

Akku has a big *kumkuma* on her forehead. But she has no husband. There is a blackbead chain round her neck. Keeping that blackbead chain in a corner of the 'nagandikae'- a wooden shelf in the wall - Akku is also given to the habit of gallivanting everywhere.

"Akku, where is your husband?" when somebody queried she could drive them to the brink of extinction. Not always. Sometimes she may even huddle as if brooding. At other times whatever the provocation she has a way of smirking, crookedly shaking her head, and keeping her silence.

She was always to be seen with a 'tuwaal' in her hand. According to her a 'tuwaal' was a handkerchief. A man's handkerchief. Nobody knows whose it is, how it came into her hand. There was not even any need to bother one's head about it. It was just accepted that Akku always went with this 'tuwaal'. Dropping it, misplacing it, losing it - there was no other occupation for Akku than to eternally keep searching for it. Let the dogs and wolves go eat the housework! She would not cease searching for the 'tuwaal', poking into every nook and corner again and again.

In Ajjayya's house no one is independent. If anyone has a voice it is only Vasu-chikkappa. If anyone dares to speak up it is only his wife, Bhanu-chikki. If there is anyone fearing nobody it is Doddajjayya's younger sister, Doddatthae. For everyone she is Doddatthae. If there is anyone without any constraints whatsoever it is Akku-pottu, a dummy. Roam around as she will, they would only murmur, "How else will she pass her time!" and excuse her. A dummy does not mean that there was real dumbness from the very beginning. Others in the house were there to churn the buttermilk, salt and spice the curry, fetch the water, dress up in silks and jewellery to attend marriages and *upanayanams*, etc., the men

STORY

Akku

○ Vaidehi

Translated from Kannada by C. Vimala Rao

attended to the business and reported to Ajjayya, stood as the pillars in the house, without opening their lips in spite of the burdensome responsibilities.

Going unchecked in this manner Akku had not missed a single dinner invitation in anybody's house. With a face sagging on the right side, lusterless eyes restlessly darting around, lips forever attempting to close over prominent buck teeth, even



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less than four feet in height, Akku, stuffing snuff into her nostrils, rubbing the 'tuwaal' vigorously like a hacksaw across her nose, wiping the face all over with her hand and smearing her *sari* with it, her long *sari-pallu* sweeping the road, the 'tuwaal' waving about in her hand - when she set out like this, there were many who quipped, "Spread out the mat, wave around the hand-fan! Where to, for dinner today?!" A few made bold to ask her to her face, "Where is the entourage headed?" If she was in a proper mood she might answer. Otherwise rudely snapping, "To your grandfather's funeral!" she would spring away on her toes like a spirit!

Once she fell to her food, without raising her lowered head, the food was

just demolished. She took great care in receiving the *bhaksha* - the speciality sweets - in her left hand, wrapping them up in that same snuff-soaked 'tuwaal' and bringing them home, sitting by herself in a corner on the front porch, and finishing them by gobbling them all down without even dropping a crumb for the crows. The dinner invitations that she never missed were for *seemantha* - 'baby shower,' performed in the seventh month of pregnancy, where food was served to fulfill the cravings of the pregnant one, and for the ceremony of naming the baby. Following in the custom of the expectant woman, adorning her hair with a trellis of floral strings tied with seven varieties of flowers like jasmine, abbaligae, chrysanthemum, iruvanthagae, etc, and looking like someone crushed under the load, she sat near the pregnant young woman and would not budge. When those who were unacquainted with her or someone from the young woman's family might frown and object to her presence and say, "Who is this woman, looking like a disheveled-haired devamma - a demigoddess! Send her out of there!" and someone from her own family might fearfully murmur, "Akku, come, sit here outside!" Akku turned a deaf ear to them. She was like that even when she went to a naming-ceremony. It was only at the time of returning home that she would let go of the cradle-rope that she had gripped in her hand to rock the cradle. She might even sing a lullaby or two after all the guests had left. But although she sang full-throatedly,

some people around had to snigger and make a snide comment, "Akku, all the crows had flown to the window to listen to your cuckoo-voice, you know!" , otherwise they would not be able to sleep that night.

