



GOD AS LOVER: A STUDY OF SELECTED VACHANAS OF AKKAMAHADEVI

Dr. Basavaraj S. Tallur

Associate Professor of English, Government First Grade College, Dharwad

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Love is a trait that is common to both the genders. It may happen anytime, anywhere and with anyone. Love is merely a puppet in the hands of time, place, and situation. Perhaps it is the only emotion which does not take any other thing into consideration. The commonest form of love is the one which one develops for the opposite sex. For a man or woman his/her lover is anything and everything.

Though gender has nothing to do with love, it is commonly agreed that the woman is more committed in love than the man. It is generally believed that women are emotionally stronger than men. There have been women who have sacrificed their lives for their lovers. For a woman her lover becomes a God. She literally worships her lover. When it comes to Indian women it matters all the more. Traditional women kept their lover on the pedestal and worshipped him. Their love was true to the core. There was no room for any other man in their life. Their mind was full of the one whom they loved. To a great extent, this is true with many modern women also.

However, in the medieval times some women developed a very strange kind of love in which the whole idea of love was subverted in a way. These women, like Mirabai, treated all men as their brothers. They never got infatuated by men. On the other hand they took God to be their lover. While other women treated their lover to be God, these women treated God as their lover. One such woman lived in the 12th century in South India namely Akkamahadevi.

Akkamahadevi is basically the child of a social movement called the "Veerashaiva Movement", led by Basaveshwara. Aiming at social reformation, the Sharanas intention was to eradicate the age-old caste system from the Indian society. They dreamt of a society in which women were treated on par with men. The concept of emancipation transcended sex in the Sharana Movement. They were opposed to untouchability and they stood for the upliftment of the downtrodden. They opposed pomp and show in the name of religion and taught the purity of thought and all endeavours. They saw God in the ever fresh knowledge and spirituality but not in the static place of worship. Being a Sharane Akka also had the same dreams.

Akka's original name was Mahadevi. She was born in the 12th century in a village called Udutadi in the present Shivamogga district of Karnataka. Her parents, Nirmala Shetty

and Sumati were ardent devotees of Shiva. Child Mahadevi never accepted anything blindly and she used to ask several questions to elders. At the age of ten, while getting Linga Diksha, she asked her Guru, Gurulinga Deva as to what was it all about. Then the Guru told her that she was being married to God. Taking it seriously, later Mahadevi refused to marry anyone as she had already been married to God.

However, a king named Koushika forcibly married Mahadevi. But soon she left the palace accusing the king of lustfulness. It is told that she abandoned all her clothes and walked naked in search of her true husband Chennamallikarjuna with an inward spiritual approach. On the way she went to Kalyana where she met Basavanna and others. There she spent time in the extraordinary divine company of the Sharanas. But finally she chose her way and left Kalyana. To quote J.P. Schoten,

"Akkamahadevi was too much of a solitary seeker to find satisfaction in such a large and turbulent community. She went on foot to the holy mountain of Srishaila, an old Shaiva centre of pilgrimage with a famous monastery. There, she expected to find her divine lover and to realize the consubstantial union with him. The heavenly plantain-grove of Srishaila is said to have been the end-point of her quest. According to the legends, she died there in her early twenties in complete surrender to her Lord." (JPS, 169)

In this paper, a humble attempt is made to trace the quest of Akka for spiritual attainment by trying to be free of worldly entanglements.

As a true lover, Akka is worried whether her lover returns her love or not. She, in fact discusses in one of her Vachanas that she is going to sing of Him, see Him, embrace Him and worship Him even if He does not care her. The joy which she gets by worshipping Him is more than anything for her.

A lover always does anything and everything for his or her beloved. In the same line, Akka also does everything for her Lord. Losing contact with this world, she is ready to do anything to impress God. Day and night she thinks about Him and all that she does in her life is for Him.

"I dress myself for Linga's sake.

I deck myself for Linga's sake.



