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Absolute as Pure Space: Passion, Failure and Psychodrama in Akka Mahadevi

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Abstract:

This is an attempt to read the Kannada Vacana poet Akka Mahadevi using the paradigms of passion and failure. The paper argues that Akka Mahadevi, through her poems and her practice of public practice of zero attire, performed passion in a novel way and demonstrated the failure of the social systems of her time. Akka's poems trace the body in order to reach the divine. Using body as a medium for spiritual exaltation is a rare phenomenon. The divine for her is not a missing presence, but a void that should be sutured in the present rather than in the future or in the afterlife. Akka's relationship with the body includes a double discourse that at the same time extends and breaks the age-old ascetic-relation with the figure. This paper also argues that for Akka, poetry was a public site to write a manifesto as she recorded herself and the society around her in it.

Keywords: Akka Mahadevi, Poetry, Passion, Failure, Body, Mysticism.

*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)

Akka Mahadevi comes across as a female Buddha. She voluntarily left the palace and a royal spouse and chose freedom over bondage, preaching freedom over everythingⁱ. But strikingly, unlike almost all men in her category, she did not leave passion. Her world kept on burning with passion for the one who was not in the world. Her poems are high on warmth and sexual imagery, a trait unusual for the

literature produced by the gurus. There is a certain amount of restlessness in Akka's poems. Her language does not follow the Vedic methodology or the Budha-like resignation. It is hard to imitate her, especially her public appearance. It is easy to understand why Akka Mahadevi does not have a huge fan-following like all other known Shiva gurus: It is hard to follow Akka. Her act is one extreme display of passion and exhibition of failure at the same time. Not the failure of a single human being but the failure of a collective entityⁱⁱ.

Her poems do not represent only the 'here' or the 'hereafter'ⁱⁱⁱ or the liminal space between these two worlds. She exists in all three as herself. Her poems represent intense love and intense hate: love for everything that is natural or God-made; hatred for the human in general and male-controlled games in particular. Her poems do not believe in an eschatological remedy. She prefers the immediate present^{iv} against the proposed future. The mystical discourse she managed to create, it can be argued, is a cipher furtively posited as a mix of oral and performed language. She exposed the male-systems, created a metaphysical discourse around failure and absence, and preached earthliness perceived through an otherworldly lens.

Because she touches the present profoundly, she touches the body. Spiritual path of Akka is not one of negating the body, but also not one of affirming it always. The divine for her is not really a missing presence. It is a void that should be sutured in the present rather than in the future or in the afterlife. She did denounce the earthly character of the being, but indulged in the much-hated temptations of the flesh through a mystical discourse. Akka's relationship with the body includes a double discourse that at the same time extends and breaks the age-old ascetic-relation with it. In those Vacanas where she deals with the transcendental nature of human being, she goes with the traditional ascetic viewpoint of ephemerality of the body and despises^v it; but in those Vacanas where she talks about passion, she goes in favour of the earthly temptations. For her anything is possible when in passion^{vi}. This tendency to connect passion with body, against the traditional ascetic tendency to connect it with soul is what sets Akka apart and makes her a true rebel even inside a protest-movement like Virasaivism.

It can be argued that viewing spirituality as an explanation of failure is a rational viewpoint. In fact, it is an argument that works against the stronghold of

rationality in human frameworks. It is not an argument stating that spirituality is a failure, rather, it says that rationality as a totalitarian dream is an already failed project and poetry is a mirror reflecting the ways in which it failed. If we take Akka for example, she clearly sees the rational project of family and the idea of female domestication and subjugation as colossal failures. It is not only the conjugal bond she refuses, but even the sacred and the seemingly innocuous relationship between mother and daughter^{vii}.

It should also be taken into consideration that she did not choose to go without dress voluntarily. She was forced by circumstances. Because her royal husband posited so much importance on clothes, she chose to do away with it as a protest. Erotic mysticism was Akka's method of protest. What made her go undressed is not the rational view point but the mystical view point. She provides the following *Vacana* as the explanation of her act: When all the world is the eye of the lord / on looking everywhere, what can you / cover and conceal? (Ramanujan, 1973, p. 131). She conceived the whole human race as performers and the omnipresent God's view as the controlling force as the ever-present spectator^{viii}. This positioning of God as the omnipresent spectator (it can be argued that this spectator is not exactly God in the traditional sense but the energy within^{ix}) is what helps Akka to conceive an existence without costume. If you are narrating some story to a human spectator then even the minutest detail of costume is important. The detail almost always lies in the costume. But if you perceive all human beings as one illusion controlled and viewed by the otherworldly spectator then the question arises: from whom are you covering yourself?