It was on one such occasion that Siriyatthae's marriage took place. About an incident that happened on the wedding day - it has to be heard in Siriyatthae's own words.

"The groom's party had arrived. There was no one near me when I was waiting. Everyone had hurried away into the wedding choultry. I was feeling a bit frightened. At that time Akku came in. 'Oh! Akku!' I exclaimed. You can say that did it. 'Hoon - hoon; is this Akku or her shadow?' Akku answered back sharply. She stood at a little distance and she stared hard at me, 'Why have you decorated yourself like this?' she demanded. I did not speak. Her voice broke out shrilly, I sat looking at her. 'Come here!' she said. 'Why?' I questioned. 'If I say 'come' you should come', she said. At first I thought I should call someone, but then also felt, 'maybe not!'

'Akku, aren't you well?' I asked. Without any word she rushed forward, plucked out the flowers that had adorned my hair before I could even blink my eyes, and said, 'Enough of this beautification! If he marries you because of your beauty for certain he will not stay by you, write that on the wall!' I tell you, honestly, I was struck dumb! Although a little short she was somewhat good-looking. Akku was! But at that moment she seemed like a big demon. Just for a second! But then she was none else than Akku ! I felt very sorry. Not because the flowers were pulled out but because of the drained face of Akku. 'How stiffling hot!' she fanned



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herself with one hand, wiped her face all over with her 'tuwaal' in her other hand and she walked out of the room. If I had reported about this happening to Vasu, would he have left her alone? He would have beaten her up, put her in the dark room and bolted the door. In front of all those guests in the wedding house, eyeing each other and vying with each other in their splendour, how could Akku be allowed freely in their midst, with her abrasive rubbing of her nostrils all the time with her 'tuwaal'? Doddathae then came in, scolded me roundly quite unheeding of my being the bride, combed my hair once again and bedecked it with the flowers!"

The day Siriyatthae was to leave home after her wedding Akku threw tantrum after tantrum. "Where did my husband die? Bring him back to me this instant!" she kept repeating only these words, nothing else. Beating the air, beating the heavens, again and again with her 'tuwaal', she wailed.

Vasu-chikkappayya, who was standing there cleaning his teeth with a toothpick exclaimed, "There! Look there! Inside that slit in the pandal-flap - the straw matting!" pointing to the cook, Babu-bhatta, who was stretched out there snoring, quite unaware of all that was happening

near him. Bhanu-chikki came with a doll in her hand, threw it in front of Akku saying, "Your husband! No one saw when he came. 'Akku! Akku!' he was calling repeatedly in a loud voice. I brought him here!" Akku's shrieks did not cease. As her screaming rose higher so did the laughter. A cheeky shorty, a lad named Satya-maani, ran up to Babu-bhatta, shook him awake, 'Babu-bhatta! Babu-bhatta, they say you are Akku's husband' he said, biting his tongue on a snigger.

"Ayyayyabbah! Hitched to her? She will separate my limbs and stuff them in the stove! She might even trade me for a handful of puffed-rice - it wouldn't be surprising!" retorted Babu-bhatta. The laughter rose to a pitch of intoxication. In the meantime the man called Tammannayya, dark as a piece of charcoal, sitting leaning against the wall cutting a piece of arecanut and observing all the drama taking place upto now, got up and came near. As one used to acting female roles in *Yakshagaana* shows, he swayed alluringly, flourished his arm, thumped his breast, saying in a shrill voice "Dearest! I am the man called your husband, I have come. What service am I to render?" he asked theatrically, sniggering and stealing a look around at those assembled nearby. On that instant Akku leapt on him like lightning and bit him hard. Like one who had sinned she quickly dashed inside, poured a jugful of water from the water-pot kept in the corner, and gulped it down, "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?" she yelled, brandishing her voice like a dagger, and went into the room and quickly shut the door. Another burst of

