



BRAHMANICAL PATRIARCHY: A PARADIGM OF PATRIARCHAL POWER

GLADIN ROSE*, Dr. JANAKY SREEDHARAN

*Research Scholar,

Department of English, University of Calicut, Kerala, India



GLADIN ROSE

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ABSTRACT

Many regional writers have highlighted the Brahmin way of life, particularly the orthodoxies and patriarchal oppression practiced on women among the upper caste Brahmins in India. From the Kannada literary scene, M.K.Indira's novel *Phaniyamma* and U.R.Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* exhibit the double standards of Brahmanical patriarchy. Both these novels break the pretensions of the Brahmins and attack their superstitious credence. This paper seeks to explore how power is operated in Brahmanical patriarchy. Generally Brahmanical patriarchy uses power to subjugate women as passive victims of patriarchal oppression and in the case of men they use power for male domination. This paper analyzes the hypocrisy and two-facedness of Brahmins in executing their power. Through *Samskara* Ananthamurthy questions the Brahmanical roots and the customs and rituals associated with it. He also hits at the caste and religious codes, traditional and cultural values. In *Phaniyamma*, M.K.Indira portrays the psychology of widows caught in the web of male-power structures.

Keywords: Hegemony, Brahmanical patriarchy, Male domination, Female subjugation

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The roots of all patriarchal societies lie in the ideology of male domination and subsequently its manifestation of the repression of women. Patriarchy asserts its hegemony over women through various ways, mainly by means of gender discrimination which is perpetuated out of the creation or construction of various gendered identities. Since ancient days, Brahmanical patriarchy is one of the patriarchies which continue to hold its authority over women and the other sections of the society in India because of being the first in the caste hierarchy. In order to understand the deeply entrenched system of Brahmanical patriarchy and its manifestations on Hindu society, it is important to look at its relation to the pervasive

caste system of India. The Hindu society has been classified into four different sections on the basis of caste—Brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and sudras. Exploring the nature of Brahmanical patriarchy, Uma Chakravarti, a feminist historian suggests that "it is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes". This structure is maintained through strict endogamous marriages without annihilating the caste system by the Patriarchal codes (Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste* 34).

The two writers from the Kannada literary scene, U.R. Ananthamoorthy and M.K. Indira have challenged and disclosed the hypocrisies of

Brahmanical patriarchy and the hollowness of its tradition in their novels *Samskara* (1965) and *Phaniyamma* (1976) respectively. As part of the new awakening in Kannada literature viz. Navya movement, these two writers have disseminated the new social ideas and proclaimed change especially in the orthodox Brahmin life.

Among the regional writers as well as the Indian writers who voiced against the disparity in the treatment of men and women in Brahmanical patriarchy, U. R. Ananthmurthy and M. K. Indira have highlighted the double standards of Brahmins and the predicament of women and widows more authentically in their writings. In this paper, my attempt is to explore how power is operated in Brahmanical patriarchy and how this power has been differently used by the Brahmanical patriarchy in the lives of men and women to aver its hegemony. This study seeks to analyze the operation of power in the lives of Brahmins in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

Phaniyamma articulates the story of a young girl named Phaniyamma, who is married to Nanjunda at the age of nine and the boy dies due to snake bite resulting in her widowhood two months after her marriage. She entered widowhood even before she attained maturity. By describing the orthodoxies like the observance of *madi*¹ purity and the Brahmanical conceptualizations of widowhood through various repressive customs and rituals of the nineteenth century, *Phaniyamma* points out the harshness of tradition and also shows spinelessness of the Brahmanical patriarchy to question the right or wrong of their legacy that was handed down to

¹ *Madi* means ritually-pure. *Madi* women means widows. To become *madi* is a kind of life where a widow has to observe certain conducts like she should wear *madi* clothes (white clothes) every day after bathing; she should pray before god and in front of the *tulasi* (a sacred plant), recite the Gita and the Ramayana; then she should have to work in the kitchen till midnight. After becoming *madi*, she would remain indoors for one year. Not only that, *madi* women eat one meal a day and fast at night. They have also some taboos of touching. If anything polluted had touched by a *madi* woman, before eating anything she would have to bathe again and wear *madi* clothes.

them over centuries. It can be seen that widowhood is the one phase in which Brahmanical patriarchy uses its power to subjugate the widowed women. After becoming a widow, Phaniyamma turns out to be the point of focus of the entire community. The lives of these marginalized figures have become the center of attention in the writings of M.K. Indira. Through *Phaniyamma*, Indira has explored and mapped the complex transformation of a young girl to that of an unfortunate widow. Here patriarchy marks, categorizes, and trains widowed women in accordance with its ideological formulations. Why widowhood is an odious situation in Brahmanical patriarchy is well exemplified in *Phaniyamma*.

