

Muddupalani (Mid-eighteenth Century)

In Nayaka and Maratha Tafijäviir, women were prominent literati. Rangdjarnma, the courtesan-wife of Vijayarāghava Nayaka, composed several virtuoso works, which also attest to her knowledge of many languages (this multilingualism was taken for granted in the courtly life of this period). A century later we find the poetess Muddupalani, a courtesan at the court of the Maratha king of Tafijäviir, Pratapa Singh (1739-63), to whom she dedicated her book, *Radhikei-santvanamu*. The work must have enjoyed a considerable popularity through the nineteenth-century, for a Telugu scholar employed by C. P. Brown, Paidipati Venkata Narusu, wrote a commentary on it. By the end of the nineteenth century, such works were, however, already proscribed by the government, driven by Victorian moral standards, as obscene.

Muddupalani's *irilgezra-kiivya*—an elaborate love-poem on the theme of Krsna's love for his new wife Ila and the consequent jealousy of his senior wife, Radha—offers a rich expression of a woman's sensibility and self-perception in the domain of sexuality. Such a focus *is* not unique to women poets of this period, since male poets, too, adopted a female voice: Ksetrayya is a major example. Muddupalani's poetry is, on the whole, very close to that of such poets, although not of the same calibre. She is interesting in her own right for the unmediated articulation of a courtesan's view of love and for the inventiveness she brought to bear upon a rather routinized Krsna-theme.

Following the model of Krsnadevaraya, Muddupalani reports that Krsna came to her in a dream as a little boy and asked her to compose this work on 'Appeasing RAdhika.' She reported her dream to her guru, Viraraghava-de^sika, in the company of other scholars, and they confirmed the revelation and advised her to compose the book and dedicate it to the god. Muddupalani also cleverly puts her own family genealogy in the mouths of these pandits, in the preface to her book; as a courtesan, she was reluctant to describe her family herself, as other poets usually did. It remains striking that this courtesan does possess a publicly accessible genealogy, as if she were a queen.

How to Read a Book'

When you are reading, and you come to a thorn,
pull it out. Use your knowledge
to heal the book. Don't meddle with poets
who make a living out of finding fault.
They're bad news.

Radha Instructs Krsna's New Bride, in the Arts of Love²

[Radha has dressed up the young bride, as Krsna waits in the bedroom.]

'How will the lips of this young girl
suffer his bites? He *is* the killer of the demon Kaitabha.
How will her breasts bear his clawing? He's a lion of a cowherd.
Can her tender thighs take his vigour? He wrestled Cantlra
to the death.
Will her smooth body survive? He's an elephant-killer.'
All the women were joking like this, and Ila bowed her head
in shyness, her face all red. Radhika drew close to her
and offered comfort:

Radhika-santvanamu [Madras: Emesco, 1972] *Avatirika* 6.

² *Ibid.* 1.65-8, 70-1, 74-6.

