

Patriarchy - Women and Mental Health: A Study with Special Reference to Vaidehi's Short Story "Akku"

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ABSTRACT: *The human world, in accordance with the established cultural norms, incorporates entrenched gender roles, precisely the masculine and the feminine. As a consequence of this gender stereotyping, men and women are not merely distinguished as social groups; but on basis of hierarchical order. These socially constructed gender norms function as the clincher in the matter of political leadership, moral authority, control of property, social privilege etc. In this gender based hierarchical structure, male dominance over women in society is general. It should be emphasized that the gender based discrimination and unequal treatment that the patriarchy birthed poses a radical repercussion on the mental health of women, the subjugated class. The current paper is purposive to discover the portrayal of patriarchy and its influence on women and their mental health by Vaidehi, the most celebrated writer of Coastal Karnataka in particular Karavali Kundapura, in her short story "Akku".*

KEYWORDS: *Patriarchy, womanhood, motherhood, institution of marriage, emotional and psychological trauma, self-assertion, normalization, marginalization, and marriage symbols.*

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Gender is a critical determinant of mental health and mental illness. Gender determines the differential power and control men and women have over the socioeconomic determinants of their mental health and lives, their social position, status and treatment in society and their susceptibility and exposure to specific mental health risks. Vaidehi, in her short story "Akku", terrifically depicts the 'mad woman – Akku' in an attempt to render how the male dominant social and cultural consequences can affect the mental and emotional consequences of female community.

The portrayal of Akku evidently depicts her crude, undaunted and erratic manners.

"Akku always carries in her hand a *tuwal*, meaning towel. To her, a *tuwal* meant a large handkerchief. Men's handkerchief. No one knew whose handkerchief this was or how it had reached her. There is no need for anyone to break one's head over this. However, Akku is an entity that includes this towel. There is no greater work that she does apart from leaving her *tuwal* behind, or losing it somewhere and then looking for it. Let the housework go to the dogs, Akku would spend all her time searching everywhere for her *tuwal*."

"There is no independent soul in Doddajayya's house. The only one who does not know any restrictions is Akku the useless. She is excused even if she wanders around, with the explanation that she must somehow find a way of spending time. Since Akku does not have any of these restrictions, she never misses festive food in other houses."

"Akku stuffs snuff into her nose, moves her *tuwal* roughly, like a saw, beneath her nostrils, rubs her palm across her face and starts off, wiping her hand on her sari, swinging her *tuwal*, and dragging the long loose end of her sari in such a way as to sweep the road, many of them utter the riddle: 'Spread out mattress and swinging fan, where are you going for your meal today?' Everyone would ask her, 'Where is the Flag going today?' If she is inclined towards answering it, she would; otherwise, she would quip, 'To attend your grandfather's last rites!' and jump like a Jakani – a malevolent female yaksha- before gliding away on tiptoe."

"When she sits down for a meal, she eats all that is piled in front of her, without lifting her head even once, oblivious to the world around her. She would pick the sweets with her left hand, bring them home packed in her snuff-smelling handkerchief, sit in a corner and gobble them up, without leaving a single crumb for the crows."

"After getting beaten like this, she did not leave her room for fifteen days. She sat all by herself without uttering a single word. The room where she lived was meant for dumping all the unwanted things of the house. It was so crowded that there was not even enough space there to use the broom. The room, full of spider webs, was located in a far corner. People used to say that it was inhabited by spirits and ghosts."

The aforementioned elucidation of Akku by the narrator explores her disturbed mind and emotional disorder. Akku's sister Siriyatte's stance apropos of the treatment of society towards Akku - "It is all right to lose anything, but not one's sanity. If you turn insane, even the father and the mother who gave birth to you will be contemptuous of you. The entire village will be contemptuous of you!" divulges the gravity of society's remissness concerned with Akku.

Akku's lunacy is the upshot of trauma inflicted by an unequal patriarchal society. Akku had a vigorous inclination to adore her womanhood being a faithful wife and an affectionate mother. But her marriage to a delinquent man Sankappa wrecked her yearning. Being a husband, instead of fulfilling her desire, Sankappa ran away leaving her alone. This discontented conjugal state deranged her. Despite of her futile married life, Akku ornaments herself with 'marriage symbols' pointedly 'big vermillion mark on her head' and 'karimani' - "Akku has a big vermillion mark on her forehead. But she does not have a husband. She wears a karimani, a chain of black beads worn by married women, around her neck." This description of Akku sarcastically questions the established ideology of patriarchal society in relation to the marriage symbols as they are the replica of 'blessed marital status'.