laughter from everyone went round, quite snuffing out Tammannayya's laughter. Quickly Vasu-chikkappayya added, "Let it be, Tammannayya, doesn't everyone know that this creature is senseless? Don't you feel hurt," he tried to commiserate with him. Tammannayya's wife, who was sitting nearby with her head resting on her folded knee watching everything and laughing, stuffed her *sari-pallu* into her mouth to stifle her sobs and ran inside. Vasu-chikkappayya exclaimed, "Eh-h! Bhanu, go and console her. Owing to this one, even respectable people will get hanged!"

"Straying here and there without check, these days this one is picking up foul language," he complained.

Having slammed the door in that manner and fallen asleep it was only the next day after the great Time-keeper had mowed down the hour to 1 o'clock that Akku woke up: Although word had passed round, "Not to worry that one, let it be." When a youngster called Anthanna enquired, "What happened, in the end, Akku? Was your husband found - or what?" "I buried him and came back," Akku replied.

Akku's face was swollen with sleeplessness. It was like the face of someone who had verily made a cremation and washed up on return.

"Then what is the fate of your children?" someone whispered.

"What is the use of keeping this lech, then? It is quite clear," she spat out.

"That lech's condition, in that case! Raarria-Raama!" someone's whisper was followed by a ripple of giggles but it didn't appear as if she had heard them.

Looking at Akku huddled against a pillar, her hair unkempt like that of a condemned creature, with that *kumkuma* on her forehead, Doddathae - who was sitting on the plank of the cutting-blade instrument,

shook with merriment. Given to composing funny airs on everything at the slightest pretext, Doddathae, who was slicing banana-rind in circles and winding the wiry banana-rind-string lengths round her finger, "Akku's *kumkuma* is beautiful/ Akku's curly hair is beautiful/ Akku herself is beautiful to all the world!" she drawled tunefully. Having made an effort to rope in and rule a wastrel husband who was given to wandering the streets until he finally croaked, Doddathae had sighed "It would have been a torture if he had lived, it is good that he is dead." She now passed her time pulling Akku's leg, cutting and drawing out string-lengths from green lianas, and growing increasingly frustrated as she neared sixty. Bow-legged as she was Doddathae appeared better seated, she was nearly bent double when she was standing.

On hearing her singing Akku held her finger to her nose and brought out the snot in a rush in a big sneeze. She wiped her fingers on her *sari-pallu* and looked round, asking, "Where is my *'tuwaal'*?"

"When I peeped out in the morning it was exiting from the gate. When I asked 'Where are you going?' 'To Manja's 'hoatlle' - hotel - to have coffee,' it said," returned Satya-maani and, having said that immediately turned on his heels and made good his escape. Instead of rushing to chase him Akku sat still and laughed. After she was spent laughing she blew on her nose hard, turned to Doddathae, "Bow-legged Subbi, I shall bend your back into a bow and tuck it at my waist!" she said. "Eh-h, *punyathagithe!* - blessed woman! My husband is dead and gone to hell, at least up to now I have survived, don't you drive me to distraction!" she said in a mock-supplicating tone, even as she murmured, "Pitiable creature!" under her breath.

"Why pitiable? What have I done? I am not a 'husband-dead-widow.' Just because my husband has gone to wander all over the country eating junk food at roadsides! Why should I be the one to be pitied? I am she who fought and threw back that *addadamaanae* neighbour. Thimmappayya, when he assaulted me! Hear, oh! Hear, *gaadminni* - dear lady!," what else she would have said was anybody's guess - but just then Doddajjayya entered. On the slightest sound of his staff, and his heavy footsteps, most assembled there had vanished!

"Eh-h, Vasu!"

Vasu-chikkappayya came, flying like Hanumantha himself.

