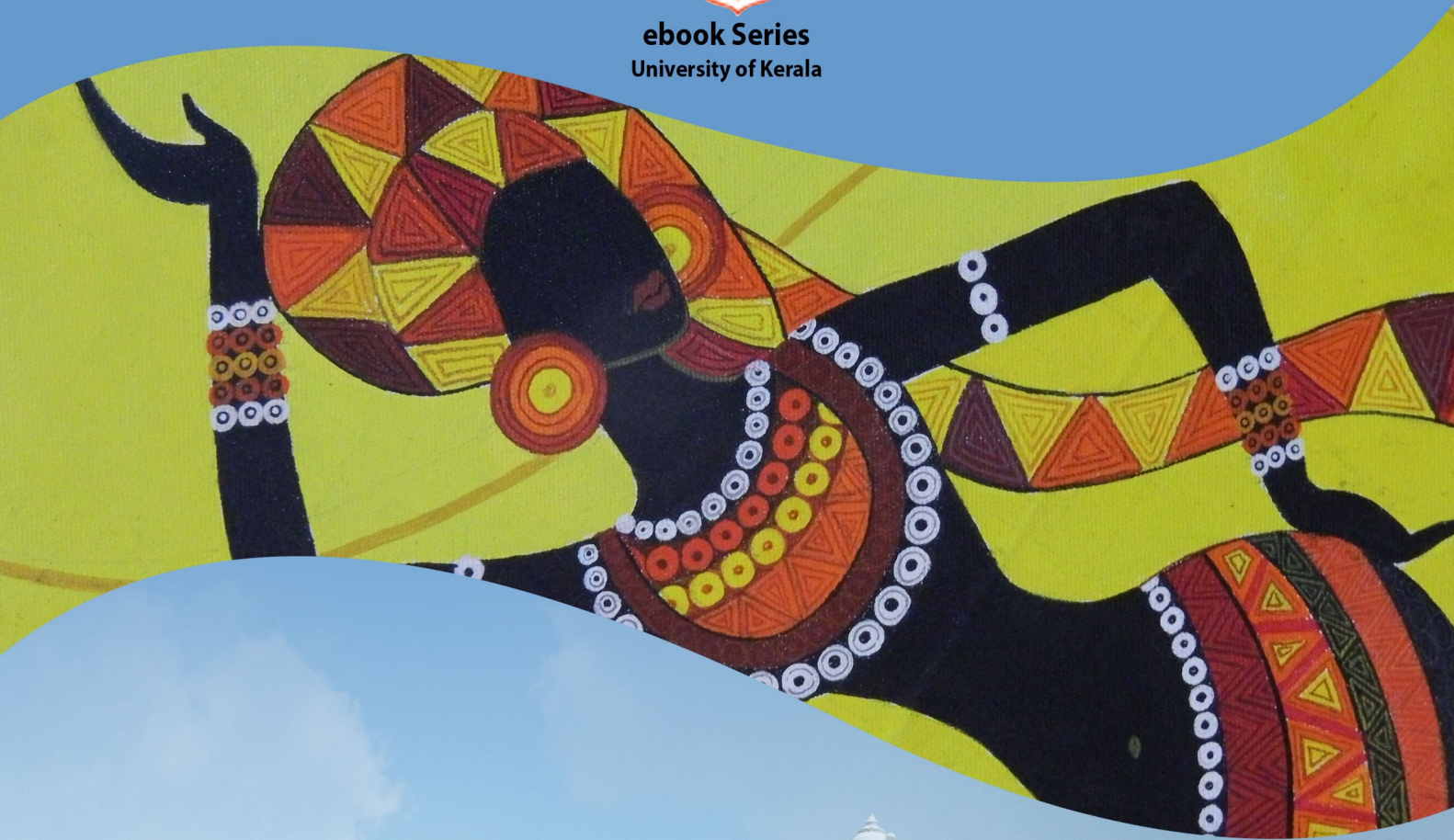


DAUGHTERS OF KALI: WOMEN'S BHAKTI POETRY IN SOUTHERN INDIA

Sucheta Sankar V.



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eBook Series: Daughters of Kali by Sucheta Sankar V.

Daughters of Kali: Women's Bhakti Poetry in Southern India

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The Language of Devotion and Rebellion

In the ancient traditions of poetry in India, meaning was regarded as a coincidence of form. The traditions of magic and spiritual enquiry which created these poems were more interested in what the poem does than what it meant. The function of poetry was to 'project the yogin' into a particular state of awareness, to contact the spirits or a deity (Schelling xix). In other words, poetry was devotional and metaphysical. Vedic *slokas* were the accepted models. The formal norms and thematic strictures of Sanskrit literature were considered to be the highest ideals in poetry. The poet, blessed with mystical and spiritual prowess, powers born from the cornerstones of Hindu religion and Sanskrit Godhead was philosopher and seer alike. Creation of poetry was a divine act which necessarily won for the poet divine favor. The praising of religion and the worship of the Gods, kings and holy men became the whole thematic concern of poetry throughout particular ages. Poetry was a conduit to express devotion or *Bhakti* to a higher power. When the meaning of the word underwent metamorphosis to refer to a very different kind of *Bhakti*, poetry itself was revolutionized.

Around 2500 years ago, the word *Bhakti* finds its earliest mention in India. It is attested in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* and in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, denoting the intense love or devotion directed to a deity or god (Schelling xvi). Krishna says: *Bhava Madbhakto, Be my Devotee* in one of the most poignant conveyances of the word's Vedic meaning. The Sanskrit root *Bhaj* initially meant to divide, share or distribute. Over time, it came to mean partake, enjoy, participate; the meaning extended to include the acts of eating and that of making love. Soon the meanings took on abstract colourings; to experience, to feel, to serve, honour or worship. The noun form *bhakta* came to mean a votary, a worshipper or a lover (xvii). Soon *Bhakti* would stand for the strong faith and devotional love one felt towards holy persons and spiritual teachers (Tharu and Lalita 56). It came to be regarded as one among many paths to spiritual realization, the other paths being *Jnana* and *Karma* along with other disciplines suited to individual aptitudes and tempers.