Akku's eccentric attitude is also the ramification of the repression of her immense desire for biological offspring and her strong impulse to relish motherhood. It is indeed significant to take into account that Akku's the indicated nature has a profound social and cultural influence because a woman's desire for a child is not absolutely biological; but an amalgamation of social factors and brain chemistry. In Laura Carroll's "The Baby Matrix: Why Freeing Our Minds from Outmoded Thinking about Parenthood and Reproduction Will Create a Better World", it is stated that the deep feelings of wanting to have a child have their roots in a learned desire from strong, long-standing social and cultural prenatal influences. Melanie Holmes in her "The Female Assumption: A Mother's Story, Freeing Women from the View That Motherhood is a Mandate" argued that the perception in connection with motherhood as the ultimate expression of womanhood is plainly a socially constructed "assumption". However, the strong feeling of wanting to have a child, for many, is engendered by socially and culturally established "idealized picture of motherhood". Akku's want for biological offspring was prodigiously determined by her conventional patriarchal society wherein motherhood is viewed as the route of physical and emotional fulfillment for women. The following instances evidently showcase how a series of unfulfilled desires of Akku turned up as traumas:

"Of all the festive meals, her favorites are those organized for pregnant women and the naming ceremonies of infants. She especially likes sitting beside the pregnant woman, who normally wears a heavy floral decoration on her head. Akku would not move from this place. People who do not know her - sometimes the relatives of the father-to-be wonder at this individual and ask, 'Who is this crazy woman? Take her away from here!' But Akku never worries about such commands. Even at a naming ceremony, as long as she is there, she is the one who rocks the cradle. You might even find her singing a lullaby or two, after all the guests have left. Her high-pitched singing usually gets the comment: 'Akku, a group of crows are sitting on our window still to hear you sing!'"

"Ever since her husband left home following an ascetic, Akku took to pretending to be pregnant. Though she often took on this role, she never thought of it as fiction. Once, she was running here and there, complaining noisily of labor pain to anyone who stepped into the house. Doddajjaya thrashed her with a broom till it came apart, saying, 'I'll get rid of your stomach ache!' She bent down protecting her stomach and said, 'Appayya, my child will die. You will have to bear that sin!'"

"Akku was sitting inside a brass cradle. The chains meant for hanging it were disconnected and kept inside the cradle. She was holding them in her hand and swaying herself, as if she were swaying the cradle itself.

She said, 'Shh... Don't speak. I nursed the baby just now and it is sleeping.'

Vaasu Chikkappayya asked, 'Fool! When did you deliver the child?'

'Last night.'"

There was never an end to Akku's state of being pregnant and giving birth to an imagined baby. These make-believe pregnancies reveal the emotional and psychological trauma of Akku.

Akku's mysterious anomalous response to Siriyatte's dressing up for her wedding lambasts the ugliest tricks of patriarchy in regard to "beauty standards" - men only want the bodily beauty of a woman, but not her pure love. What happens on the day of Siriyatte's wedding is best narrated by Siriyatte herself.

'The groom's party arrived. I was alone as everyone had gone to the pandal. I was getting a little apprehensive. That was when Akku came in. I felt relieved when I saw her and said, "Oh, Akku!" But she replied brusquely, "Am I Akku or her shadow?" Then she stood at a distance and asked me, "Why do you make yourself pretty like this?" I did not reply. Her voice sounded cracked. I just sat looking at her. "Come here". She said.

"Why?" I asked her.

"When I call you, you must come", she said.

'I felt like calling someone. But I also thought I shouldn't do such a thing. I asked her, "Akku, are you not well? Without answering my question, she came straight to me and, in a second, tore off the beautifully arranged

flowers from my hair and said, "This much of decoration is enough for you. The one who marries you for your beauty will certainly not look after you. You can write this on the wall!"

Akku's disconsolate marital status coerced her to react in such a freaky manner. This act of Akku reveals her "deep understanding of patriarchy and its normalization in the institution of marriage" and stoutly attacks the institution of marriage where in women are considered property instead of humans with emotions, desires and rights over basic necessities and more importantly their own bodies and existence.

