



**ECOFEMINISTIC SENSIBILITIES IN THE VACHANAS OF THE WOMAN SAINT
AKKAMAHADEVI**

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Abstract: The term Ecofeminism is an activist and academic movement that sees critical connections between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women. The activism grew during the 1980s and 1990s, among women from the anti-nuclear, environmental and lesbian-feminist movements. Ecofeminism is used to describe a feminist approach to understanding ecology. Ecofeminist thinkers draw on the concept of gender to theorize on the relationship between humans and the natural world.

This paper endeavours to present the ecofeministic sensibilities in the vachanas of the 12th century woman saint Akkamahadevi. She was a prominent vachana composer on par with the male saints namely Lord Basaveshwara and Lord Allamaprabhu. The paper is a re-reading of the Vachanas of Akkamahadevi from modern ecofeministic perspective as well.

Keywords: Ecofemism, Akkamahadevi, Vachanas, Re-reading.

The vachanas of Akkamahadevi lend themselves to various interpretations: feministic, mystic knowledge, rationality, devotion, renunciation, ecological concerns and the like. The five prominent religious practices to be practised in the strict sense in order to claim to be a Lingayath are Lingachara, Sadachara, Sivachara, Ganachara and Brityachara. Brityachara preaches practising non-violence. The Lingayath religion preaches vegetarianism too. Here one can see the advanced ideas of a religion much ahead of its time and not a couple of centuries back, but as early as 12th century. The woman saint Akka (she is called so, popularly) was a staunch practitioner of these as well. She was merciful to all the fellow beings and would strongly oppose the killing of animals. She criticises the fisherman in one of her vachanas as follows:

*a fisherman entering water
would search for fish,*

*and killing several creatures,
 would rejoice.
 Why shouldn't he mourn for them,
 As he would, if an infant of his house should die?
 For instance,
 As it is said,
 "One should not discriminate between oneself and others.
 He alone sees the truth, who sees
 The Light of Consciousness in everything",
 The sorrow of the fisherman would be
 The laughing stock of the world.
 Therefore,
 What shall I call a pariah,
 Who, being a devotee of Cennamallikarjuna,
 Indulges in violence to life?*

She means to say a devotee of Lord Chennamallikarjuna never indulge in harming the fellow creatures. Rather he/she should see the Light of Consciousness in every being however small or big. Since each being is a creation of the Almighty, showing mercy to animals is equated to His worship. At the same time, she appears to criticize the domination of man over nature. Society would treat women as inferior to men till the 12th century. The Bhakti Movement gave equal status to women thereby aspiring to achieve egalitarianism. Through this vachana Akka seems to be criticizing both patriarchy and non-vegetarianism. While fighting for the cause of the animals being hunted, she is fighting for the elevated status of the fellow women as well.

Similar attempt is being made by the modern ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva in the 20th century as well. Eco-feminism, is a feminist philosophy that celebrates the feminine difference derided by patriarchy. This philosophy points to the predominance of what it calls a masculinist ideology that structures the world, through which both nature and women are to be controlled and dominated, and their productive capacities harnessed for certain kinds of economic goals. Vandana Shiva, for instance, shows that both women and nature are thought to be passive by masculinist ideology, productive only if their energies are harnessed in a certain way. A forest is thought of as unproductive unless it is planted with, for example, commercial woods. Unless it is planted with teak and other trees that can be cut and sold, unless something commercial happens, a forest is not thought of as productive. The very term 'natural resource' suggests that nature is merely a resource for capitalism to yield profit, and so, unless the forest does that, it is thought of as non-productive. But Vandana Shiva points out that its productivity is actually continuous- a forest is preserving

groundwater just by standing there. It's replacing oxygen in the atmosphere, it is providing habitat for animal species, it is providing food and fuel for local inhabitants. So, what eco-feminism tries to do, is reclaim from masculinist ideology a radicalized notion of the creative feminine (Shiva 1988).