A new conceptualization of the term appeared in what was Tamil country, about 1200 years ago. In its new form, *Bhakti* was understood as "the singular path, and in many instances the only appropriate path to liberation" (Schelling xvii). This change in understanding entailed other renovations to the concept of

Bhakti. As opposed to the quiet, reflective contemplation of a deity, the new form demanded an unyielding passion and an existential attitude to the devotee's own experience. Devotion was now a personal practice, detached from the doctrines of religion and the sanctions of the state and the priests. More importantly, it located "spiritual truth" in the body and the heart of the devotee. Desire and longing were no longer suppressed and uncertainty was embraced. The *Bhakta* was led away from theory, theology, doctrine and elaborate metaphysics. He immersed himself or herself in the physical body and its stormy emotions into the realms of dance, poetry and song (Pillai 10). At the heart of *Bhakti* was the desire to express.

Over a course of around thousand years, from the ninth or eighth century Tamil Nadu, *Bhakti* took shape in India's West, then spread to the North. Eventually, it surged forth in the Eastern regions of Bengal and Orissa where according to a Sanskrit saying, the movement "re-emerged a nubile young woman" (Schelling xviii). This does not imply that the movement has a single destiny or a linearly charted chronology. Andrew Schelling describes the movement's progress across India as a clockwise process of "maturation" and "renewal" (xviii) while P. Govinda Pillai points out that the movement's transition from one geographical location to another entailed radical change (19). Yet some essential features of the *Bhakti* poem remained static over spatial and temporal transplantations.

Bhakti poetry begins in the human voice. Dilip Chitre, in his extensive work on the Varkari tradition of Maharashtra, coined the term 'Orature' (qtd. in Schelling xix). *Bhakti* poetry is not literature but *orature*. The *Bhakti* poet travelled from village to village on foot enunciating his poems. The nomadic practices of *Bhakti* poets gave rise to a cult of travelling bards.

The natural habit of *Bhakti* poetry has been performance. A 'translocation' onto the page will only reveal *meaningful* linguistic elements: The tones of speech, the steep climbs and descents of the singer's voice and the repetition of words and phrases often cannot be replicated. It cannot do justice to the vocal sounds that hold no fixed meanings or to the deliberate and ritual distortion that words undergo when recited. The most important part of a *Bhakti* poem is not what it says. The orature of *Bhakti* makes use of "magical – language", cultivates the paradox and the echo, initiating a "secret language within a language" (Eliade 249). It is almost akin to the initiatory languages of tribal people, or the mystic languages of subterranean, folk traditions. The imaginative vitality of the popular oral tradition has been shaped, nurtured and renewed by the presence of invisible poets – women and marginalized classes, who are not represented aptly in classical literature (Morris 79). According to Pillai, it is this nature of *Bhakti* poetry, the nature of *Vaamozhi* that provided the platform for its incendiary

passions (25.)

Schelling lists six roads that address the processes that take place within a *Bhakti* poem (xxi – xxii):

1. Firstly, the poem is carried by the poet's voice. The chances are that it has been composed orally, sometimes spontaneously. It was inspired in theme and musical and metrical forms by local folk traditions. The poem is to be recited, intoned, sung and chanted; this presents the opportunity to make use of the full range of vocal sound as well as musical accompaniment. In fact, Schelling advises the reader to "keep the drum skin close at hand" when reading *Bhakti* poetry.
2. The poem exhibits a highly developed process of thinking in images. Often these images are built on polarities, held tense by conflicts. The poet deliberately uses techniques like contradiction, illogic, paradox and non – casual thought. The succession of images may owe their logic to a dream, a trance, to linguistic puzzlement or to the 'supernatural.' Consistent emotions are rarely held: *you say I contradict myself? Very well I contradict myself* will not be unfamiliar to the *Bhakta* as the laws of non – contradiction do not hold.
3. The poem is minimalist in style but entails maximum involvement and intensity from the poet. Thus *Bhakti* poetry is romantic in nature. The poem transfers its energy through conviction and the poet's white – hot experience of reality, not through rules of composition or a delicate reworking of known themes. Honesty of tone was preferred to eloquence. Diction was rough, vernacular and simple.
4. The poet creates a theatre of participants, willing or unwilling. In most cases, the presence of listeners or spectators is only implied. The poem implicates the listener into its world. Schelling clarifies that the poem's world is not a figure of speech. It is an alternative society governed by love and devotion. The fierce confrontation, hectoring, proselytizing, the vows and oaths are meant to draw the slothful and the reluctant into this world. For similar reasons there are warnings, pleas, curses and outcries. The poet actively attempts to construct a community of visionaries who will live by the questions posed by the poem.
5. The poem is an act of the body and the soul; a demonstration of 'animal – body rootedness.' Instead of the conventional dichotomization of the soul and the body, *Bhakti* poetry draws attention to their inseparability. Dance as a technique of ecstasy is central to the performance of the poems. Sexuality as a

state of heightened sensitivity and vigilance is channelled through these poems. The full range of the vocal – growls, groans, sighing and weeping, accompany the poem.

6. The poet is a shaman who controls the techniques of ecstasy. He or she makes use of every available figure of language to reach insight or to make the insight available to the listener. Yet, the poem is neither didactic nor descriptive. It attempts to transport the listener to other states, affecting and transforming time and space, and making both sacred.

At the heart of the movement was the indomitable desire for human freedom. Its poetry, in a dozen or so languages, is the drive for spiritual and material equality (Tharu and Lalita 60). It sought to infuse the “knowledge of the spirit” (Sardar 20) in to the lives of the oppressed. While the emotion of *Bhakti* might seem familiar, its intensity and duration locate it as an experience not easily achieved nor commonly desired for. The path of Bhakti demanded that the *Bhakta* forgo culture in every form and shape.

Kenneth Rexroth defines the ‘counterculture’ as ‘those people who live by the tenets of lyric poetry’ (qtd. in Schelling xiv). As a movement, this is precisely what set Bhakti apart. They were resolved to match poetry and life. They lived by their songs. The poets of the Bhakti tradition drew from the so – called little traditions and subverted the great traditions; they coerced, threatened to “*break, blow, burn*” (Donne, 4).