Indira points out that in the nineteenth century the decisions regarding the social and religious matters were taken by the Swami in the temple at Sringeri². As per the rule, they should follow the instructions of Swami or else they will have to face the dreadful punishment of excommunication. Indira writes:

Since the girl is still a child, remove the signs of marriage on the eleventh day and have her wear a white sari. Don't touch her hair. She shouldn't show her face to anyone until she menstruates. Nor can she perform any *madi* task. The fourth day after she menstruates, her hair must be shaved off and she must be made to take up *madi* for the rest of her life. (Indira 46)

Phaniyamma explains how patriarchy insists or imposes some rigid rules and orthodox customs on the hapless young widow to make her unattractive. "On the eleventh day the old men and women of the village mercilessly broke the bangles of the nine-year-old girl. They wiped off her turmeric and *kumkum* and tore off her *mangalasutra*. (Indira 47) Apart from all these, they imposed restrictions like dietary control and other similar restrictions to curb the sexuality of a widow. As Chakravarti puts it, in her article, *Ideological and Material Structure of widowhood* a widow has to give up all forms of adornment like the use of *kumkuma*, the red mark on the forehead, the *sindoora* applied in the parting

² Established by Adi Sankaracharya. There are five such temples including the ones at Sringeri and Dwaraka (Indira 138).

of the hair and the use of *haldi* (turmeric) because these items are associated with sexuality and reproduction (75).

Apart from the above mentioned markers of widowhood, the two other important symbols are also used to indicate the status of widowhood that are the white, ochre and maroon coarse sari, and the tonsured head among the higher castes Hindus in the southern and western India. The *Vridhha Harita*, a text written roughly between A.D.600 and A.D. 900, XI.205-10 states about the appearance of a widow after the death of her husband, "The widow should give up chewing betel nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments, and dyed clothes, taking food from vessels of bronze, taking two meals a day, applying collyrium to the eyes; she should wear only white garments, curb her senses and anger, and sleep on the ground."(qtd. in Shadow Lives 38)

Phaniyamma's menstruation can be seen as a point of entry to her inevitable fate of widowhood, after four years of her widowed life. As part of these elaborate ceremony of making or marking a woman as widow, she has undergone the last auspicious rite, the ritual of tonsure in her life.

Through this *Phaniyamma* explores how the body of the widow has been considered as a site to conduct all forms of atrocities by the deeply entrenched system of Brahmanical patriarchy. However, through various mechanisms of repression, patriarchy asserts its authority over females. Here the ritual of tonsure can be seen as an attempt to annihilate and deprive both the social and psychological self of a widow. Widows have been treated as mere subjects in the hands of the cruel system. Using its power, the patriarchal discourses make the life of widow a miserable one. After the ritual of tonsure,

No fasts and *pujas* and ceremonies for her now, unlike the other girls. She realized that until she died she would have to eat one meal a day and live with a shaven head. But what could she do? This happened to every woman whose husband died. No one had wronged her. If there was any mistake, they would be

excommunicated by the temple at Sringeri. (Indira 49)

Here Phaniyamma meekly accepts the general conduct set by the patriarchy to be followed by widows after the death of their husbands.

In order to examine the possible implications associated with the notion of 'power', one should analyze the theorizations of power in the writings of Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, who observes that power is not only the one which works vis-à-vis repression or inhibition, or male domination but as the one which works through institutionalized discourses which include action, knowledge and being. Hence the exercise of power is possible through the control of individuals as mere subjects (Brooker 206). Similarly, Uma Chakravarti suggests that power is operated in Brahmanical patriarchy in three ways and the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy is deeply embedded in the conception of women's general subordination and men's domination. By creating an ideology and entrusting the power to discipline and punish the erroneous women by the kinsmen and the king, Brahmanical patriarchy confines people in its debilitating power structure. At the ideological level, Brahmanical patriarchy internalizes the notion of *pativrata* which is the creation of Brahmanical patriarchy to ensure the chastity of their women and thereby it thrusts and naturalizes the duty to safeguard ones purity in women (Chakravarti, Gendering caste 73). Thus Brahmanical patriarchy has been keeping its power packed institutionalized form till now.

