

## Priya Sarukkai Chabria

### The Autobiography of a Goddess

#### Translating *The Autobiography Of A Goddess*: Concept

Aandaal's songs are primarily seen as sacred texts, not poetry. Most often in translating sacred verse philosophical overtones tend to override the poetry. I see her as a poet divine. She composed in *cen*/Old Tamil, faithful to 2 BCE-to 2 CE Sangam era poetic conventions. Sangam means a gathering; the practitioners of old knew the rules and modes of interpreting such love poetry; coded allusiveness was the key. Besides the literal meaning, simultaneous parallel (*ullari*) and inset (*eraichi*) meanings needed to be prized out of each poem. Such poetry offers a riddling generosity of interpretative possibilities as each verse reveals layered, multiple configurations of meanings. Each of Aandaal's verses is a literary hologram. View it 'frontally' and one level of meanings appears, tilt it to catch another glow, angle it further and different illuminations emerge.

Further, if all translation is an act of faith in language of other times, tongues, textures and visions to be worlded in the now, translating sacred verse is also an act of faith in one's self to presume to touch the mystical experience in some furtive way. That's a big one. Aandaal's songs begin on the horizon of the liminal and spill into a vast unknown. Often, therefore, my 'third version' of her verses reside in the realm of speculation.

In this work-in-progress I've deployed various strategies.

Sometimes I use *italics to suggest her hidden thoughts and allusions*; sometime an inset block of prose-poetry to elaborate dense philosophy, sometimes I've adapted A K Ramanujam's stepped techniques

to abbreviate  
and enrich

and other times spun out with extended internal rhymes the landscape of her songs etc.

These renderings are from *The Sacred Songs of The Lady*. She addresses Kamadeva, God of Love/Lust, an archer akin to an adult Cupid wherein an underlying symbolism of the archer is the body, the bow the will, and arrows one's consciousness aimed at eternity.

The first versions are closest to her literal utterance.

The second, the parallel, emphasizes her erudite mythological allusions --no footnotes!-- and nature for she adopts landscapes as metonyms of inner vistas of love and longing.

The third, the inset, is the most free: in the hidden she is explicit. For Aandaal demands divinity inhabits her pulsating corporality. Making this third leap has been the most demanding: this has often 'arrived' as an inversion of the literal meaning.

This is my Aandaal.

The inking reflects the movement of her voice from articulation as song back to thought to its fluttering germination to its birthplace in fecund gracious silence

## Aandaal/Andal/Antal: The Autobiography Of A Goddess

Aandaal, 9<sup>th</sup> century mystic poet was elevated to goddess status within a few centuries of her birth in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. She was the only woman among the twelve Vaishnava saints, the Alvars who '*dived deep and drowned themselves in the love of god*' implying their complete devotion to Vishnu (The Preserver in the Hindu pantheon), often called Tirumaal, The Sacred Dark One in Tamil. Aandaal is unique in demanding to be taken as bride by Vishnu not as spirit by as living maiden. Her legend is that she, a foundling, was caught wearing the god's sacred garlands signifying she was his bride and chastised before her father – also an Alvar - realized her divine nature. When she was about sixteen she merged with her god at his temple in Srirangam, Tamil Nadu.

The Alvars, along with their counterparts, the Siva worshipping Nayanmars, are the earliest proponents of the *bhakti* movement, a devotional and socially radical form of worship that emerged in medieval India. With its emphasis on god as easily accessible to all, celebration of personal prayer and stress on composing in the poets' mother tongue --as against Brahminic Sanskrit -- it struck against the caste system. Even as kings 're-converted' to Hindu faith, the *bhakti* movement became a popular force instrumental in the retreat of established and wealthy Buddhist and Jaina sects and, simultaneously, curtailed Brahmin monopoly on religion.

Aandaal first work --composed when she was about thirteen-- the *Tiruppaavai /The Path to Krishna* is a lyrical devotion- doused description of vows undertaken by maidens to obtain a good husband; it is a song of congregational worship. In her second and last work, *Naachiyaar Tirumozhi / The Sacred Songs of The Lady* Aandaal sings of her individual need for spiritual and sexual congress with her chosen god and of an abundant female desire explicitly sited in the body which too is holy. Notwithstanding its overt sexuality, the *Naachiyaar Tirumozhi* and the *Tiruppaavai* are included in the circa 10<sup>th</sup> century compilation *Naalayiram Divyaprabhandaam (Four Thousand Divine Compositions)* that Tamil Vaishnavas consider on par with the Sanskrit Vedas.