I work for Linga's sake.
 I see for Linga's sake.
 Because my inner self and outer self are for Linga."
 (CRY 115)

As Mahadevi was very beautiful, many men came forward to marry her. But she refused to marry. Her answer to them was,

" You came, O brothers,
 Seeing the beauty of my bare breasts
 And blooming youth.
 But I am not a woman,
 Nor a whore, O brothers!
 Seeing me, who did you take
 Me for, O brothers?
 The face of no other person
 Than that of Cennamallikarjuna,
 Pleases me,
 Look, brothers!" (CRY 173)

As it is common with lovers, Akka also never feels hungry. The only aim of her life is to find her lover. She says,

" I spend four quarters of the day
 In anxiety for you.
 I spend four watches of the night
 In dissolute state, pining for Linga.
 I lie day and night forgetful of myself,
 Longing for you.
 With your love piercing me,
 I lost hunger, thirst and sleep,
 O Cennamallikarjuna!" (CRY 208)

Having God for her husband Akka feels that she is the most fortunate of all. Her sole aim of life is to unite with God. Nothing else matters her. She is the one who is out-of-this world, unconnected to the world. The men and women of this world are all brothers and sisters to her. She cannot expect anyone of this world to be her lover or husband other than God. When Mahadevi is forced to marry the king, she says that she cannot marry any man of this earth. She refuses to touch or even go near any man as they have thorns in their chests. She cannot embrace them. It is only her Lord who is free from any kind of thorns. She wants to embrace Him and wants Him to have her merged in Him.

Akka's love is not mere physical attraction. Her mind is always filled with the thoughts of God. He has possessed her whole being. She feels happy because God has conquered her mind. When King Koushika makes lustful advances, Akka gets angry and tells him that she never cares for physical gratification. She asks him to move away from her as she is worried whether her Lord loves her or not. Her views are expressed in a beautiful Vachana :

" A she-buffalo's worry is for one thing,
 A cobbler's worry is for another.
 A pious man's worry is for one thing,
 An impious man's worry is for another.
 I worry for myself,
 He worries for lust.
 I don't want you, go away!

Let go my hood, fool!
 My worry is –
 Whether Lord Cennamallikarjuna
 Loves me or not." (CRY 120)

However, with a lot of spiritual attainment Akka later becomes confident that Chennamallikarjuna is one with her. In one of her Vachanas, Akka subtly attacks the meaninglessness and hypocrisies of the day in the outer world. Hardheartedness, dry devotion, bereft of compassion, pomp and show neither enables people to realise the Almighty, nor does God accept the offerings of such people in the form of worship. Akka in a way is attacking the institutionalised religion which had become stale without real knowledge and spirituality. Her greatness lies in her humility when she confesses before God Chennamallikarjuna in the same Vachana as to what made Him come near her; when she didn't know the nature of her own devotion.

Akka clearly mentions in her Vachanas that her mind never thinks about any man. As the cuckoo sings when the mango tree blooms and as the bee longs to visit a flower when it has fragrance, her mind also yearns to meet her Lord. The reason she gives for not thinking about other men is that she has already married God. And in Indian tradition, a married woman cannot even think about other men because this is the purity of mind. This is what she tells about her marriage,

" Guru became the kinsman,
 Linga the bridegroom
 And I am the bride.
 As all the world knows,
 My father and mother
 Were the innumerable Saranas.
 They gave me in marriage
 To a suitable groom.
 Therefore, Cennamallikarjuna is my husband.
 Other worldly men
 Are nothing to me, O Lord!" (CRY 146)

Again, Akka is so happy with her decision of marrying God because He is stronger than Manmatha, Yama, Brahma, Vishnu and Tripura Fort. She says in a Vachana,

"
 Therefore, Cennamallikarjuna
 Who is beyond birth and death is my husband.
 How can I describe his strength?" (CRY 134)

Akka's mind is filled with the thoughts of her lover. She not only thinks of Him when she is awake but also when she is asleep. Like a true lover, she thinks of Him even in her dreams. There are many instances in her Vachanas where she tells that God came in her dreams. Akka is happy because she knows that her God also loves her. That is why Akka is not worried about the problems she had to face in the forest. In fact, she is happy with whatever she gets there:

" When hungry, alms are available in town.
 When thirsty, ponds, streams and wells are there.
 When the body catches cold,
 There are cast off clothes to cover it with
 And for bed to sleep in, deserted temples.