It is also important to note that Virasaivism was fundamentally a protest movement. As a movement stressing on equality, it aimed to break out of the decay brought into the society by Brahminism^x. However, rather than trying to create a new world order, the attempt in Virasaivism was to get into an older religious set up^{xi}.

Akka considers the failure as the failure of all men. She prefers to hold on to a lover who is not available in this world and denounces all men who live on earth. She says that it is the throne-like character of men^{xii} that forces her to follow the one who is absent. Akka's relationship with the absent one – Siva – is not one of subjugation. She does not really find the missing presence as an absolute master. She finds it as

something that was inside her, as something that she herself was. She uses the deity, as it were, to attain validation for her conduct; as a reason for being herself^{xiii}. She found out that the human lover is more interested in status gambling and power games than in earthly passion or love as such. So, she gets out of his system; chooses the absence over the presence.

As I Please; As I Utter

Analyzing Akka's character strictly inside her context is a tough job as this context is vague and open to interpretation. Getting the historical facts exactly right about her, as someone living in twelfth century South India, is difficult. There are many arguments out there about Akka's time and action. Comparing these arguments or verifying them does not lie inside the immediate purview of this study. The attempt here is to understand Akka's character through her poems rather than understanding her historical frame. The question we are facing here is: if one is going to enact Akka's character then what traits one would extract from the mythico-history?

Playing a character, according to popular norms, is mostly about getting the costume and the gesture scheme right. According to the colour of the costume the philosophy and the ideal behind the character change. In Akka's case, this difficulty is not there. Realizing Akka is not about putting on costume, it is about taking off the embellishments. If you strip yourself you will get closer to Akka. But that does not give you her character. In order to get to Akka one has to get her mindset correctly. The psychodrama of events is crucial in the case of Akka because she was totally engaged in the transcendental reality of the inner space^{xiv}. By taking off the clothes, she invites our attention to her inner space. One has to learn how to keep the inner fire alive to play Akka.

Akka is a strange character even inside Virasaivism or inside the history of bridal mysticism. We do not get a lot of women mystics who wanted to 'crush Siva on her pitcher breasts'^{xv}. She prodded the earth as if she was alone and not accountable to mere mortals. The sense of freedom in Akka was heightened to the extent that it would appear as madness. Getting the widest possible sense of the word 'freedom' is important to understand her. What makes her furious is the lack of freedom? The Linga is her excuse for performing the absolute ideal of freedom.

It can be argued that, Akka was trying to enact the difficulties involved in being a 'single' woman. Her act was purely singular. She did not want her devotees to remove their dress. We are not even sure whether she kept devotees after getting out of the palace. She just asserted a single person's position and did it in a singular way. Her struggle was also the struggle of an artist, again from a single person's position. As an artist, with vagabond tendencies, she goes around the society and records it. Akka's myth unfolds as a journey; a journey that records herself and the things around her^{xvi}. What is recorded in Akka's poems contains, as it were, the mythical-history of twelfth century Karnataka, partially narrated through the lens of the rebel Saivite network. It is important to note that the recording is done here through a spatial viewpoint rather than a temporal one^{xvii}.

There is a school of thought that understands Akka as a pre-modern feminist^{xviii}. Even though this kind of an argument runs the risk of anachronism, one has to concede that that kind of a reading is not entirely out of place. Akka's act could legitimately be seen as an act against the male epistemological paradigms. One gets a lot of references from her poems to substantiate that kind of an argument^{xix}. She is feminist in a different sense of the word. It would be totally anachronistic to posit her in the western framework of feminism. The rebel energy in her certainly aims to go beyond the male world. Understanding the world as a male place itself, in the context of twelfth century India can indeed be seen as a feminist engagement. Akka's myth runs around the feminine energy. Her story has its roots in the Sakti tradition^{xx}. There is a never ending commitment to herself. She does not do anything to please any other living thing. What dictates her is the commitment to her own ideals. Her thought and action go hand in hand. Akka can be portrayed as an unflinching idealist in the mold of a female revolutionary, but as the one who chose the spiritual path to undertake that journey. The tendency in her to get into the open and to reestablish her touch^{xxi} with herself could be understood, even though we risk the dangers involved in over-reading, as a feminist impulse.