Literature abounds in myriad number of images of nature sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit and at other times symbolic. Nature is used as a metaphor as well. The saint Akkamahadevi has used nature as strong metaphor in some of her vachanas:

*After plucking the fruits of a tree,
What matters who chops off its branches
After a woman has been divorced from her husband,
What matters who sleeps with her?
After a land has been abandoned,
What matters who tills it?
Once Chennamallikarjuna has recognised you,
What matters if a dog should eat your body?
Or water drown?*

In this vachana she equates the status of woman to that of nature, where both are portrayed as helpless victims of patriarchy and mankind respectively. She feels sorry that both fail to defend themselves and man takes undue advantage of their weaknesses. The dignity which the women deserve and the reverence the nature deserves are not given to them. Rather both are treated as easy victims of their domination. Patriarchy presumes superiority over both the animals and women.

In another vachana Akkamahadevi compares the similarity between the nature and her obedience towards Him very poignantly. She implies to say that both women and nature have tremendous patience. The mother Earth is said to be pardoning the sins of the mankind. Both face atrocities for no fault of theirs and instead wait patiently for the man to correct himself and treat them fairly. In the following vachana, she depicts the nature and herself as a staunch devotee of Lord Chennamallikarjuna.

*Did ever the sandal wood lose its fragrance
Because it was cut, sawn and rubbed?
Did ever gold lose lustre when heated,
Because it was cut and whetted?
Did ever a sugarcane lose its sweetness
Because it was hurt when cut into pieces,*

*Crushed and boiled to make sugar?
 If you collect all my by-gone sins
 Even if you slay me,
 O Father Chennamallikarjuna!
 And cast them into my face,
 The loss is yours
 I'll never cease to say, "I bow to you".*

The selfless service of nature to man is brought out as follows:

*Can a bamboo sprout again?
 Can a burnt pot become clay again?
 Can a fruit dropped from its stalk
 Return to it again?
 If the toiling and moiling men
 Utter a word unknowingly,
 Do the steadfast devotees
 Return to earth again,
 O Chennamallikarjuna?*

The following vachana expresses the nature serving the fellow creatures and mankind:

*What is the use of a tree,
 Unless it has shadow?
 What is the use of wealth,
 Unless one has compassion?
 What is the use of a cow,
 Unless she gives milk?
 What is the use of beauty,
 Unless one has virtue?
 What is the use of width,
 Unless there is sky?
 Of what use am I,
 Unless I know you,
 O Chennamallikarjuna?*

And nature's bounty is shown in this vachana:

*The whole wood is but a wishing-tree
 And all are life-restoring trees.
 Every stone is alchemic stone
 And every place holy place
 All water is but unageing nectar,
 And every beast a man-like beast.
 Every stone you stumble on a wishing-stone.
 As I went round observing the mountain*

*Dear to Chennamallikarjuna
I saw the plantain-grove!*

The Bhakti movement in general, and the Vachana movement in particular shared a conviction that being merciful to fellow people and fellow animals is the way to salvation. Therefore they saw the Almighty in them. They made the laity believe that the lower caste people should be given due respect and the animals should be taken care of since they are the incarnation of Him. The saint Akkamahadevi when she is longing to see the Lord Chennmallikarjuna implores the birds and the animals if they have seen Him.

*O prattling parrots,
You have not seen Him.
O cuckoos, singing loudly, seen Him,
You have not seen Him.
O bees, swooping and humming
You have not seen Him.
O swans, frolicking on the lake,
You have not seen Him.
O peacocks, sporting on hills and in dales,
You have not seen Him,
Tell me where Chennamallikarjuna is.
O tell me where He is.*

And in the following vachana as well:

*O swarms of bees, O mango tree,
O moonlight, O cuckoo,
I beg all of you one thing;
If you happen to see
Lord Chennamallikarjuna,
Call me out and show Him to me!*

Thus, the vachana composers of the 12th century responded to their society in a unique way which the world can ever think of. They dreamt of achieving egalitarianism which implies due respect to the flora and the fauna, finding the Almighty in the nature, finding the Creator through their toil and not amassing wealth which is generally done through exploitation either of nature or womenfolk. The saint Akkamahadevi exploited the milieu rightly by fighting against patriarchy and destruction of nature.

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