Everything in their poems was designed to unfetter the mind from beliefs that would restrain the ferocity of raw experience (Schelling xv). They employed the dramatic qualities of the human voice. The refusal to bow down to caste and gender hierarchies was apparent in the traditions of Bhakti poetry. The women Bhakti poets were not content to sit by their hearths or to tend to their families and their household chores. They embraced the life of the nomad, travelling to far off lands for the sake of *Bhakti*. The verses of Bhakti refused to be tied down to gender. Socially accepted performances of femininity were upset. The songs of *Bhakti* caused upheavals in the family and revolutions within clans, across kingdoms. The once marginalized sections of society raised their voices through the vehicle of Bhakti poetry. The long – suffering tenants of the feudal lords, to the *shudra* slaves, to the women who succumb to patriarchy, to concubines and *tawaiifs* – the Bhakti movement made it possible for both men and women to uphold their dignity in the face of societal oppression. They were valorous in their poetry, they were fierce in the way they lived; there was no other way for a *Bhakta*. The tenets of Bhakti poetry were for them the way of life, truth and

faith (Tharu and Lalita 63).

Apart from the names that frequent anthologies of Bhakti poetry, it is possible to document the names of hundreds, if not thousands of singers who fit the profile of Bhakti. These poets have been drawn largely from the old excluded orders of India's political or social hierarchies. In the south, where the *Bhakti* movement initially emerged, the earliest *Bhakta* poets were Shaivites. The very first lyrics of the Nayanar movement are popularly attributed to eighth – century Tamil poet Karraikal Ammaiyar [circa 8 CE] (56). of feminism were evident in the tradition from the very beginning. Roughly around the sixth to the tenth century CE, the Alwar poets Antal and Nammalvar also wrote in praise of Vishnu. Along with Karraikal Ammaiyar, Antal began a long line of women poet – saints, extending well into the late eighteenth century (Pillai 53).

More than any other genre, poetry is associated with notions of literature as universal. Women have undoubtedly found it particularly intimidating to claim entry into this elevated discourse (Michele Barret qtd. in Morris 79). Both language and genre placed daunting restraints on women.

However, the women poets of Bhakti literature did outgrow these solid restraints. Language was democratized as Prakrit and other unofficial dialects came to be employed in literature. The diction of the low – class, popular languages offered a fertile ground for the feminine *I*. The world – view encompassed by the less respectable languages proved inclusive of the lived experiences of women's lives. Women no longer had to resort to the inequality of the prescribed images and standard forms of a misogynist language. They could frame their own modes of expressions, and their own potent Selves. Tharu and Lalita list the linguistic paradigm shift that the Bhakti movement brought about as one of the foremost reasons for the predominance of women poets (58).

Bhakti as a movement cannot be detached from its religious roots. It grew out of the need to reconfigure the elementals of Hinduism. The nature of the movement's religious inclinations is continually speculated upon. Feminist historian Neera Desai proposes that the Bhakti movement was a response from the medieval Hindu society to the threat posed by the egalitarian ideas of the Muslim invaders (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 58). On the other hand, I. H. Qureshi suggests that the Bhakti movement was a subtle attempt to lure Muslims into the folds of Hinduism (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 59). However, from the evidence available, it is possible to accrue to Tarachand's argument that the movement represents a creative synthesis of the great religious traditions of Hinduism and Islam (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 59).

Both Hinduism and Islam religions are phallogentric, the ambit of religious

power being occupied by men. This allows them to control the religious concept of morality. Women are conceived of as the keepers of morality, their bodies are viewed as essentially sinful and their chastity is intricately tied into the idea of honour. The end result of this arbitrary connection is a pattern of social constraints on women and a bias against their inclusion into the public sphere.

The Bhakti movement erupted onto the medieval scene revolutionizing the relationship between women and religion. Vedic rituals and rites which excluded femininity were abolished in favor of personal paths of worship. The female *Bhakta* personally chose a God imaged as a husband/lover (Tharu and Lalita 59). The devotional poetry of the women poets of the Bhakti did not seek to settle into the beaten paths of worship. They drew on their everyday experiences, the traumas and injustices of the woman's life which patriarchy deemed to be natural. Taboos of profanity and sacrilege were broken as women began to write of their own bodies. It must be noted that almost all medieval religions associated impurity and sin with women's bodies and biological functions. The idea of shame is born from this notion. Bhakti poetry very nearly did away with the notion of shame.

A woman's sexuality was synonymous with guilt and sin. It was outrageous for a woman to acknowledge sexual desire or even knowledge of the sex act. The suspicion of promiscuity was enough to call for religiously sanctioned violence against the woman. The strictures of the medieval theocracies replicated the model of the state within the family; the woman was the metaphorical motherland that had to be protected against marauding invasions at any cost (Chatterjee 40). The women poets of the Bhakti movement refused to conform to the notion of domesticity. The poetic traditions of the Bhakti movement allowed women to escape the strict enforcement of religious control.

The political scenario of India is a wide canvas on which many aspects of Bhakti played itself out. The country witnessed a series of major political transitions from the eighth century CE to the late nineteenth century when the Bhakti movement was in sway. From theocracies, the states developed into colonies, and through the influence of nationalism, to nation – states. In all these conditions, women were disenfranchised non-entities. It seems that in the political sphere, women were reduced to functional symbols. Women are always at the centre of the political self-image (Chakravarti 253). If in the theocracies, women were non-standard subjects of patriarchal rule, in the colonial state, women were symbols of India's degenerating morality. In his work *The Duties of the Faithful Hindoo Widow*, J. S. Mill quotes an ancient Sanskrit text on the uncontrollable sexuality of Indian women, where Hindu women are compared to “a heifer on the plain that longeth for fresh grass” (qtd. in Chakravarti 255). Nationalism attacked this

mode of appropriating moral superiority by investing spiritual power with the Indian woman. The Vedic woman was upheld as the highest ideal for any chaste and loyal Indian woman.

Bhakti poetry proved to be the strongest iconoclastic force in the political sphere. The women poets of the genre broke out of the traditional modes of depicting women – as politically insignificant and socially powerless. Women were portrayed as active agents in the political struggle. The national feminine identities constructed on the model of the Vedic woman were questioned. Many of the women poets of the Bhakti movement resisted the notion that they were legally vulnerable (Baxi 247). They contested the apathy of traditional law – makers to the lived situations of women.