The focal attention of Brahmanical patriarchy lies in women's sexuality and it considers women as "mere receptacles and transmitters, never the carriers" of their vansa line (Chakravarti, Gendering caste 32). They are always in fear of the lower caste men's sexuality to avoid the dreadful mixing of castes. Hence the upper caste women are under the constant surveillance of the patriarchy and thereby they ensure the purity of their vansa line. According to the Brahmanical prescriptive texts, woman has no social existence apart from her husband. In the case of a widow, Brahmanical patriarchy considers her as a person who is physically alive and socially dead (Chakravarti,

ideological 64). Hence she is doubly controlled by the Brahmanical patriarchy. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) while analyzing the power relations attributed on the body, Foucault points out that, such deeply embedded power relations are not only related to the biological aspect of the body but also historical and it "subjects to power relations which restrain it, invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it, to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (qtd in Barry 86). In a similar vein, Kumkum Sangari in the *Politics of the Possible* remarks that "patriarchies, function simultaneously through coercion or threat and practice of violence, through making a wide social consensus drawn from and dispersed over many areas of social life and through obtaining in various ways, different degrees of consent from women". (Sangari 371)

Through *Phaniyamma*, Indira discloses the double standards of Brahmanical patriarchy. She mocks at the *madi* purity and touching taboo of Brahmanical patriarchy and wonders at the uncomprehending rules of patriarchy. She broods over the pathetic plight of widowhood and thinks that,

When her own blood flowed every month, a woman was defiled. She had to sit outside the house for three days. On the fourth day, she was purified, and could then become *madi*. Many women in Phaniyamma's family continued to menstruate after the fourth day, but they were still considered *madi*. The widows who were touched by the barber were still *madi*. But those widows who had full heads of hair were considered absolutely impure even though they had never been touched by a man. Hundreds of questions about these things plagued Phaniyamma. (Indira 91)

At the ideological level, the motive behind elevating the discourse of purity by religious patriarchy is to control widow's sexuality and identity. Referring Nur Yalman, an anthropologist, Uma Chakravarti states that a fundamental principle of Hindu social organization is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women, and ritual quality within it. These three are structurally linked and it is

important to control the female sexuality to maintain its structure. Without closely guarding the sexuality of women who form the pivot of the entire structure, the purity of neither caste nor the land or ritual quality can be maintained (Gendering caste 66).

Similarly, Phaniyamma also questions the idol of *pativrata* in Hindu mythology. The notion of *pativrata* is a symbol in Hindu religion. For instance, once Phaniyamma witnessed an illicit relationship of Putta Jois, a married man and Subbi, who was abandoned by her husband. This made Phaniyamma to think about the anomalies in the existing traditions and beliefs of Hinduism and the hollowness of the grand notion *pativrata*. Through Phaniyamma, Indira mocks at the celebrated Hindu mythology and its discursive traditions. She views,

Putta Jois had died several years ago. Subbi was now an old woman, and a *pativrata*, a faithful husband-worshipper. Phaniyamma had never understood what *pativrata* meant, even when she heard the tales of good house wives from the *Puranas* and fables. Renuka had been beheaded for looking at the reflection of the *sanyasi* who sat on the opposite bank of the river. She was turned to stone for sleeping with a god who came to her in the guise of her husband. But men who slept with a hundred women were still pure as fire. (Indira 93-94)

Describing the characters like Putta Jois and Subbi, *Phaniyamma* discloses the hypocrisy of people who act overtly as they are obeying and accepting religious notions in their life, but covertly they act against it. Chintamani's daughter Subbi had no children in six years of her married life. So her husband sent her back to her natal family. After several years she has been living as a *pativrata*. Through *Phaniyamma* Indira questions the foundations of Hinduism like puranas and its teachings, the deceitful notions of purity where men can have various illicit relationships but a woman's illicit relationship is punishable.