"Take this, give that one a hiding-bring down her gall! " On those very words of Doddajjayya screaming as if welts had erupted on her body from a real thrashing, Akku scrambled to her feet, shouting, "Ayyayyoo! They are killing me!", dashed inside the corner-room and bolted the door.

Akku was Siriyatthae's own elder sister. She was 'Akku' even to Siriyatthae. So also an infant born today might call her 'Akku,' there was no going by the relationship as far as the mode of address was concerned. There must have been a long age-gap between Akku and Siriyatthae. But even more than Siriyatthae Akku looked younger. According to Siriyatthae's reckoning of family events by the time I myself had grown up Akku's life had already taken this present turn. Siriyatthae would always say, "Whatever is lost one need not care, dear girl, but the head should be balanced. Otherwise it is bitterness to the father and mother who gave birth - it is bitterness to the whole world."

Ever since her husband had followed in the footsteps of a *sanyasi* Akku's make-believe pregnancies had never ever appeared falsehoods to her. Once she was screaming that she had a stomach-ache, running up and

down, announcing it to whoever set foot in the house and generally creating a furore “I shall cure your stomach-ache!” Doddajjaya would say and rain blows on her with her fists. Akku would shout, “Appayya! My baby will die, you will go to hell!” And would bend low as if to protect her stomach. After such a beating without opening her lips for fifteen days she would keep to herself inside the room, groaning and moaning. The corner-room in which she stayed was one of those into which all discarded things were thrown. It was so tiny even a fist would not go into it - a really small space left after everything else had been constructed, standing all by itself in a corner. It was even rumoured that ghosts and demons dwelt in it.

Once when we were playing some childish domestic games a jingling sound was audible near the room. Our throats became dry. Getting up on shaking legs one of the boys went and reported the matter to Vasu-chikkappayya and immediately Vasu-chikkannayya and Anthanna came running. When we also trailed behind them, “What

kind of boldness is this in these female kids! Will you get out or not?”, they shooed us away like cattle. We pretended to leave but slipped back quietly. Pushing the door gingerly with the tip of his little finger, “Oh-Ho! Antanna! This is the demon!”, he chuckled. As soon as we heard him we peered in from the corner of our eyes. Akku was sitting inside the brass cradle. Clutching the dismantled chain of the cradle that was lying in it she was shaking it, pretending as if she was rocking the cradle.

“Sh-hh! Don’t talk! The baby has just finished suckling and has fallen asleep,” she said. Vasu-chikkappayya hooted with laughter!

Doddatthae who walked in then provoked another round of laughter by commenting, “Ask her if the milk was plentiful!” and shamelessly Vasu-chikkappayya repeated the question. “Yes, it sufficed for now,” she replied

“No panic, no bother! - When did the birth take place?”

“Last night.”

That whole morning passed with chatter about the ‘demon’ that was lying in the corner-room after giving birth. If left to lie in like that she might be really possessed by a ghost or devil, Vasu-chikkappayya worried but



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Doddatthae reassured him, “Didn’t she knock out the real devil who assaulted her! Don’t you have any fears!” The very next day Akku was pregnant again. These pregnancies will never cease. The husband will never return.

Amidst this state of affairs the news that Akku’s husband had come first reached our ears when we were sitting near the cupboard in a room upstairs, reading some story books. As soon as he had arrived in town, ‘Akku is pregnant,’ someone had blurted out, it appeared. With his heart flying out of his mouth he had turned back, it was reported. In the end it was

disclosed to him that it was all just a rumour doing the rounds and he had then come back, it was further reported.

Sitting on the verandah he was talking to Doddajjaya in a phlegmatic voice. He did not have a big stomach, heavy moustache, and short stature, as I had imagined. He was emaciated, his limbs were like thin sticks, his eyes were like frog’s eyes. *Inamundu*-a loin cloth — covered with such a thick layer of dirt that a *haaravana* seed would have burst into sprout if placed on it, he was sitting hunched up on the floor. Ajjayya was sitting in his chair without even the trace of a smile on his grim face. Even the very tip of his moustache seemed to be regarding Akku’s husband like a dog that was worth just three pennies.