The figure of the courtesan or the tawaif went a long way in placing the women's question in the realm of politics (Tharu and Lalita 64). Courtesans were sophisticated women of learning, trained in music and art, well –versed and knowledgeable. They were consorts to men of the elite class who frequented the homes of courtesans, seeking their addictive company. Though the courtesan was expected to enter into sexual relations with her clientele, it was always on her own terms. This liberated figure of a woman fell into disrepute with the imposition of British morality (Chakravarti 270). The dialectics of cultural exchange had left the once admired figure of the courtesan mired in the shame and sin of Christian theology.

The medieval woman was harangued by the three – personed God of patriarchy made up of an oppressive language, misogynist religion and sexist politics. Bhakti poetry challenged the realms of all three, and provided an expose of the mechanisms by which the three operated in the public and private spheres to subdue the 'dangerous' feminine.

Voicing Women's Bhakti in the South

Before the Bhakti movement began in earnest, igniting women's passions for liberation, two major literary genres produced similar anthologies of women's writings. An analysis of the women poets of these forerunners of Bhakti literature reveals the roots of many of the themes, imagery and symbolisms later revisited through the conduit of *Bhakti*.

The first of these literary movements emerged from Buddhism. Like the Bhakti movement, here too theology was the prominent drive. The *theris*, buddhist nuns who were contemporaries of the Buddha (ca. 6th century BCE), sang testimonials of how the *Sangha* changed their lives. This was committed to writing by about 80 CE, in an anthology called the *Therigatha* (Tharu and Lalita 65). The oeuvre consists of 522 extant lyrics describing the rigors of the everyday lives of women,

and of the asylum the *Sangha* provides. Indeed Buddhist egalitarianism attracted women from all walks of society.

The courtesan Ambapalli writes about how *the Buddha leads the soul away from the burning fires of desire and luxury* (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 66). In contrast, Mutta, one of the most prominent poets of the genre, describes Buddhism as freedom from *the mortar and pestle* and her *dark and twisted lord* (1 – 3). She declares sovereign control of her own body when she writes:

Freed from rebirth and death I am,
And all that has held me down
Is hurled away. (“So free am I”, 4 – 6)

Significantly, Mutta is able to proclaim the idea of a self, the *I*. It is this very same assertion of the feminine *I* that would be central to Bhakti poetry. The theme of freedom from domesticity too would be developed in the Bhakti In Buddhist theology, *not being* was freedom. For the *theris* freedom was a metaphysical concept. Emotion, passion and longing are hurdles that would prevent one from being truly free. Sumangalamata and Meetika, contemporaries of Mutta, express similar ideas. They were both wives and mothers who chafed at the monotony of routine housework. By joining the *Sangha*, both declare independence of the domesticity.

A slightly different conception of the theme appears in the poems of Ubbiri, about whom there are no biographical details except those that can be derived from her poems. Kumkum Roy and Uma Chakravarti, the translators of Ubbiri’s poems point out how her perception of Buddhism is related to the concept of loss and bereavement (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 68):

The grief that left me faint all gone,
The yearning stilled,
To the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha
I turn, my heart now healed. (Ubbiri, 9 – 10)

It is suggested that Ubbiri might have been a widow forced to live a miserable life under Hindu laws, before she escaped the unjust system by joining the *Sangha* (Tharu and Lalita 68). This is a clear indication that Buddhism was considered a refuge from Hindu patriarchy. Here the theme of freedom is closer to the idea conceived by the women Bhakti poets. However, it retains the metaphysical tinge of Buddhist emancipation.

The women poets of the Tamil *Sangham* poetry were the second significant feminist forerunners of the Bhakti movement. The *Sangham* age encompassed the third to the sixth centuries of the Common Era. Nationalism was the

vitalizing force behind the poetry of the age. There can be no doubt that *Sangham* literature was an arena for repressive notions of chastity and submissiveness for women. The women poets had to follow the rigid literary conventions of the patriarchal *Sangham*. Failure to comply to the norms usually meant that the works were censored or considered unworthy of perusal. In any case, poetry was serious courtly business; a woman who wrote poetry was breaking taboos and ‘intruding’ into political and public space.

This is not to say that poetry and songs were excluded from everyday life. The commentaries that accompany the translations of *Sangham* literature mention how important songs and poems were to the women who used to sing while transplanting seeds, drawing water and husking paddy. They used to sing when they kept vigil on the open fields, in order to charm the spirit that would make the fruits ripen.

Tharu and Lalita quote a commentator as having said that the poems “express the delight of a fairly new civilization with its material culture (70).” In celebrating its material culture, the burden of symbolizing spirituality appears to have fallen upon the women of the *Sangham* age. Thus the masculine principle adorned the external world while the feminine was considered internal or spiritual.

The spaces accorded to each gender crystallized into two distinct categories of poetry: *Akam* (Outer) and *Puram* (Inner) poems. The *Akam* poems dealt with an inner space and were usually love poems. The dramatis personae of the love poems were ideal types, like the chaste heroine and the valorous hero, the heroine’s mother, the hero’s friend and the courtesan. Everything else was taken into the scope of the *Puram* poems. Mostly, such poems dealt with historical figures and real events. There were fixed images connotative of certain situations: “the wild jasmine in bloom and the dark clouds of monsoon rain represent and evoke the grief of lovers who are separated; the *kurinci*, a wild mountain flower, alludes to the first and often illicit, sexual experience, and so on” (Ramanujan qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 71).

A.K Ramanujan writes about the restrictive conventional imagery of *Akam* poetry. The heroine of the *Akam* poems was confined to the surroundings of her house or to general notions and hearsay. She was made for love. The body of the woman was sensuously evoked:

Her skin like young mango leaf, her dark hair musk with the scent of jasmine (71).

Her girlfriend and foster mother, being of lower classes and having therefore acquired more experience of the outside world, have a greater range of imagery.

The hero and male characters, of course have a great array of images to choose from.