There is no paradox involved in Akka's act. She relies only on the inner mortar to carry out her acts. She does not play according to the situations. She does not care much about human situations. She plays it exactly the way it comes out of her. There are two famous incidents in Akka's story: the event of her wedding and her debate with the Virasaivite peers such as Basavanna and Allama at Kalyana, the main center

of twelfth century Lingayat movement. In the first incident, as the pressure mounted from all parts to marry the local king Kaushika she puts forward three demands: 1. I will spend time meditating on the Lord as I please. 2. I will spend time in the company of other devotees as I please. 3. I will spend time attending to the service of the guru as I please (Vinaya Chaitanya, 2005, p. 8). In the second incident – during the debate – Allama asked the ‘wild woman ascetic’ a searching and apparent question: If you feel that you have outgrown the need of dress why cover yourself with the tresses? As an answer Akka utters this Vacana: till the fruit is ripe inside / the skin will not fall off / I’d feeling it would hurt you / If I displayed the body’s seal of love / O brother, don’t tease me / needlessly / I’m given entire into the hands of my lord white as jasmine (Ramanujan, 1973, p. 112-113).

These two incidents portray two important characteristics of Akka: she does things the way she pleases and she can be honest even while she boasts. In the second incident, as a reason for keeping herself covered with her long hair, she could have said any abstract reason. But she chose to say two things that seem most obvious and honest: she is not yet ready to be fully nude and she fears men’s gaze. These two seemingly obvious traits are her biggest strength. It could be argued that what kept her in the oral tradition for centuries are these two capacities – the capacity to do things the way she wants and the capacity to utter truths about herself in all kinds of situations.

As a rebel, Akka carried out a task realised by not many people. Her act was new. The way she acted it out was novel. She acted according to her rhetoric and framed her rhetoric according to the act. Poetry for Akka was a public site to write her manifesto. Lyric poetry was her site of avowal. She took on the society through her poems and acted out whatever she claimed through her poetry. Akka’s poetry and her character are inseparable. She is completely there in her Vacanas. She says every detail about herself. As a poet she is true to her art; she is also true to her social status as a rebel. Her relationship with her deity includes, among many things, a writer’s relationship with her signature. Akka signs with great zeal. She signs with her whole being. There is absolutely no paradox in her being. She and her act/art coexist in a perfect rhythm. It is also important to note that her art did not get lost in the rhetoric of political engagement. She managed to make two inaugural openings: the first one connects passion, erotic mysticism and poetry; the second one is the practice of a sky-

clad (Digambara) female ascetic.

Endnotes:

i For a discussion on Akka's life and times, see: Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi, Vinaya Chaitanya, p 4-12, 2005, Altamira Press

ii What historian articulates is the success of an operation defined by the rules and models elaborated by a present intellectual discipline. What the spiritual recounts is the failure of that operation

(Michel De Certeau, History and Mysticism, Histories: French Constructions of the past, Ed. Jaques Revel and Lynn Hunt, The New press. p. 438)

iii One has the here, another hereafter / One has no here, another no hereafter / Another has neither here nor hereafter / Those who have taken refuge in / Chennamallikarjuna, Jasmin – tender have both here and the hereafter

(trans. Vinaya Chaitanya, p. 49)

iv What's to come tomorrow / Let it come today / What's to come today / Let it come right now / Lord white as Jasmine / Don't give us your nows and thens!