Phaniyamma also points out a character Subbaraya who is a Brahmin and a man who has no control over his sexual impulses. He lies with

untouchable women at night and changes his sacred thread in the morning. If someone enquired about it, he would explain the matter as he had stepped on a piece of old cloth. Considering it might have been an untouchable's or a menstruating woman's, he bathed and changed his thread. Through this, Phaniyamma reveals the hypocrisy of the Brahmin men. *Phaniyamma* hits at the foundations of Brahmanical patriarchy with her arrows of questions.

Phaniyamma thinks, "What peculiar customs we have",

If a man touches an outcaste woman, all he needs to do is to bathe and change his sacred thread, and he's pure again. If a woman even looks at another man, she's a whore. O Lord, why do you play with us like this? The left hand which washes the buttocks is used to ring the bell during your prayers. When we pray, we must join both palms to you. For every task we need the left hand. And we're not allowed to begin any auspicious ceremony with it! How many blind traditions we have! Like the banyan tree father planted that everyone hanged himself from. No one ever thinks of changing anything. (Indira 96)

Phaniyamma had recognized the hollowness of religion. Through the incidents of Subbi's and Subbaraya's, Phaniyamma questions the significance of the idealized concepts of *pativrata* and sacred thread, and the do's and don'ts of the system in Brahmanical Patriarchy. Uma Chakravarti states that the *pativrata* concept is the most successful ideologies created by the Brahmanical patriarchy. Through this, women control women's sexuality themselves and believe in gaining power and respect through such observance. She also asserts that *pativrata* is the ideological 'purdah' of the Hindu woman like chastity and wifely fidelity as the means to get salvation (Gendering Caste 74). Phaniyamma questions and challenges the hypocrisy of the Brahmin men and the continuous perpetuation of traditions. She shows that they frame separate rules for men and women. Similarly they force widow to take *madi* and when she became pregnant she would be excommunicated

and forced her to work in the entire village and not only that her children would belong to the caste of the untouchables.

Another novel *Samskara* (1965) deals with the story of Naranappa who had lived an extravagant, boisterous, uncontrollable life against the rules of Brahmanism. After his death, the people in the community are in a dilemma to perform his last rites. Through *Samskara*, Anantha Murthy explores the Brahmins way of life and also the ebb and flow of Brahmanism. His portrayal of Naranappa and Praneshacharya shows the inconsistency in the complex relationship with Brahmanism. Being a Brahmin, Naranappa did everything what Brahmin orthodoxy prevented and prohibited. He drank liquor, ate animal flesh, abandoned his Brahmin wife and lived with a lower caste woman named Chandri. Not only that, he threw the holy stone, which has been worshiped by the Brahmins over many generations, in to the river and spat on it. He ate and drank with the Muslims and brought them into his *agrahara*, the Brahmin colony.

Though he challenges and rejects Brahmanism, it could not abandon him. Naranappa openly ruined and out threw what Brahmins considered sacred and pure. He broke the superstitious belief of Brahmins that if any one catches fish from the temple pond will die of vomiting blood. He openly violated that rule and came with his Muslim gang and caught fish from the pond and thus uprooted that superstitious custom. Here he lives as a casteless man who has no distinction between castes. He deliberately arranges feast to his Muslim friends on a day when every Brahmin is indebted to fast. He openly challenges: "Try and excommunicate me now. I'll become a Muslim, I'll get you all tied to pillars and cram cow's flesh into your mouths and see to it personally that your sacred Brahmanism is ground into the mud". (11)

Brahmanism never excommunicated such an unruly man from the community. This shows their double standards. Using the same Brahmanical power, the community excommunicates and marginalizes poor women and widows but in the case of men, the community uses power to protect them in to the community even if they are

delinquent. Ananthamurthy attacks Brahmanism and its hypocritical holiness and the superstitious beliefs.