Even within this restrictive framework, the women poets of the *Sangham* exhibited an impressive repertoire of images. They used the conventions of *Puram* poetry to talk about the male fear of female spiritual power:

Her purpose is frightening, her spirit cruel.
That she comes from an ancient house is fitting,
surely (Macattiyar,1-2)

The male *Sangham* poets could write of the intense experience of going to war. The women *Sangham* poets wrote of the trauma of a mother, sending her sons out to war. They were not to be outdone in the eloquent praise of their patrons, the king. The women poets proved just as capable of whipping up a frenzy of jingoistic pride as the male poets. Says a *Sangham* poet of her son who has deserted his army post:

If he has run away in the thick of battle
I will cut off these breasts from which he
sucked. (Naccellaiyar,7-8)

In composing *Akam* poems, the women poets had an inbuilt advantage. The psyche of women was familiar to them as was the domesticity which pervaded the *Akam* poems. As a result they were able to straddle the genre with great assurance:

My arms grow beautiful In the coupling
And grow lean As they come away.
What shall I make of this?
(Venmanipputi, 10 – 14)

One of the most significant developments the women *Sangham* poets aided was the relocation of the theme of freedom onto a physical plane. The notion of freedom entailed being able to go to war or writing the same poetry as men. This was more akin to the idea that would be central to the women poets of the Bhakti tradition.

The poetry of the *Theris* and the women poets of the *Sangham* make exaggerated encores in the works of the women Bhakti poets. The theme of women's emancipation and the struggle to rid the society of patriarchal oppression were major concerns in Bhakti literature. The *Theris* and the women poets of the *Sangam* literatures made the first significant feminist attempts to locate the 'Self.' The process finds continuity in the works of the women *bhaktas*.

In the South, where the movement originated, Bhakti held sway from the eighth to the late eighteenth centuries. One of the earliest known Bhakti poets, Karraikal Ammaiyar (ca eighth century CE), was a Tamil Nayanar. Her poetry explores a personal path of worship to Siva. The central motif of her poetry was the intense relationship she had with her lord Siva. The diction and tone of her works do not confine her to a state of formal devotion. Karraikal Ammaiyar's poetry is the conveyance of the great love and awe that Siva inspires in her.

Thus faith was no longer a series of rules that contain the feminine Self. In Karraikal Ammaiyar, Faith becomes the spontaneous overflow of unsanctioned and repressed emotions; poetry was *bhakti*. The influence of Ammaiyar's style can be found in the works of the long line of women poet – saints who followed.

One of the most significant women poets of the tradition was Antal, a Vaishnavite Tamil poet (ca Sixth century – Tenth century CE). She emphasized total devotion and utter surrender to a personal god; Krishna for whom she wore flowers in her hair. It is said that she would replace the flowers for the evening pooja with the ones that she had worn in her hair. One day, her father having discovered the desecration, withheld the flowers from that evening's pooja. That night Vishnu appeared in his dream and told him that Antal's flowers were made fragrant and holy by her hair (Schelling 10).

Antal was greatly empowered by the spiritual powers such legends endowed. Marginalized as a woman, her Self was not considered important enough to be placed at the centre of faith. This is precisely the subversion in the poems of the women *bhaktas*. Antal says:

O Ancient one,
I wrote your name
Upon the wall. (1 – 3)

Antal's action resuscitates the Self as the initiator of faith. She does so by reclaiming the power to write. The written word was once the privilege of the Vedas and the Puranas. Here, it is Antal who deconstructs and rewrites the 'Word of Faith.'

Vidya Dehejia recounts a legend about Antal: "She approached the image of Vishnu, embraced its feet, climbed into the Serpent couch, and vanished" (qtd. in Schelling 9). This total absorption of the body into the God was the first instance in the annals of Bhakti. It represented a contradiction at the heart of *Bhakti*, and certainly of Antal's philosophy. Only by losing themselves in devotion, could the *bhaktas* locate their Selves.

Around the twelfth century, Kannada poet Akkamahadevi famously wrote:

People,
Male and female
Blush when a cloth covering their shame
Comes loose.
When the Lord of lives
Lives drowned without a face
In the world, how can you be modest? (116 – 122)

True to her word, she abandoned clothes, using only her long tresses to cover herself. In an act of supreme defiance she had literally revealed the Self. Fellow Virasaiva poet and Guru, Allama Prabhu is said to have asked her why she travels unclad. Furthermore, if she was so opposed to conventions, why does she cover herself with her hair? (Schelling 43). She replied with a poem:

Till the fruit is ripe
inside The skin will
not fall off.

I'd a feeling it would hurt you
If I displayed the body's seals of love. (1 – 4)

The poem is typical of the high humor that Akkamahadevi employs. The idea of shame is stripped of its association with the naked female body. Instead it is Allama Prabhu who is *hurt* by the display. It is this strength of self-assertion that makes her poems potent. Here the rediscovery of the Self is thematically united with the notion of gender equality and the liberation of the body.

The tracing of one's lineage is an act that necessitates the patriarchal confirmation of one's roots. However, Akkamahadevi claims to have come down, not through her *forefathers*, but through *vaginas*:

Not one, not two, not three or four
But through eighty – four thousand vaginas
Have I come. (15 – 17)

In contrast, when Allama Prabhu traces his lineage through Siva, the kinship is centred on the conventions of a marriage. He does not transcend the male-centred definition of identity as Akkamahadevi does:

You are the father – in
law And I the son – in law
O Lord of Caves. (35 – 37)

Akkamahadevi's struggles are not always purely mental or philosophical. She revolts against the pettiness of the roles society forces her to accept. Marital life is scorned in favor of the life of a recluse. Her poetry transcends the social expectations forced on her:

Mother,
Because they all have thorns
In their chests,
I cannot take
Any man in my arms but my lord
White as jasmine. (Akkamahadevi, 1 – 6)

Like Antal, Akkamahadevi too is in love with her personal god:

I'm the woman of love
For my lord, white as jasmine. (80 – 81)

The lord *white as jasmine* is the *ankita* or signature of her poetry. Her human suitors do not measure up to her White Jasmine Lord:

Take these husbands who die,
Decay, and feed them to your kitchen fire! (145 – 147)

Akkamahadevi stands for the woman liberated by the path of *bhakti*. It is within her power to choose and to refuse. Her poetry bears the stamp of radical illegitimacy. The resistance to the male-centred ethos of her age is woven into the fabric of her poetry.

