

Caroline Mackenzie

*Melkote, Mysore*

## A WOMAN'S EXPERIENCE OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN A CROSS CULTURAL SETTING

The following reflections are essentially cross-cultural and autobiographical. They have arisen from my search as a woman to discover and develop my relationship with truth/God. This has been an important part of my search to become a creative artist/person. There are two main parts. The first focuses on the place given to feminine imagery and experience in Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. It reflects on the way that Nammālvār<sup>1</sup> as a man has creatively entered into the feminine experience. It shows how art and ritual can be a powerful means for transforming and broadening the mind and imagination. The second part explores masculine imagery in the Judaic Story of Exodus, and how based on the example of Nammālvār, a woman could imaginatively relate to this symbolism.

### I

#### Sri Vaishnava Culture Accepts the Feminine Experience

In Śrī Vaiṣṇavism a primary symbol through which everyone, male or female can relate to God/truth/reality is the bride. Intimacy with or knowledge of God is sought, not through the prophet, who is most often male (cf. Old Testament) nor through the first-born son (cf. New Testament) but through the image of the heroine in love with the hero. In the "girl-poems" of Nammālvār<sup>2</sup> we see how the bride speaks to God, and is able also to tell others about him. These poems are far more than mere lyrics. They are not only of great importance for the Vaiṣṇava religious experience, but also for the philosophic understanding. "The mysticism of Nammālvār is the heart of Viśiṣṭādvaitic wisdom and it furnished the *raison d'être* of its metaphysics".<sup>3</sup>

However in spite of this prominent place given to feminine experience in Śrī Vaiṣṇavism it has not meant that therefore women have been espe-

1. Friedhelm Hardy, "Virāha-Bhakti" (O.U.P., Oxford 1983) pp. 308-370.

2. Hardy, "Virāha-Bhakti", pp. 331-32.

3. P.N. Srinivasachari, "The Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita". (The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras, 1978) p. 448.

cially creative. Social norms have been such until recently that women were married off even before attaining puberty and often had children by the age of fifteen. Such a situation was hardly conducive to philosophic reflection or artistic creativity because there was simply no time to spare for it. Therefore it has to be born in mind, that where I have found Śrī Vaiṣṇava symbolism creative and liberating, it has been because there have been less restrictions on me at the social level. I enjoyed a liberal education in a school where each girl was encouraged to discover and pursue any interests or talents she had. Therefore these reflections are essentially cross-cultural, and from a twentieth century perspective.

### Western View of the Feminine

However in spite of this apparently "good-education", which did give us social freedom, it did not give us cultural equality. I think that at a fairly unconscious level Western society and culture basically look down on "the Feminine". The qualities associated with the feminine such as intuition, feeling, submission, softness and so on are not considered to be the qualities which could help a person survive in society. Strength, exploitation, vigour, analytical thinking, are more likely to get a person "somewhere". Not that I think these qualities to be very praiseworthy but since I myself was caught up in this notion of "getting somewhere" as a professional artist, the last thing which looked as if it would help was to appear too feminine. Since a career in the world seemed to need a certain amount of self-assertion and independence, again to be "feminine" would be dangerous and make myself vulnerable to the more powerful "male" aspects of society.

Therefore my solution to the problem at that time was to freeze those aspects of myself which might be too easily identified with the feminine. However the effect on my creativity was exactly the reverse of what I sought. By becoming fierce and independent in order to appear as a "liberated woman", I found that my creativity, especially painting, became completely fossilised. In fact for a period of ten years I was unable to touch colour and did only sculpture. I think that colour, being a potentially very emotional medium, was somehow directly connected with all that I saw as feminine in myself.

I should say that one of the most important aspects of my experience of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism was to glimpse a really positive notion of femininity. At least at the symbolic level the feminine response is *the way* to truth. The

feminine is inseparably connected with the godhead, although it is distinguishable. According to P.N. Srinivasachari.

"Brahman who is beyond *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* expresses its will to redemption by having a two-fold spiritual form of its own as Lord and Śrī that are philosophically inseparable, though functionally distinguishable".<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this doctrine of the feminine within the godhead, the means of salvation called "Prapatti",<sup>5</sup> or self surrender to God is commonly understood through the symbol of human love between man and woman. Thus at all levels the feminine experience has its place. This is in marked contrast to the Judao-Christian tradition which emphasises God as a father. Although the Holy Spirit is sometimes conceived of as feminine, this is not always so. Thus the godhead is thought of as primarily male. The means of approach in the christian tradition is through the only son. Thus the filial relationship is the most important one for realising the "way" to salvation.