Akku’s husband was not sitting still. He was moaning and jerking like a watersnake. Not that he had deserted her. But it was because he had gone behind that infernal *swami*. Was it not? Had his memory been washed clean? Once gone he had remained away. The *swami* had wandered up to Kashi, and the Himalayas —

he had also wandered. He need not be considered a worthless man. Earnings would be good in the company of the *swami*. He had indeed earned well himself - etc., etc., he droned on. Ajjayya was making no sound. He did not even glance in his direction.

Besides everything if Akku is to be summoned, where indeed is she? Not anywhere in the house, the information was confirmed.

“Search for her, - but only in this vicinity!” it was ordered.

When Vasu-chikkappayya went looking for her he found her on the bund of the nearby lake.

When he said, “Don’t you jump into the water-tank! Your husband has come, you come and see,”

“You give his ‘bus-charge’ and send him back. It was on seeing him that I came here!” she is reported to have thrown back at him.

“I went through some gymnastics and fetched her. If you abuse her in any way she will jump into the water, you watch out! I am not answerable,” he announced wiping the perspiration on his forehead.

Entering from the back door Akku refused to come inside the house. With her right leg bent back, at the knee and the foot resting against the wall behind her, she stood gawkily near the paddy-husking *varalu* - the large pounding bin and pestle that were standing there, empty. She rolled around her eyes restlessly.

Doddajjaya waited for a minute and then said, “Move, you yourself.” to Sankappa, Akku’s husband, and they both came in.

“It is already three days and three nights since Akku died. Ask this nerd whether he has come to perform her last rites!” Akku’s words blazed. “Take a look, the result of throwing a pearl before swine like you!”

With his stubble-haired head bent low Sankappa was standing without a word.

“At last you have come! Did you run out of young women in town?” As if acquiescing with Doddathae’s comment Doddajjaya looked at him with disdain.

Before Sankappa could open his lips Akku butted in, “You think I was myself missing out on everything! Would anyone venture to say that I had left some man or the other in town untouched? Let the male who will say so come forward! What else do you expect on being yoked to a cheating husband like this one?”

Sankappa stood there like a eunuch, Ajjayya rasped at Akku, “Woman! Will you shut your mouth?”

“It is because of your bragging like this that your head went down and feet went up!” Doddathae said.

“Sankappa, what ever happened has happened. You suffer the fate that you brought upon yourself. Whether foolish or simple-minded she belongs to you. Stay here for two days and then leave with her!” pronouncing thus Doddajjaya finally walked out.

“What? Go with this man? Over my dead body!” Akku declared.

“Female! You can’t abuse your husband in this manner - whatever kind of man he might be” said Doddathae.

Sankappa did not step forward. Akku turned in a flash and stamped out. No one made a sound.

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Sankappa stayed for two nights. Akku continued to sleep in the corner-room. She did not put even her foot inside the house. At the edge of the verandah with his legs folded up Sankappa used to sleep. Like an innocuous Bhodala-sankara, as if guileless. In the morning Doddathae was whispering to Vasuchikkappayya, “Last night I was sitting near the bottom step of the staircase and watching. Wondering whether this fellow had truly turned into a *sanyasi* or not. This man here—in the dead of night didn’t he quietly rise and step towards the corner-room? Observing so far I went in and fell asleep!”

When her words were overheard by us as we were sitting nearby and stringing flowers into a garland for the *poojae* of the gods. “In front of today’s young girls who grow into maturity before you realize it you can not even whisper so much as ‘soo!’ They instantly become all ears!” Doddathae exclaimed.

We felt like folding up our ears! Wasn’t it this same Doddathae who had prodded Vasu to ask whether Akku’s breast milk had flushed properly? If it so pleased her, without

even heeding who was around, she talked as she wished. Only in our presence she wanted to appear prim and proper. Isn’t she herself a woman then? All these internal arguments were being strung along the knots of the garland which was growing longer and longer, when Akku’s parade entered. With the same kind of appearance as a demon. She came in talking like popping corn.