Sule Sankavva was a contemporary of Akkamahadevi's. She is survived by a single poem. In it, Siva is portrayed as *Nirlajjeswara* – *the god without shame*. Sankavva speaks of herself as a prostitute though it is unclear whether this is historically true. It is likely she could have been employing a fierce metaphor for the relationship she has with her personal god:

In my harlot's trade
Having taken one man's money
I dare not accept a second man's, sir...
Knowing your reputation I will not.
This is my word,
O god without shame. (1 – 3, 13 – 15)

Siva was most commonly portrayed in conventional literature as an ascetic bachelor. Sankavva portrays him as a shameless solicitor of women. Within the poem, as the realms of the sacred collapse with the realms of the profane, the subversion of the Siva legend is absolute. Akkamahadevi and Antal has shown

similar callousness in approaching the notions of ‘purity’ and ‘holiness’. Antal *yearned for the Lord of Dwaraka* (9 – 10) and offers him, not sacred flowers or ritualistic gifts, but her *budding breasts* (13) while Akkamahadevi claims that her lord *claimed as tribute/my pleasure,/took over all of me* (74 – 79). These poems created a scenario wherein the Gods did not frown down on the sexuality of women. This was not the case with the poems of the male poets of the Bhakti tradition. An examination of their works reveals an inherent hypocrisy in dealing with the women and sex. Erotic love was gender – biased in many of the poems of the age as in “To an Older Woman”: *Are you in love/after you’re past/the age for men?* (Sarangapani, 5 – 7). Dhurjati, a sixteenth century poet, claims: *My chest has been worn away/ by the breasts of women rubbing against it* (“Kalahastisvara Satakamu”, 1 – 2). Such bravado was not uncommon in the poems of men. In most cases, women were sexual objects: *The things they give you – women with eyes/like lotuses...* (Dhurjati, 27 – 28).

In a startling instance of paradox, Akkamahadevi sings:

I saw the haughty master
For whom men, all men
Are but women, wives. (37 – 39)

Akkamadevi seems to be insisting that in *bhakti* the principle of pleasure is invested equally in men and women.

The feminism of the Bhakti movement in the South was heralded by these poets. Through Karraikal Ammaiyar, the personalized experience of Bhakti can be seen to have reached Antal, Akkamahadevi and Sule Sankavva. Each of them transformed the experience into innate frameworks. This accounts for the wide variety of ways in which the feminist rebellion of their poetry progresses.

In the early sixteenth century a young woman from the potter class wrote a new version of the *Ramayana* in Telugu. In her times, it was quite an achievement for a Brahmin to read through the enter epic even once. One can imagine what an extraordinary feat it was for Atukuri Molla to rewrite the epic, as legend has it, in five days (Tharu and Lalita 94). Molla did away with the customary introductory flourish which was intended to establish the ancestry and literary lineage of the poet. Instead, Molla paid a simple tribute to her artisan father:

I am god’s gift to him
They call me Molla. (“My Father Kesava”, 8 – 9)

She makes self-depreciatory gestures in the introduction, barely masking the confidence she possesses:

I am no scholar, Distinguishing the
loanwords From the native stock.
I know no rules of combination
No large vocabulary. ("I am no Scholar", 1 – 5)

Tharu and Lalita point out that given her circumstances as a low-caste woman, it was mandatory that Molla used a tone of diffidence if her work was to be read or acknowledged (94).

Molla was no stranger to the malice of the upper classes, being frequently persecuted for her unorthodox Virasaiva beliefs. They vehemently opposed caste discrimination and animal sacrifices. She held firm to the view that women were of the same status as men. Stories passed down through the oral tradition make it clear that Molla was a rebel. It is said that the "loss of her mother at an early age lead her to grow bold and unwomanly" (qtd. In Tharu and Lalita 95). Since she carries her family name 'Atukuri', it is likely that Molla did not get married.

Her work is not dedicated to the king as was customary in that age; in fact, the king Krishna Devaraya is said to have been aghast at the fact (95). The *Molla Ramayana* is dedicated directly to Rama, her *Kantha Mallesa*. This did not prevent Molla from dwelling on Sita's childhood and celebrating her vitality, strength and joyousness. The work contains explicit descriptions of Sita's coming of age and of her stay at the Ashokavanam in Ravana's kingdom. Describing Sita's beauty, Molla asks:

Is it the moon
Or the looking glass?
Difficult to say
Of her face. ("Are they Lotuses", 9 – 12)

The moon was a conventional motif for the 'natural' beauty of a woman's face. In a sense, the image uniformizes the standards of beauty and objectifies women. On the other hand, the looking glass is symbolic of introspection and of sharp mental faculty. By juxtaposing the image of the moon with that of the looking glass, Molla seems to be commenting on the opacity of the male gaze which sees only the conventional patterns of Sita's beauty.

The heroine of the *Ramayana* was being released from the bonds of her submissiveness:

Are they lotuses
Or the arrows of
Cupid? Difficult to say
Of her eyes. ("Are they Lotuses", 1 – 4)

The lotus is an inanimate motif caught in the straits of orthodoxy. Molla problematizes this idea of passive beauty by the second comparison to the *arrows of Cupid*. Molla continues in this vein to deconstruct many of the established modes of writing about the beauty of women.

She consciously developed a diction that would appeal to the immediacy of the senses as much as to the learning of the scholars. Yet, the language of composition was closer to the spoken forms of Telugu than was conventional in her times. Note the conversational style employed in these lines:

As honey sweetens
The mouth readily
A poem should make sense
Right away. (“As Honey Sweetens”, 1 – 4)

Molla’s poetry was meant to be sung out loud, not chanted in reverence. This allows her the artistic freedom to explore her theme with versatility. Importantly, Molla’s refusal to adhere to the conventions of the classical epic, and her brave depiction of Sita, are vital clues to the direction in which women’s writings of the Bhakti tradition were headed.

The late seventeenth century saw the emergence of a collection of verses in Kannada called *Hadibadeya Dharma, Duties of a Devoted Wife*. It was composed by a servant in the king’s palace, Sanciya Honnamma. While it was common for noble women and bhaktas to write poetry, it was truly unusual for a servant to do so. It is said that the court poet Singaracharya recognized her talent for words, taught her how to read and write and trained her in the rules of poetic composition. Her brilliance at composing poems earned her the name “Sarasasahityada Varadevata,” literally the goddess of exquisite poetry (Tharu and Lalita 115).