Although Christianity preaches equality for all human beings, the symbol system favours the masculine over the feminine. When I heard sermons preached by male priests about this equality, my feelings that women were inferior to men, and that religion was another means by which to reinforce this oppressive social and symbolic system were increased. However in this total, angry rejection of any religious way, I think I was cutting off an important well-spring of creativity. The history of art, both eastern and western has almost always been linked to religious developments and perceptions.

### **Art as a Means of Darsan**

The word darśan literally means a showing. It is also used to mean philosophy. It implies that philosophy is a means of gaining insight, revelation.<sup>6</sup> In Indian culture, art and rituals have played an important role in bringing about these sorts of insights. In this section I want to explore the way in which this type of art can overcome psychological blockages in a way that personal verbal contact, cannot.

4. Srinivasachari, "Vigistādvaita", p. 166.

5. Srinivasachari, "Vigistādvaita", pp. 382-413.

6. Srinivasachari, "Vigistādvaita", p. 431. "The term *darśana* connotes a philosophical system as well as a spiritual perception of reality and may be explained as an integral intuition of Brahman".

Before coming across this dimension of Indian culture, I was in a psychological frame of mind where I had rejected any kind of relationship with the divine considering it to be thoroughly oppressive for women. Any amount of verbal persuasion left me just as resistant as before. However, there was one particular festival/ritual at Melkote<sup>7</sup> which made a very strong impression on me and out through my anger and awakened in me the possibility of relating to God. This coincided with the re-discovery of my creativity in painting.

The festival is called Tirunakshetra. It celebrates the birthday of Śrī Rāmānujacharya. The central event is the symbolic greeting of the Ten Avatāras (Incarnation of Vishnu) by Ramanuja. Two main images or icons are used: one representing Rāmānuja and one representing the main deity, a form of Viṣṇu. The festival is celebrated in the night. This itself is very important and adds much to the atmosphere. It is outside the normal every day routine where social divisions are more strongly felt. It is enacted around the temple. This sacred space again takes the participants out of the ordinary. The image of Rāmānuja is brought out of the temple first. Behind him the deity is carried. The two images face one another and in between there are musicians who walk backwards, facing the deity, as does the Rāmānuja image.

When the deity is just out of the temple the first Avatāra symbol, the Fish (Matsya) is put on to him. Everyone sees it as the procession round the temple proceeds again. At the first corner of the temple the images are halted, while the fish symbol is replaced with the turtle (Kurma). The procession proceeds to half the length of the temple and the turtle is replaced by the boar (Varāha). Thus the procession carries on with each of the ten Avatāras being ceremonially worn by the deity and prayed to by Rāmānuja.

Because the icons are timeless and possess an abstract anonymity, I was able to imaginatively enter into the symbol of the fish, the first Avatāra. This most unevolved specimen of nature seemed to relate to where I felt myself to be as a woman, that is at the bottom of the spiritual and social hierarchy. What surprised me in the imagery was that the figure symbolising Rāmānuja, the great ācharya-guru, salutes this

---

7. Melkote is a temple town, situated near Mysore, where Rāmānuja lived for twelve years during 11c C.E. The author has been living there since 1984.

image. His acknowledgement of the fish's importance appeared to encourage the evolutionary process from fish to turtle to boar and so on, up to Kṛiṣṇa and Buddha. The whole emotional symbolism seemed to show a profound acceptance of what is low and unevolved. It also showed that there was a strong possibility of evolution. It revealed a creative relationship between the evolving soul or if one prefers, the human creative potential, in direct relation to the spiritual teacher.

If this same possibility had been spoken of, especially by a male theologian, I would not have listened, suspecting yet another trap for asserting male superiority. This sense of the superiority of men over women is a deeply entrenched unconscious reality. Thus even though a real man were in the place of the *image* of Rāmānuja, he might have *said* the same thing i.e., all beings are equal before God. But unless he was a very unusual man, he would not at the unconscious level appreciate the idea of the equality of women and of their spiritual evolution, which is the logical conclusion of this idea of God's love. The problems we are dealing with here are constellations of the unconscious mind and as such cannot be affected either by direct social action or intellectual argument. A kind of soul transformation or metanoia is required. Social action is no doubt essential as well, and is the first step of revealing God's "dayā" or mercy,<sup>8</sup> but at the psychological/spiritual level, art may be one of the ways in which cultural habits are changed.