“Oy! O hoy! You - named Doddathae - where did you die? Come, come, come, come quickly! There is a great deal to be talked about. Fetch the platter with the betel leaves and arecanut —!”

On hearing her jovial tone Doddathae remarked, “This *randy* one behaves as if she is on her last breath!!” and she came forward laughing to herself. All of us trailed behind Doddathae - the other members of the family, servants, etc. Sitting and crossing her legs carelessly and swinging them like an elephant’s trunk Akku said in a brash tone, “O! Hoy! Did you hear the news? This fellow charged into the room and caught hold of me saying, ‘You are not any loose woman of the street!’ *Thoothe!* Pie-bred creature! Get out! Don’t touch me, I’m pregnant’ I retorted. ‘Who impregnated you?’ he asked.

‘Addadamae Thimappayya,’ I returned.

Even then he did not let me go. ‘I’ll give you your dues’ I said, pulled out the cradle-chain and thrashed him again and again and again - thrashed him right and left. Where was this useless creature? Tie up your threadbare loin-cloth and run! — Say what you will, Doddathae, compared to this creature that addadamae Thimappayya is less objectionable! What a chest! What a pair of lips!...” The staccato sound of Doddajjaya’s approaching staff was heard. Vasuchikkappayya clamped his hand over Akku’s mouth and dragged her into

the kitchen closeby that was used for cooking on special occasions. Pulling out a stick of firewood from the pile there he brought it down repeatedly on Akku's back, like beating a garment on the washing-stone . If you roam around speaking of river, pond, lake, well and such things not just addadamana Thimmappayya, even his father will catch hold of you! Hereafter all this roaming around shall stop!". The thrashing was continuing.

"Who knows whether he truly touched her or not? Believing this one's mindless boasting attack him supposing we go and - we might be the ones who will be forced to swallow a slap on the cheek," said Antanna soberly as he rolled a bit of arecanut in his mouth.

"Dash it! Of all people that Thimmappayya! Could you say his sperm is even capable of impregnating and bringing forth offspring?" he guffawed like sawing wood.

"Bring Sankappa here. Let husband and wife get out of here once and for all. Let them take a rope for their feet and necks, if necessary."

Even the pillars in the house were chattering by now. Doddajjaya just then descended on the scene. He was shaking in anger. "What kind of curse is this in my life?" he groaned. "Thrash her! Thrash her a few more times! If she drops dead let her die! There is no one to cry for her -" he said. Vasuchikkappayya continued to rain blows.

"Ayyayyoh! Vasu is killing me! Appayya! He is beating me. He is killing my baby, Appayya! You ask this fellow why he was sitting and waiting on Thammannaya's verandah day-before-yesterday, Appayya - -!" He hit her on her screaming mouth. No one stopped him. No one intervened either to say



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'no' or pull her away from him. Every minute the *size* of those gathered around was growing. It appeared as though they stood there wishing the scene to go on forever. There was a matching momentum to the screaming and the thrashing. When Bhanu-chikki with her arms on her hips observed, "If it is not craziness, what else is it? This one can make a fool of anyone . . . ," her voice seemed to be edged with tears.

"If I had been beaten up like this I would have just died. Isn't this why they say crazy people are very strong!" said another woman's voice. Strike her as he might on her mouth, Akku's bawling did not cease. Neither did the abusing stop. She did not die.

Exhausted, leaving Akku there, "All of you — clear out!" Vasuchikkappayya ordered. Soon after that he himself came out, shut the door quickly and bolted it. Fear of Akku rushing to the door immediately to bang on it and demand her freedom were belied. Our desire to secretly unbolt the door when no one was looking also lost its warmth. Akku remained inside, waving her '*tuwaal*' through the small window and shouting, "That Thammannaya's wife is waiting for you - go, look, run, run fast! Shameless man! Come and hit me, let me see...!" □

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