Honnamma was a traditional thinker, loyal to the king and the social mores of the time. However she does not shy away from expressing the pain of women’s lives in a misogynistic society:

Wasn’t it woman who bore them,
Wasn’t it woman who raised them,
Then why do they always blame woman,
These boors, these blind ones? (“Wasn’t it woman”, 1 – 4)

Honnamma chose neither the path of Bhakti nor of a revolutionary. The literary fashion during her age was to depict the sufferings of women as a natural consequence of their sinful existence. Despite this, Honnamma dwelt in her verses on the great many roles women play in society, and of her importance as a

mother and wife. The significance of her work lies in the consciousness raising quality of her verses. In the path of moderate protest, Honamma had tried to reason out and debate the women's question.

The late eighteenth century would see a poet of a very different brand from Honamma, in Muddupalani (ca. 1730 -1760). She chose to introduce herself in this manner:

You are incomparable,
Muddupalani, among your kind. (*Radhika Santwanam*, 7 – 8)

Her Telugu *sringara prabhandam*, an erotic epic titled *Radhika Santwanam* redefined the nature of women's writings. The work consists of five hundred and eighty four poems, divided into four sections. It tells the tale of Radha, Krishna's aunt, a woman in her prime who brings up Ila Devi and gives her in marriage to Krishna. The poem has explicit descriptions of the consummation of the marriage. Radha advises the young bride on how to respond to Krishna's love – making, and Krishna on how to handle his bride tenderly. But the poem also captures the pain of Radha who must give up her own claim on Krishna. At one point she breaks down and rages against Krishna for having abandoned her. Krishna gently appeases her and she is comforted by his embrace. This is the section from which the work derives its title (Tharu and Lalita 117).

In an unusual third section, Krishna complains that Radha insists on making love even though he does not want to:

If I tell her of my vow not
To have a woman in my bed,
She hops on
And begins the game of love.
(“If I ask her not to kiss me”, 10 – 13)

The right to take the initiative in a sexual relationship had been considered as the sole prerogative of the man. There were no precedents for this instance in Telugu literature. In another section, Muddupalani deems men to be inconsistent, impatient and unreliable. She presents Krishna as inept in love – making. It is Radha who is experienced in the ways of sex. In Muddupalani's work, Radha frequently advises Krishna on how to satisfy his partners:

Place on her
cheeks a gentle
kiss;
Do not scratch her
With your sharp
nails. (“Move on her lips”, 5 – 8)

A century later, in 1887, Venkatanarasu brought out the first published version of *Radhika Santwanam*. It was followed by a second edition in 1907. Both editions censored huge parts of the love play in *Radhika Santwanam* as indecent. It was inconceivable that a woman should write of erotic experiences in such detail. Her status as a courtesan was an adverse influence on the review of her works. Veereshalingam was the strongest voice of condemnation: “Many parts of the book are such that they should never be heard by a woman let alone emerge from a woman’s mouth. Using *Sringara Rasa* as an excuse, she shamelessly fills her poems with crude descriptions of sex” (143). Tharu and Lalita consider Mudupalani’s gender as the major reason behind the censoring of her erotic epic (118). Bangalore Nagaratnamma, a courtesan, brought out an unedited version in 1911 which the government translator Goteti Kanakaraju Pantulu declared objectionable to “the already fragile moral health of the Indian woman” (Tharu and Lalita iv). The copies of *Radhika Santawanam* were seized and the publication of the book was banned throughout India.

Mudupalani was the culmination of a long tradition of women’s writing that began with Karraikkal Ammaiyyar. The diversity of the women *bhaktas* of the South and their personalization of the genre is truly remarkable.

Daughters of Kali

As in all other discourses, language is a universal battlefield in Bhakti poetry also. Hierarchies are always at war, constructing and advocating themselves linguistically. The act of creativity is traced back to the father, the masculine source of authority, desire and intention. The feminine creative force is often associated with madness and hysteria alone. Indeed the quill/pen, a universally accepted symbol of artistic creativity, is equated with the phallus to the exclusion of women (Morris 67).

The metaphor of the phallic pen has various resonances in the depiction of gender in *bhakti*. The wielder of the quill/pen assumes a position of subjectivity wherein they can create and define the Self and the Other. The act of writing situates the object/other in relation to the positions maintained by the subject/self. The discourses of patriarchy attempt to negotiate the written word into a defence of its principles and ideologies. Perhaps, this is why the poems of the male *bhaktas* corroborate the dichotomies of society, where the woman is the Other. The male position on *bhakti* is privileged as morally and religiously tenable. The written word is manipulated to sustain and justify the oppression of women. The malleable interpretations of male discourses on *bhakti* are powerful propaganda against the inclusion of women into the stream of literature and creativity. Indeed, in the poems of the male *bhaktas*, it is possible to delineate the major strategies by which patriarchal discourses have superimposed an elite

male vision onto public consciousness (Plumwood 42 – 56):

1. Back grounding: The master relies on the services of the other and simultaneously denies his dependency. This is best exemplified by these lines by Devara Dasimayya (ca. 10th CE):

When a man is of the
Lord And his wife, of
the world, What they
eat is still
Shared equally (“In the Mother’s Womb”, 36 – 39)

The poet seems to have conveniently forgotten the fact that it is the wife who cooks the food, and is therefore entitled to an equal share. The *man’s* state of metaphysical awareness is privileged over the woman’s physical exertion. The chores and errands a woman has to perform as part of her domestic life are hardly acknowledged. Thus her role in society is neither transparent nor made visible in literature.

2. Radical exclusion, in which the master magnifies the differences between self and other and minimizes the shared qualities:

The women
Wear wreathes of buds
Fingered and forced to blossom
So they smell differently (Nakkirar, 18 – 21)

The essential qualities of the two genders are often portrayed in terms of symbols (*buds*). The master/male discourse puts forward the image of the other/woman as buds that can be *forced to blossom*. In popular iconography, *buds* represent fragility and vulnerability. The qualities of the master/male are represented as an opposing force to the ethos represented by the qualities attributed to the feminine. They are posited as the aggressive conquerors of the other/woman, as is evident from the tone of the extract.

3. Incorporation, in which the master's qualities are taken as the standard and the Other is defined in terms of the possession or lack of those qualities:

He initiates Love’s
Holy rite with languorous
blue Lotus limbs.
Cowherd girls like
Splendid wild animals draw him into their
Bodies for pleasure...(Jayadeva, 28 – 33)

The short extract from the *Gita – govinda* characterizes the two genders in Love. The actions of the master/*he* are imbued with sacredness. Consider the contrast with the bestial quality of the women's love – making. The master/male and his desire is the norm. The *cowherd girls'* desire is a deviation from the absolute type for Love. The hedonistic pursuit of the male is sanctioned while the woman has to be reduced to *splendid wild animals* so that they may experience pleasure.