Naranappa questioned the prescribed ideology and code of conduct for his caste. He exposes the hypocritical, mean, sinful life of other Brahmins who lives in public according to the religious presumptions of Brahmanical patriarchy but secretly violate the very rules of Brahmanism for their own advantage. Praneshacharya is the great ascetic, and local guru who is 'the crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning'. He lives in the same agrahara where the sinful Naranappa lives. Once Naranappa openly challenges and exposes the real situation to acharya. He mocks at and says,

Your Garuda, he robs shaven widows, he plots evil with black magic men, and he is one of your Brahmins, isn't he?...All right, let's see who wins, Acharya. You or me? Let's see how long all this Brahmin business will last. All your Brahmin respectability. I'll roll it up and throw it all ways for a little bit of pleasure with one female .(21)

Through the portrayal of Naranappa, Ananthmurthy exposes the seamy side of Brahmanism. Naranappa admits that he is a sinner and at the same time he points out that all the other Brahmins are also terrible sinners who are greedy of gold, money and do not have any control over their sexuality. It can be seen that Naranappa is testing the core of Brahmanism even in his death as he did in his lifetime. Naranappa is breaking the taboo and he once reveals his intention to Acharya,

Let's see who wins in the end—you or me. I'll destroy Brahmanism, I certainly will. My only sorrow is that there's no brahminism really left to destroy in this place—except you. Garuda, Lakshmana, Durgabhatta—ahaha what Brahmins! If I were still a Brahmin, that fellow Garudacharya would have washed me down with his *aposhana* water. Or that Lakshmana—he loves money so much he'll lick a copper coin off a heap of shit. He will tie another wilted sister-in-law round my neck, just to get at my property. And I'd have had to cut my hair to a tuft, smear charcoal on my face, sit on

your verandah and listen to your holy-holy yarns. (23-24)

Naranappa's vision of these Brahmins becomes true in the end. At first the Brahmins hesitated to cremate Naranappa's corpse but when chandri offered gold for the cremation everyone who was unwilling first came forward to cremate the corpse just to snatch that gold.

Another instance where Ananthamurthy questions the ideology of Brahmin prescriptive texts is that, Brahmins gave supreme position to vedanta's or the prescriptive texts in their life. When Acharya couldn't find out a solution for the problem created by Naranappa's corpse, Garudacharya asks him,

Acharya-re, you once said—our philosophy is called Vedanta, because it's the end, the *anta*, of all thinking. Is it ever possible that such Vedanta has no solution for us? Especially when—what do you say—a Brahmin corpse lies untouched in the agrahara, thwarting every daily duty for a whole colony of Brahmins—what do you say—they can't eat till they take care of the body—I don't mean just that— . (29-30)

On the one hand, the other instance shows how Brahmanical patriarchy diverts their authority or power to their own ends. The temple is a place which works like an institution to make money. Swami's decision over Naranappa's cremation exemplifies this. Guru orders, "Even if he gave up Brahminism, Brahminism cannot leave Naranappa. Which means, the right and proper duty is to perform the death rites. But the impurity must also be cleared—therefore all his property, silver and gold must be offered to the monastery, to Lord Krishna" (86).

Praneshacharya who upholds Brahmanism in first half of the novel can be seen in a great conflict, agony and dilemma in the second half of the novel. Finally he abandons Brahmanism because he could not find out the solution for Naranappa's plague infested rotten body neither from the scriptures nor from the Maruti idol in the temple where he prayed for an answer. Finally he too like Naranappa turned the Brahmanism upside down. Finally he realizes the hollowness in the Brahmin faith and he thinks,

I too would have turned the Brahmin lives upside down. I'd be giving their faith a shattering blow. What shall I tell them? "I slept with Chandri. I felt disgust for my wife. I drank coffee in a common shop in a fair. I went to see a cock-fight. I lusted after Padmavati. Even at a time of mourning and pollution, I sat in a temple-line with Brahmins and ate a holy feast. I even invited a Malera boy to come into the temple and join me. This is my truth. Not a confession of wrongs done. (131-132)

The play of power is evident in these two novels. On one hand, Brahmanical patriarchy uses power to subjugate women and widows. On the other they use power for domination and also to suppress others. Both ways they use power negatively. It can be seen that these two writers have taken a step to annihilate the power structures of Brahmanical patriarchy by vehemently criticizing and disclosing its hypocrisy. But patriarchy still continues its power through various mechanisms and thereby controls and maintains the caste hierarchy and its supreme position in that hierarchy. However, without realizing this hidden agenda of Brahmanical patriarchy, other sections of the Hindu society are adopting their practices especially their marriage practice of endogamy and also the upper caste norms of female virtue. Hence, as Uma Chakravarti states, they reproduce 'the bio-genetic map of inequality' (Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste* 36).

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