(Speaking Shiva, trans. AK Ramanujan, 1973, p. 128, Penguin Classics)

v Pot of refuse / Vessel of piss / Mat of bones / Stench of pus / Burn this body / Don't be destroyed / Holding on to the body / Know Channamallikarjuana, Jasmine tender

vi When in passion / Do what you like, O master, When in passion cut off the locks, O master / When in passion / bite off the fingers, O master / O master Chennamallikarjuna

(Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi, H S Shivaprakash, India International Centre Quarterly, 2004, p. 37)

vii Go, go, I'll have nothing /of your mother-and-daughter stuff / you go now.
(trans. AK Ramanujan, p. 102)

viii For his pleasure he created the universe / For his pleasure he wove into it this world / For his own pleasure, he made it go round in endless / suffering of cyclic becoming / When Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender, the supreme Siva / has had enough of this phenomenal dance / He will sever the bonds of illusion.

(tans. Vinaya Chaintanya, p. 59)

ix When I didn't know myself / Where were you? / Like the colour in the gold / you were in me / I saw in you / Lord white as jasmine / The paradox of your being / In me / Without showing a limb

(tans. Ramanujan, p119)

x When examining religious experiences of Hindu women in the first, or Vedic period, which lasts until the 6th century BC, one notices the distinct pattern of a number of women philosophers, such as Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, and others, living in an egalitarian society, in which women enjoyed freedom and has access to all religious activities. The next period lasts until the 6th century AD, during which women lost their earlier freedoms and some of the most obnoxious practices such as child marriages, child widows, and sati became common. One notices a well-entrenched pattern of the suppression of women and lower castes on one hand, and a highly oppressive society on the other. Indeed, in this second period Hindu society had sunk into mindless orthodoxy and mundane religiosity, where there was no freedom or scope for creative dialogue of meaningful experience. Women seers were conspicuous by their absence. The third period began on a different note from about the 6th century, and lasted until about 1600. To respond intellectually and spiritually to the state of decadence and oppression of the preceding era, there emerged a galaxy of seers and saints, both among men and women from high and low castes.

(Chandra Y Mudaliar, *Mystic Quarterly*, Vol 17, 1991, p. 137-146)

xi Virasaivism was not just a reactionary impulse; rather it was an appeal to an earlier stratum of spirituality. Thus it was a continuation of similar efforts made time and again since the Vedic subjugation of an older, more contemplative tradition associated with the Siva, himself known as akula, belonging to no family.

(Vinaya Chitanya, p 10)

xii Other men are thorn /under the smooth leaf / I cannot touch them / Go near them, nor trust them / Nor speak to them confidences

(trans. Ramanujan, p. 125)

xiii Like the monkey at the tip of a pole / Like the puppet at the end of a string / I played as you made me play / I spoke as you made me speak / I stayed as you made me stay: Till Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender, the machinist of the world/ said 'enough'.

(trans. Vinaya Chaitanya, p. 78)

xiv What if the body is dark and scorched? / What if the body is shiny and bright? / What does it matter/ O Channamallikarjuna, Jasmine-tender / how the body you have favoured is / if the inside is pure?

(trans. Vinaya Chaitanya, p. 46)

xv Riding the blue sapphire mountains / wearing moonstone for slippers / blowing long horns/ O Siva/ When shall I / crush you on my pitcher breasts

(trans. Ramanujan, p. 136)

xvi Akka Mahadevi's *Vacana's* are full of images of a journey through villages, towns and forests. Her keen sensitiveness to sights and sounds of nature make her one of the most

magnificent nature-poets in the language.

(Shivaprakash, p. 32)

xvii Where am I, Where is he?/ The absolute is pure space

(trans. Vinaya Chaitanya, p. 47)

xviii For a detailed discussion on female asceticism and the genealogy of female spirituality in South India through a feminist and subaltern lens, See: *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India*, Vijaya Ramaswamy, 1997, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies

xix The eternal walked into my house today/ liberation walked into my house today

(trans. Vinya Chaitanya, p. 69)

xx For women the metaphors of sexual union come naturally. They are also much more powerful in their expression than their male counterparts, sometimes startlingly intense and bold. The influence of the Shaktas and the tantricism is clearly perceivable in this characteristic of Virasaivism.

(Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Indian Literature*, May-June 1996, p. 150)

xxi Woman's autoeroticism is very different from man's. In order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language... And this self-caressing requires at least a minimum of activity. As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus within herself, she is already two – but not divisible into one(s) – that cares each other.

(Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, 1985, p.24, Cornell University Press, New York)

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