The essential insight that I gained from this event was to accept myself as a woman in relation to truth. In some peculiar way this unblocked my creativity and I was again able to paint. From this event I understood that before God or God's teacher, everyone is a fish, evolving slowly towards personhood and full creativity. Although society does discriminate between sexes, castes and races, this essential reality does have a certain sustaining power behind it. The effect it had on me was to stop trying not to be a woman. It made me confident to accept myself and to believe that in relation to truth, here characterised by Rāmānuja, I could evolve. This has been a constant source of strength in the face of a society which is full of injustice.

Philosophically this process could be related to the notion of God's "dayā", or mercy, which Rāmānuja saw as extending to all living beings.

---

8. Srinivasachari, "Viṣiṣṭādvaita", pp. 384-387.

"Deliverance works in multitudinous ways and enriches the nature of the deliverer and entitles Him to be called by the following names: He is sarva-bhūta-suhṛt or the friend of all beings, parama-udāra, or all-bountiful and gambhīra, whose quality of mercy cannot be quantitatively measured. He is sulabha or easily accessible to all jivas, āśrita-para-tantra, who depends on His devotees and saumya or approachable *irrespective of their birth or worth*".<sup>9</sup>

## II

### Women Imaginatively Using Masculine Symbolism and Experience

In part I, I have attempted to trace a personal journey, which started with a rejection of the feminine. The effect of this was to make me incapable of creativity. The discovery of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition enabled me to view the feminine from a new more positive perspective. The ritual art of the Tirunakshetra festival enabled me to accept my own femininity at the psychological and spiritual level and the result was that I was enabled to rediscover my creativity.

However I soon felt that while it was essential to be oneself as a woman it was also necessary to go beyond this symbolism. It was important in the Tirunakshetra festival that the fish is acknowledged, but it was equally important that there was an evolution beyond it to the turtle, and from turtle to boar etc. Thus having accepted the feminine, I found my own imagination wanted to go beyond this.

Referring back once again to Nammālvār, there seemed to be more to learn from him. Although Nammalvar was a man, he had no imaginative inhibition about entering into the feminine experience. Of his famous sacred poem the "Tiruvaimoli", Sri Rama Bharati writes "the several layers of a unified consciousness Prakriti, Mahat, Ahankara and Manas enveloping the Atman - take on roles and become the dramatic personae. Manas the heart of every man, is a maiden in love, the Nayaka, Ahankara, the rational self or the intellect, becomes the Nayaka's chaperoning mother. The Gunas of Mahat - Satva, Rajas and Tamas appear in the roles of the Acharya, the Sakhis, and the Bairagis. Even the unretorting pets, the garden bees, and the clouds in the sky, play their parts, as Prakriti. The

9. Srinivasachari, "Viṣiṣṭādvaita", p. 165 (emphasis mine).

Atman is the Sutradhara and the lord, the supreme oversoul, the Nayaka".<sup>10</sup> In order for Nammāḷvār to convey his particular religious experience in the form of poetry he needs all these images. It is said that he even went as far as dressing himself like a woman, his identification with the heroine was so intense.

One of the ways in which the imagination of women has been suppressed is in this area of androgeny. It has been and is, an accepted convention for men to cultivate their emotional "feminine" side. Nammāḷvār is certainly not alone in his identification with the female, although he may be an extreme example of it. Christian mystics such as St. Augustine, St. Bernard of Clairveaux, St. Louis de Montfort, and St. John of the Cross have all employed feminine imagery to express the drama of the soul's union with Christ or God. However we fail to find a corresponding convention of entry for women into male imagery.<sup>11</sup>

Creativity essentially comes from wholeness and Nammāḷvār's experience shows that in the process of liberation, imagination is an essential factor. Thus it is only a cultural convention that prevents women from having access to masculine symbols. These symbols need not necessarily be seen as vehicles of oppression for women, if before entering they are sure of their femininity, as Nammāḷvār never doubted his *actual* masculinity. Thus just as Nammalvar thought of himself as a bride, a woman could think of herself as a son or a prophet and seek intimacy with God through these symbols.

Using Nammāḷvār as a paradigm we will suggest here how a woman could extend her vision/experience through using masculine symbolism. We could take a story such as Exodus from the Old Testament where there are no outstanding female figures. Many women would perhaps feel that this story has absolutely nothing to do with them. It is a story about a group of people who were anyway especially chosen by God. They were led by a man called Moses. So what relation could it have to women? However if we are inspired by the method of Nammalvar we could well find this story a liberating one. It might be interpreted something like this.

