Transgression and Fulfilment:
Images of Widowhood in Indian Fiction and in Films

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Traditionally upper-caste society in India has prescribed lifelong asceticism and self-denial for women who have lost their husbands and consequently their place in the family and community. The standard image of a widow is a shadowy figure, dressed in white, without embellishments, abstaining from the normal pleasures of life and living out her days in the service of others, symbolizing the end of desire and the striving for release from the embodied self. In the discourse of the orientalists, the liberal intellectuals of the nineteenth century and the leaders of the national movement one comes across, on the one hand, an urge to rationalize the condition of widows and to treat it as an indication of the spirituality of Indian culture and on the other hand, anxiety about the possibility of their going astray and the desire to divert their physical and sexual energy into productive and 'safe' channels such as education, social work and nation building. However, both the orthodox and nationalist modes of thinking, which imposed various restrictions on widows so as to project an idealized image of Indian womanhood, became instruments of their oppression, and sometimes compelled them to find an escape through suicide, withdrawal or illicit sex. While upper-caste society stubbornly ignored such aberrations, rejecting the transgressors and wiping them out through a conspiracy of silence, it was left to the poets and writers to speak up for them and to defend their conduct. The nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the rise of the novel in India, a new and transgressive genre in which the protagonists often represented or incarnated a potentially disruptive or socially unstabilized energy that might threaten to disrupt, directly or implicitly, the organization of the community which could not accommodate it or give it a proper place.[1] Indian literature of this period is replete with narratives wherein the writers, while ostensibly upholding the norms of upper caste society draw sympathetic attention to the frustration of men and women marginalized and oppressed by it. The fictional discourse becomes a

site for questioning, examining or defending social values and relationships. The widow emerges as a very significant figure in this discourse as an individual whose personal needs and desires are ignored by society and who is entitled to be treated with compassion and understanding. In the novels of liberal humanist writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sharatchandra Chattopadhyaya and Munshi Premchand a conspicuous place is given to the suffering and loneliness of the young widow and her transgression is seen as a striving towards self-assertion and personal fulfilment which is sought to be legitimized without upsetting the established social order.[2] The transgressing widow remains an outsider, an outcast from family and society, but transcends her ascribed role and asserts her selfhood, sometimes even at the cost of her life, or achieves happiness, albeit limited, on her own terms.

In this paper I propose to look at four Indian novels in Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi and Kannada, two of them written by men and two by women, spanning the period from 1898 to 1976. I hope to demonstrate how Indian writers have used different traditions and ideologies, both ancient and modern, to create and uphold alternative images of widowhood. The emphasis is not so much on individual texts as on the discourse of which the texts form a part: the discourse on sexuality, personal fulfilment and social acceptance, a discourse that began in the nineteenth century and has continued up to the present day.

Shubhada: The Vaishnava Paradigm[3]

Sharatchandra Chattopadhyaya (1876-1938) was acknowledged throughout India for his sympathetic treatment of women rejected or marginalized by Hindu society. His early novel *Shubhada* was written in 1898 but not published in his lifetime for fear of adverse public reaction. It is a rejoinder to Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya (1834-1892) whose novels *Vishavriksha* (1872) and *Krishnakanter Uil* (1878) demonstrated the social and moral decline of transgressing widows. In *Vishavriksha* the beautiful young widow Kundanandini is punished for falling in love with and accepting the bigamous marriage proposal of Nagendranath, thereby wrecking the happiness of his faithful wife Suryamukhi. In the same novel, the widow Hira loses her reputation and her sanity as a consequence of her illicit affair with the debauched landowner Debendranath. In *Krishnakanter Uil* the beautiful and ambitious widow Rohini becomes the concubine of Gobindalal, a married man, but is eventually killed by him for her attempted infidelity. Sharatchandra felt that Bankimchandra's handling of these

widows was too harsh and unsympathetic. The argument central to his numerous novels of sexual transgression is that chastity is not the only measure of a woman's worth and a so-called unchaste woman can also be loving and loyal and deserves to be happy, although she might not find acceptance in society.

