

Salvation through Encounter: In Search of Identity

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Some years back I was discussing with one of our most important writer not only of Kannada but of the country, who also happens to be a Jnanapeeta awardee. It was about women metaphysical poets. I was probably overenthusiastic in placing them or in locating the unique qualities of women saint poets. After listening to me, he told "you must read a book to cross check your thesis. It's a book on Meera's husband". I said, "Surely I would like to go through it, but let me know what is the thesis and antithesis of the book?". He said "I tries to give an account of the suffering that he undergoes after Meera's unification with lord Krishna. It must have been a very difficult phase for him, to face the consequences. It is a very important book...". I screamed with all my arrogance, irony and disappointment and at the end, it was also an enlightening aspect for me, since it was endorsing my own thesis on patriarchy and the working pattern of gender politics.

So, let me use this incident as an anecdote to make a skeletal structure/frame work to what, I am going to propose it as a thesis in this talk. It is true that Bhakti movement happens to be a culminating era which unveiled a certain self-hood for women. But here lies two important formulations which are interconnected and interwoven:

- (i) Women saint poets have gone far beyond the imagination and power structure of the male constructs in their search for identity; and this search not only adds metaphysical to its own aim but also has got a deeper socio-political nuance to it.
- (ii) Patriarchy had got its own firm working pattern within which the women saint poets' contribution was duly acknowledged as an inevitable part of this very pattern. In the very interpretative methodology construed in order to contain women saint poets, their living and philosophical outlook was successfully projected as something which was a part of the status quo of the male construct.

If one glances at the patterns of even the majority of the studies about Bhakti movement and women, it becomes obvious that the socio-political aspect of these women have been underplayed; and the abstract metaphysical premise has been highlighted.

(II) With this introduction, let me propose the hypothesis of the study: I would like to term it as '**Womanhood to Human hood**'. Or it could also be termed as '**Salvation through Encounter**'. I believe that the overall body of woman saint's contribution is a 'process' which can be proposed through this kind of hypothesis. Though I am familiar with that other kind of hypothesis regarding the same is possible. I being a student of literature and its relation to gender, propose that this is the most appropriate premise for articulation.

The two above said points are briefly the core aspects that shaped the overall mindset of the women Bhakti poets. In order to substantiate my hypothesis, I would like to discuss two of the many aspects that are appropriate to the study.

(i) One is their attempt to overcome the established characteristic features of womanhood.

(ii) Secondly, in their attempt to establish Bhakti as a value system against prevailing socio-political value system via patriarchy. Arguably, they wanted to get away from 'Kaya-Sutaka', 'Kaya-Sarvasva' (an imagination where the body alone yields as an apparatus for all possible experiences). By refusing the holistic possibility of the feminine body they were also refuting the identity of second sex. Kaya-sarvasva refutes any subjective intellectual and emotional possibility which is perceived as a mere physical entity.

(III) I would like to illustrate this aspect with a classic example from a constantly referred text in Kannadalanguage. This is from a text called '**ShunyaSampaadane**' (an extremely relevant metaphysical text in Kannada). It is a discourse between two protagonists **Allamaprabhu**, a pioneer of the twelfth century '**Vachana movement**', and **Akkamahadevi**, a primordial feminist and his contemporary. **AnubhavaMantapa** is a metaphysical congregation of such and other saints and followers, wherein this specific dialogue occurs.

When Allama questions Akka as to why she covers her body with her hairs, he tries to indicate a paradox inherent within: she replies that it is for the conscience of the male-gazes, it is to address the aspect of Manmatha-Laanchana. She calls the audience as "Annagalira" (that the male, the brothers' might be disturbed due to her physical appearance and presence).

Is it only the metaphysical aspect that is inherent within ShunyaSampadane ? Or is there any trace of a certain socio-political conditioning of the male perception evident within Akka's answer, as well as Allama's ironic question?

(IV) Conclusion:

I am familiar with a similar incident that happened in the life of Lalleshwari of Kashmir, who was naked and was similarly admonished by her father in law. The question of the 'gaze' and 'voyeurism' brings in a common point inherent between the northern and southern extremes of the country. There is a strange encounter, a resistance which is not strictly metaphysical but also has staunch socio-political dimensions to it.

The second point is that there is an effort to alter the aspect of "Bhakti" as a value system for socio-political values: Bhakti is used as a mode of resistance. It is so because of its effort to alter the existing value system. As a result a new potentiality brought into "Bhakti" was both a contribution and achievement of the Bhakti women poets.

Also "Bhakti", which is a form of protest to the existing and established patriarchal order, is also used as a 'value of consciousness entity' (SaakashiPrajne). It is true that their aim was to go beyond this world as metaphysical personalities, but at the same, I am totally convinced that they would have liked to go beyond this only after addressing the question of identity and authenticity meant for it. So Bhakti was both the way and the aim. While dealing the question of identity it was the way, while attaining the metaphysical salvation, it was the aim.

The third aspect is that we find women saint poets often moving towards nature (Prakriti). They equate, submerge, they alter both themselves as well as their soul-mates (God). Why is it that they tend towards this infinite aspect of nature? Nature in this context is a premise and horizon free of hierarchy and patriarchy. Hence they identify their existence and identity with this very endless nature. By doing this, they tend to expand the constraints of second sex. To

call women as nature and equate Bhakti poetess tending towards nature, correlate. They literally lived it to be as nature.

All major women poet saints stand testimony to this aspect. Be it Lalleshwari, be it Karikalamma, be it Andal or be it Akkamahadevi. Each one of them is an embodiment of a part of this sense of infinite definition of both the subjective and objective aspect of nature. We can even term it as the true self of womanhood, her personality, her premise, tending towards human hood. This is the premise wherein we the women of contemporary discursive World, who are looking for authentication of our identity, can comprehensively relate to the Bhakti poet's achievement and contribution. This is also the meeting point of the perspectives from both ends.

Though this might seem to be a cliché, it is inevitable that it is rich in its subtle nuances. Feminism is a discursive epistemological aspect, which has been gradually but spontaneously progressing towards becoming an assured global 'Theoretic construct'. At this juncture, we are involved in re-discovering Feminist tradition by having a dialogue with these women Bhakti poets, which need not be a mere academic discourse. It is not only an attempt to break the monolithic construct of Bhakti movement, but it is also an attempt to identify and trace out the counter movement inherent within itself and also to locate a legitimate philosophical position for the women poet in their attempt to identify themselves with the universal spirit. We find in them the ultimate aim of Feminism i.e. human dignity, which surpasses all the limitations of the historicity of hierarchical and civilizational definitions. Woman saint poets are power points, who uphold human dignity and human love. Arguably, this is the ultimate aim of the women Bhakti poets, despite giving space to various discussions and dialogues through their contributions.

I have been in dialogue with metaphysical poets from a considerable time. I feel it as a privilege to be witness and audience to the scholastic presentations of scholars hailing from multi-geopolitical positions.

I must congratulate Central Sahitya Academy for organizing this Seminar in the land of Lalleshwari, Lalla, who has become a part of my contemporary sensibility. Along with Akka and Andal, she has become an inevitable part and parcel of my sensibility. Though it has

become difficult to hold seminars in this disturbed heaven, it has also become a humanitarian compulsion to hold it now and the Academy has put in all the effort to realize it. In this 'melancholic paradise, is Lalla availing a solution through these verses, which still hold its strong effect on one and all?

"Shiva or Keshava, or the enlightened one, or the lotus born,
Whatever he calls himself
I just wish he had cured this poor woman of life ".

References

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