---

10. Srirama Bharati and Sowbhagya Lakshmi "The Tiruvaimoli of Nammalvar", (Tyaga Bharati, Melkote, 1987) Preface.

11. For a discussion on this subject in the Christian context see: Rosemary Radford Reuther "Sexism and God-Talk" (SCM Press, London, 1983), pp. 127-130.

Moses represents a woman who is oppressed by patriarchal society and yet she is also part of that system as a result of her education. In the same way, Moses who was saved by Pharaoh's daughter, is educated by the Egyptians i.e., by the dominant culture. Although he is culturally almost an Egyptian, he sees the oppression of his fellow Israelites and is furious. His anger finally gets the better of him and he kills one of the Egyptians which leads to his going into the desert. We can see a similar syndrome when an apparently docile daughter or wife leaves home in search of herself, boiling with rage at her feeling of being enslaved by male domination.<sup>12</sup> Or it could be the anger of a woman which leads to her being sacked from a job which she can only keep if she plays the game of patriarchy obediently.

This exhibition of anger leads to isolation and reflection. In the land of Midian, where Moses is a foreigner, he sees the burning bush. It is his first real contact with God or in Indian terms, with his *Ātman* (self). God announces Himself, "I am, who I am".<sup>13</sup> So the feminist who has been isolated through her angry attack on society sees God truly for the first time. For myself, the Thirunakshetra festival acted as a kind of burning bush experience. For the first time I accepted myself as "I am", before God. I stopped running away from my femininity even though I knew it was the reason for my socio/cultural oppression. In the same way Moses acknowledges his identification with the oppressed group, the Israelites in spite of his Egyptian education. He is given strength to return to the situation and to try to do something about it because he feels that God is on his side, even though that is the weaker side. I think that one of the reasons my "burning bush" happened to be discovered in Vaiṣṇava culture was because God is seen and experienced in and through women. God is on their side even though they are weak.

When Moses returns to Egypt, God sends the plagues against the Egyptians. In feminist terms perhaps this could be seen as the whole of nature, so often identified with woman, rising up against the patriarchal, technocratic powers that be. After the plagues, the Israelites leave Egypt and go out into the desert. There many of them feel despondent, and blame Moses for getting them into a worse situation than before. They complain saying "Why did we not die at Yahweh's hand in the land

12. cf. short story by Aruna Gnanadasan "The Glass Window", *Jeevadhara. A Journal of Christian Interpretation* (May 1987) pp. 205-209.

13. Exodus 3:14 (Jerusalem Bible, D.L.T., London 1968).

of Egypt, when we were able to sit down to pans of meat and could eat bread to our heart's content! As it is, you have brought us to this wilderness to starve this whole company to death!"<sup>14</sup> As we see with the whole idea of women's liberation, many fall by the way side and complain, feeling that a life of unthinking slavery far preferable to the tiresome journey to the promised land of independence and creativity.

One of the central events which occurs because the Israelites do stick it out, is that a new covenant is received by Moses. Through this covenant, God declares, I will be your God and you will be my people.<sup>15</sup> Through God speaking directly to their leader a new and sure relationship between God and the Israelites is formed. They are no longer to do as the Egyptians tell them but as God tells them. In terms of women, presumably they no longer feel enslaved by the patriarchal culture but will understand their own proper relationship to God. Signs of this emerging new covenant can perhaps be discerned in the numerous feminist theologies that are being produced at present. This leads them eventually to enter the Promised Land and to overthrow the patriarchal society symbolised as Jerico. This overthrowing may not be anything very physical but rather the destruction of whole symbol systems and cultural conventions that keep woman enslaved and uncreative.

The two most liberating aspects of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism that I have discovered and tried to express here have been firstly, the important place given to feminine experience and secondly, the imaginative possibilities of going beyond the feminine, yet without negating it. Rāmānuja's perception of "Dayā" or mercy seems to be a very enlivening one. It extends, not only intellectually, moralistically or philanthropically as sometimes is the case in christian culture, but emotionally and symbolically it comes down to the lowest level. It offers the process of evolution towards freedom by confirming what a person is, even at the lowest level. It does not ask this to be negated because it is low. It inspires the person to evolve beyond it, thus enabling her/him to become a whole and integrated personality.

---

14. Exodus 16:3.

15. Exodus 19.