4. Instrumentalism: The other is construed as having no ends of their own and their sole purpose is to serve as a resource for the master. In Chandidas, the woman's path is to *dedicate her soul/to the service of loving* (12 – 13). Vidyapati renders the same notion in a slightly different form: *I who body and soul/ am at your beck and call/ was a girl of noble family* (24 – 25). The purpose of the woman was to serve. The life of the woman seems to be given over to the conveniences and whims of the patriarchal society. Cixous argues that this is the necessary consequence of women being regarded as possessions, exchanged from fathers to husbands always so as to control or gain something (qtd. in Morris 119). The masculine libidinal economy of 'property' is set in opposition to the female libidinal economy of the 'gift.' The woman is one who gives without "recovering her expenses" (Morris 119).

5. Homogenization: The dominated class of others is perceived as uniformly homogeneous. The representation of the woman falls into stereotypes and universals. In most of the poems of the male poets of the traditions, it is the woman who longs; the act of loving belongs to the man. For example, Surdas writes in the voice of a *gopi* (Cowherd girl): *thoughts of him stalk me, even in my dreams* (1). Without the love of a man, women's desires are seen to be hollow: *O deserted bride/How will you live in the absence of your beloved?*

(Kabir, 1 – 2). Several of the male poets construct the image of femininity in women: ... *'My girl, your body is tender as a leaf'* (Sarangapani, 12). The body, the hair and the breasts are transformed into key symbols for women: *If they see/ breasts and long hair coming/ They call it woman* (Devara Dasimayya 75 – 77). The various representations of women in the poems of the male *bhaktas* are unified by the tendency to homogenize. Women appear to have been transformed into a body of complex patriarchal meanings.

Bhakti poetry offered a venue that could challenge the paradigms and assumptions of dominant discourses. The rise of women poets in the Bhakti tradition proved to be a challenge to the masculine creative ego. The writing and composition of Bhakti poems entailed control over the phallic quill/pen. Thus the textuality of the women poets of the tradition represents a metaphorical transgression, the appropriation of a male – dominated medium. Feminist historian, Tanika Sarkar in *Words to Win* argues that the right to be textual

transfers the power of self-definition to women. Generally, the phallocentric society prescribes the making of the feminine as an act of conformation with its moral and religious codes. By writing about life and reality as she experienced them, the textual woman could translate herself out of the language of the patriarchy.

An effective strategy adopted by the women poets of the tradition was the conduit of love. In Bhakti poetry, eroticism and love take on the nature of free transcendence. Lovers do not recognize the roles imposed upon them by society. It is the normative institution of marriage that forces the roles of husband and wife upon them; by providing legal security, social sanction and privilege to the married couple, normative impulses are garnered and sustained in the lawlessness of love.

The love that is central to Bhakti is a chaotic expression of desire whereas the sacrosanct realm of faith deals in sanitized affection. Conventional religion presents love as a filial concept. God is the doting, if judgmental, father and the *bhakta* is his child. The image of the father/child allowed religion to exercise a 'natural' authority. The arrival of the Bhakti movement destabilized the possibilities of absolute control.

From Antal to Mirabai, women *bhaktas* created the image of the lover – god. The relationship was imbued with sexual connotations. The female poets of the genre did not shy away from images of sex and descriptions of conjugality. The terms of erotic desire were no longer being laid out by society or men. To the women of the Bhakti movement, sexuality became an extension of their faith and lived experiences. Eroticism was not reduced to yearning and coy submission as was frequently framed in the poems of the male *bhaktas*. The woman was portrayed as an equal sexual partner. Bhakti poetry constructed a feminine order of meaning which produced a positive sexual identity for women.

However, the icon of godhead makes the matter of sexual fulfilment problematic. It remains a fact that the women *bhaktas* laid claim to a form of chastity by proclaiming their divine lords as their only lovers. In this scenario, sexuality becomes a metaphor for worship. This is precisely the reason why the notion of 'sacred purity' was anathema to the women Bhakti poets. The body was a path of sexual prayer and was treated with reverence. This was a complete upheaval of the sense and direction of the term 'chastity.' The poems demonstrate the will to dictate the conditions of chastity, the power to choose a way of life.

Yet, Bhakti poetry did not confine itself to a sexual and gender revolution within literature alone. The women *bhaktas* attacked conformist stands and conventional institutions in society. Many of them, like Akka Mahadevi and

Mirabai, led the lives of recluses. They upended the hierarchies of caste, religion and gender by living true to the convictions of *bhakti*. The spheres of private life and domesticity were abhorred as were the routines and customs of the male – dominated public realm. The idea of the woman as a spiritually and morally endangered figure was replaced by the fierce philosophizing of the women poets. The extreme nomadic and oral traditions of the Bhakti movement were inculcated by the women, of whom the *Manusmriti* demands invisibility and submission.

The ethos of *bhakti* undid much of the Vedic zeitgeists of the era:

This darkest of ages has
destroyed The lines of caste,
the stages of life:
All that is proper has been tossed aside... (Tulsidas, 67 – 69)

The *thick, black – magic curse* of the age of *Kali* had engendered a new class of liberated, textual women – the daughters of *Kali* (Tulsidas, 78). True to the nature of the Kaliyug, these women did not recognize propriety and conformity. They unraveled the constructs of femininity by dint of their extraordinary radical lives. On their lips were praises of dark, Dionysian disorder: *Kali and Krishna are one* (qtd. in Schelling 208). In the frenzied revolutions of their works, the daughters of *Kali* emerged *Like a silkworm weaving/her house with love/from her marrow* (Akka Mahadevi, 1 – 3) and *set forth naked to dance* (Lal Dedh, 5) upon the charnel grounds of patriarchy. The women poets of the Bhakti tradition drew upon the force of their lived experiences, erotic and every day, to transform the institutionalized and conventional system of language and poetry into a subversive phenomenon. The Daughters of Kali were a potent counterculture within Bhakti poetry.

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