Akku was never embraced as a human being by her community. Another incident on the day of Siriyatte's wedding imparts the profundity of marginalization of Akku by her community.

"The day Siriyatte got married, Akku kicked up a big row. 'Where the hell is my husband? Get him here now!?' This was the only chorus that could be heard. She repeatedly threw her tuwal in the air, into the sky, and asked the same question. Vaasu Chikkappayya, who was standing there cleaning his teeth with a pick, showed her the cook Babu Bhatta, who was snoring in a corner, oblivious to all this commotion: 'See there, near the thatti....' He said, pointing to the frame made of woven coconut leaves, used to cover a part of the open courtyard. Bhanu Chikki brought a doll, threw it in in front of her and said, 'See, this is your husband! Nobody knew when he came here! He was calling you "Akku, Akku" till his voice got hoarse. I brought him here.'

But Akku's howling did not stop.

The more she howled the more they laughed.

One little boy called Sathyamaani couldn't stand it anymore. He ran to Babu Bhatta, shook him awake, and said, 'Babu Bhatta, Babu Bhatta, they are saying that you are Akku's husband!'. Then he bit his tongue and laughed loudly. Babu Bhatta replied, 'Ayyabba. If I marry her? She would tie my limbs together and shove me into the fireplace. It shouldn't be a surprise even if she sells me for three grains of puffed rice!'

The laughter was getting more and more intoxicated.

By then, Thammanna, who was dark like washed cinder and had been leaning against the wall cutting betel nut into two and watching everything as if it were some play being enacted, got up. He used to enact the female roles in Yakshagana. Swaying his hip, slapping his chest, he asked very dramatically, 'Darling, the one who is your husband is here. What can he do for you?' Saying this, he looked at the others and smiled."

Akku was recognized by her society as "the useless", "the crazy" and "a laughing stock" but not as a woman with desolation. It is important to point out the fact that women who have been normalized by a male order turn out to be as atrocious as the men. Doddattu's song to ridicule Akku, "Akku's vermilion is beautiful, Akku's curls are beautiful, Our Akku is the most beautiful in this world!", her act of encouraging Vasu to ask unembarrassed unkind question about Akku's imagined motherhood: "'Ask her, Vaasu, whether she has enough milk!' and Vaasu Chikkappayya asked Akku the same question without any shame. Akku adjusted her sari and said, 'I had. Just enough for the time being'" and her advice to Akku to stop abusing Sankappa when he returned: "Female! You can't abuse your husband in this manner – whatever kind of man he might be" sharply highlight how the patriarchal dynamic, via the process of normalization, conditioned women.

Akku never felt trepidation to question and denounce the men folk. Her reply to Anthanna - "A man called Anthanna asked her, 'Finally, did you find your husband? What is the latest on that?' Akku retorted, 'I have come after burying him.'" and her warning to Tammannayya - "Ehh! Tammannayya! You get out with your tail between your legs! Look to your own business – you want to interfere with me? Shall I tell with whom your wife had slept the other day?" show her bravery. It should be noted that, Akku, though her freakish nature, never surrendered herself to the normalization tactic of the male dominant society. She incessantly exhibited aberrant behavior as a mechanism to protest against the patriarchal ideology that ruined her womanly instincts by exploiting her relentlessly.

When Sankappa returned, all arrangements were enthusiastically done by the members of Doddajjaya's family to send Akku with her husband to get shut of her. But, the manner Akku repudiate to accept her husband and her intense words - "Give him the bus fare and send him back", "It is already three days and three nights since Akku died. Ask this lean fellow whether he has come to conduct my last rites!", "Did I leave anyone untouched? Tell me, which man in this town did I not have? Let us see who has the guts to deny this! Otherwise, how can one survive a marriage like this?", "What? I should go with him? Let him take my corpse!" manifestly portray her fierce disapproval of the channel of the male dominated society that attempted to restrain her personal liberty.

Akku, through self-assertion and self-realization, by continually behaving as lunatic found her own way to be happy in the male dominated society and thus challenged the typical dogmas of patriarchy and derided its act of despotism and marginalization. Vaidehi's creation - Akku appears as an insurrection against the patriarchal culture that was blameworthy for her not being normal state.

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