For my soul's companion
You are there, O Cennamallikarjuna!" (CRY 209)

I'll never return, O mother!" (CRY 216)

Generally, people want to be respected by others. They want to be recognised and honoured. But Akka is least bothered about worldly honour. Being loved by God itself is a great honour for her. She puts the same idea in the following Vachana,

Thus, one can see Akka as a prominent figure of the Veerashaiva Movement of the 12th century. Her didactic poems are a great contribution to the Bhakti literature. Though simple, her Vachanas are of the highest order. Rejecting the family life she actively participated in the debates at Anubhava Mantapa. That is why, though being the youngest member of Anubhava Mantapa, she was called Akka, meaning elder sister. Dr. C. R. Yarovintelimath rightly comments, "Akkamahadevi, 'the miracle of miracles', 'the Divine Cuckoo', was the first among women Vachana writers both in mystic height and poetic excellence." (CRY 41)

"Do those who are united by love look for caste?
Do those who are mad with love know shame?
Do those who are loved by Cennamallikarjuna,
Care for worldly honour?" (CRY 126)

Having loved the God Himself, Akka had to face the comments of the cruel world. In spite of people talking harsh words about her and children throwing stones at her, she never heeded to their words and continued to walk in her own path. Her advice in this regard is worth following,

The love that we see in Akka's Vachanas is of very unusual kind which we rarely see in this world. Her affection or devotion towards God may seem to be extreme. Truly she is an extremist in love who has the guts to reject even the king. She is totally unaffected by the physical charm, strength, beauty or the position of the men of this world. What makes her unique even in Bhakti literature is the firmness of her mind. Time and again women have crush on God, but ordinary women succumb to worldly attractions later. They can't stick on to their earlier philosophy when they come across handsome men. Some of them are made to accept the norms of the society in which one lives. Such women are given a very bad treatment by the society and are even laughed at.

"Having built your house on a mountain top,
Why fear wild beasts, Sir?
Having built your house on a sea shore,
Why fear froth and foam, Sir?
Having built your house in the bazaar,
Why blush at words of abuse?
Being born in this world,
Should scorn come to you,
We should be cool and collected,
Allowing no thought of anger
Darken our mind,
Listen, O Cennamallikarjuna Lord!" (CRY 178)

Akka is least bothered about her body. According to her the body has nothing to do with love. Bhakti is more important for her than physical appearance. This is clear when she says,

Some modern critics consider Akka as the first feminist of the world. Perhaps it cannot be viewed that way in the modern sense because presently women are fighting for their emancipation through gender equality, equal opportunities, common rights, etc., which are all concerned with the worldly life. Akka, in spite of being married to a king who had everything, did not find anything interesting in the worldly life and she wanted to get rid of it for her spiritual attainment to have God Cennamallikarjuna as her consort. Rejecting worldly things for spiritual quest has a philosophical dimension as it can be seen in her Vachanas and she can be compared only with a few a great women like Mirabai. Nevertheless, Akka's life is a source of motivation and inspiration for women who want to express themselves and choose the life of their choice.

"What if my body is burnt pitch black, O Sir?
What if my body radiates light, O Sir?
When once the heart is purified,
And the body is loved by you,
What matters how the body is,
O Cennamallikarjuna?" (CRY 135)

Akka searches her lover even when she is walking through the dense forests. She desperately asks the parrots, cuckoos, bees, swans and peacocks on her way whether they had seen Him. However, later she finds that He is very much with her :

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".....
How can I live without seeing
My Lord Cennamallikarjuna,
Who dwells in me
Being a part of my heart and soul?" (CRY 154)

While leaving Kalyana, Akka writes a Vachana in which she tells that she will go and stay at her husband's place. She wants to test her love for her God. She says,

"I'll go and stay at my husband's place.
Once gone I won't return.
.....
If Srisaila Cennamallikarjuna loves me,