivity and freedom from the mundane. Poetic devices like the *nayika-nayaka* mode employed by all, irrespective of sex, nevertheless created a special niche for the woman mystic. Though the men assume the passive female role, the *lila* is nevertheless seen and expressed from the phallocentric perspective, unlike the women whose voices ring more authentic in their representation of the yearning for their Lord.

Both the women mystics examined here, were venerated even during their time. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why their utterances are heard even today and preserved for posterity as a record of their having existed and having spoken out. Yet their discourses reveal the pain and intensity of disgrace they encountered. Feelings of shame and distaste over unwarranted male overtures are recorded by both the speakers analysed in this paper. Andal's conservative brahminical social attitude would perhaps have called for greater determination to break away from accepted conventions of her time and a much more acute sense of rebellion in the protagonist as recorded in the internal evidence of her poems. And the use of the oral medium perhaps accounts for the popularization and the dissemination of their work. But is it popular fear of their influence on the ordinary woman that has resulted in the idolization of these mystics? Both Andal and Mahadeviakka are today worshipped at temples and represented as avatars of the goddess. The recent- film *Scribbles on Akka*, for instance, examines the transformation of this rebellious mystic into an icon of popular worship. Is the representing of the rebellious as divine a clever device of channelising feminine rebellion. By representing the unacceptable as divine, are hey in a sense mainstreaming the legend and avoiding the revolutionary influence of their discourse which was both popular and eclectic? Is the idolization another phallocentric device of marginalizing'?

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