Each of Aandaal's *pasurams/songs* is drenched in the blaze of the sacred embedded in every material that constitutes ephemeral life; at the same time she summons timeless grace, *arul* to illumine her. Her work calls to question all markers of identity and boundaries as she passionately sang for bliss to enter her body and spirit. Her youthfulness must be kept in mind when receiving Aandaal. Even today some question her existence, insisting she is a fabrication of her poet-saint father's imagination as a girl can't possibly display such erudition, erotic longing, mastery of language and poetic imagination bedded in hallowed verse. She conflates extreme violence with swooning surrender; splices needs birthed deep within the body with visions of Deep Time; she calls out. Yet I refrain from applying the term 'transgressive' to Aandaal as it suggests a deliberate breaking of rules. I think she didn't bother with any social conventions or rules – except those of poetry.

*Nacciyar Tirumoli/ The Sacred Songs of The Lady*

Song One Verse Six

*Aandaal/ Andal/Antal says:*

Remember each day through the thirty days of Pangu  
I brought beautiful maidens to your temple  
Each dawn we raised our voices in worship, I kept each  
Vow, performed every ritual for you Kamadeva.  
He glistens dark as thunderclouds, with the kaya flower's inkiness,  
The indigo of night lilies, his face beautiful  
As a blossomed lotus adorned with lotus eyes. May his glowing  
Sight light on me! This prayer I send to You

*Perhaps she's saying:*

Don't forget all month I've delighted your eyes  
and ears with your praises, God of Lust

Devoted, love-drenched, lambent as dawn  
I've opened my heart to You. Hear me, Tricky God!

Vast, mysterious, bewitchingly perfumed is  
his sacred sapphire allure; his face the mesmerizing

deep heaven through which his sun-eyes dazzle:  
may his gaze blaze me so I shimmer in grace

*And maybe this:*

i showered praises  
on You, return  
the favour

his luminous dark must release  
bliss  
flood me

my radiance must shoot  
to flood him  
in love I drown

Verse Seven

I worship You Manmatha with fresh-cut paddy, sugarcane,  
Sweetest jaggery, flattened rice, with  
The pour of mantras chanted by holy Brahmins  
And plead that he who is Vamana  
And Trivikrama too touches me with his sacredness  
Touches my breasts, my waist so slender  
I live only for this pleasure-- pray help me  
And enhance Your glory

*Perhaps she's saying:*

Paddy with wet roots intact, the full spread of the year's  
harvest I lay at your feet - and my pleas Mind-Churner.

My tribute may seem dwarfish as his Vamana avatar but  
recall as Trivikrama he expands to cover the heavens -as

does my love. I want his sky-hand touch on my full breasts,  
tiny waist, my desire for him expanding like him expanding

For the singular splendor of my acceptance  
Into his vastness I hymn You

*And maybe this:*

virginal i place myself before  
You as offering  
small

though i be my love grows  
like him who grows  
make his desire for me grow

large enough  
to swallow my smallness  
in sacred rapture

Verse Eight

Limbs dust-laded, hair uncombed, pale lips chapped, not  
Eating nor resting I do penance to You glorious  
Kamadeva, praying You realize the depth  
Of my devotion. But do You? I have a request:  
Make my Lord Keshava accepts me completely and make  
Me a woman complete, I crave his embrace.  
I will serve at his feet as an ecstatic slave whose single  
Aim in life is this. Bestow on me Your favour!

*Perhaps she's saying:*

I neglect myself in Your penance Kamadeva; I reject  
everything but my longing for Kesava, hoping

You accept my unswerving devotion. See  
through my worldly wrapping and concede my wish:

in this very life he takes me as I am, completes me  
by gathering myself to him, he fulfills my reason for living.

Make him fulfill his duty and I'll fulfill mine, cherishing  
my service at his feet. Pray permit this!

*And maybe this:*

see I cast the world aside see  
through me see  
my desire

aim me at him  
who must enter me make  
me woman make me his

make me full fill me full  
fulfill fillfull fillfull  
bliss