Shubhada is ostensibly the story of a 'pativrata', a woman devoted to her husband, in spite of his inability to provide for herself and her family, his infidelity, his addiction to opium, his propensity to tell lies and indulge in petty crime. However, the real protagonist of the novel is her elder daughter Lalana, an attractive young widow, who, unable to endure the poverty and degradation of her parental home makes a bid to escape by throwing herself into the river which flows by her village to the great city of Calcutta. She is rescued by Surendranath, a prosperous, widowed landowner cruising down the river with his retainers and his mistress Jayavati in his luxuriously fitted barge. Lalana tells them a concocted story about losing her family in a boat accident and gives out her name as Malati, assuming an identity which has no links with her past and the social environment in which she has grown up. Realizing the uncertainty of her future and the precariousness of her situation as an unprotected young woman among strangers, she responds with relief and gratitude to Surendranath's sexual advances, troubled only by the feeling of having betrayed Jayavati who had trusted and befriended her. In a passage rare in its explicitness in the literature of that period, Sharatchandra describes Lalana's passionate enjoyment of her physical surrender to Surendranath, unclouded by any consciousness of sin. He says:

> She is not the same person; she is not Lalana, she is not Malati. She is only what she is at the moment: the eternal companion of Surendranath his beloved forever. She is Savitri. But why name Sita and Savitri? She is Radha, she is Chandravali. And what is the harm in that? What is honour or dishonour in the face of such happiness and peace, in the very lap of heaven?[4]

Sita and Savitri were archetypal models of chastity and wifely devotion, whereas Radha and Chandravali faced social disapproval for their love of Krishna and yet were considered sacred. In this passage Sharatchandra endorses Lalana's enjoyment of illicit passion by invoking Radha, the supreme deity of Vaishnavites who believed that a love like hers could lead a human soul to salvation. Vaishnavism, an alternative religious tradition in Hinduism and an off-shoot of the Bhakti movement was popular all over India, particularly in Bengal and parts of Uttar Pradesh where many of its important centers were located. According to Vaishnavism, divine love can be expressed only

through the analogy of the most intense, unconventional love between a man and a woman. Conjugal love is devoid of the strange mystery of romantic longing, for long association, social conventions and legal compulsions take away the intensity of love and make it commonplace. The best human analogy for divine love is 'parakiya prema' or the love of a man for a woman who is not married to him.[5] Again in Vaishnavism, the highest ideal is 'prema' or pure love which is valued for its own sake and not 'kama' which is necessary for procreation. 'Prema' is exemplified in Radha's love for Krishna[6] and is the ideological model for many romantic novels in India in which the protagonists keep the intensity of their relationship alive by refraining from marriage. Vaishnavism took a liberal view of caste rules and sexual relationships and the thinly disguised eroticism of its devotional practice gave its followers an outlet for channelizing their sexual energy. It was therefore not surprising that a large number of widows, specially in Bengal joined the sect or became members of a 'math' or 'akhara', a community settlement of Vaishnavas. Though frowned up by conservative upper caste Hindus, Vaishnava doctrine and aesthetics exercised a powerful influence on Indian literature and art forms which celebrated human relationships based on love rather than on a formal adherence to social conventions.

After Jayavati's accidental death in a boat tragedy, Surendranath returns to his village and establishes Malati in his garden-house as his mistress. Unlike Bankimchandra's Rohini in *Krishnakanter Uil* who could not restrain her anarchic sexual appetite and so aroused the murderous fury of her lover Gobindalal, Malati conducts herself with grace and modesty and wins the approval of Surendranath's household. Surendranath comes to love her deeply and makes an offer of marriage which she demurely turns down as it would lower his prestige in the community. She discloses the true story of her past to him and for her sake he tries to establish contact with her family only to be rebuffed, for they prefer not to acknowledge her existence, as a woman living in sin. As though to compensate for her disappointment, Surendranath comes to Malati's apartment, dressed as a bridegroom and sanctifies their clandestine relationship in a private ceremony without any witnesses. They exchange garlands and paint each other with sandalwood paste as in a Vaishnava marriage ritual.[7]

In *Shubhada*, as in other novels by Sharatchandra, the widow's transgression prevents her from getting married and re-entering respectable society. Lalana, alias Malati does not acquire the status of a wife and remains forever an exile from her native village. However, Sharatchandra grants her love, wealth and the aura of a good woman

which she justly deserves. Sharatchandra make a strong plea for meaningful personal relationships, whether recognized by society or not, as against a sterile life, circumscribed by meaningless restrictions.

Sharatchandra decided against publishing this early novel, anticipating an unfavourable reaction from the public, accustomed to the moralistic tone of Bankimchandra. However, he persisted in rationalizing and condoning the transgressive behaviour of men and women in his subsequent novels to the point of laying himself open to the charge of immorality on the one hand[8] and sentimentality on the other. The fallen women in his novels remain 'pure' in the midst of impurity, achieving impossible heights of feminine virtue like Sita in the kingdom of Ravana. Saratchandra could not entirely overcome the taboos imposed by Brahminical patriarchy but as a popular writer, he helped in liberalizing attitudes towards female sexuality and making it acceptable to the readers of his day.

Prithvivallabh: Sexual Transgression and the State[9]

The Gujarati novel *Prithvivallabh* (1921) by Kanhaiyalal Maniklal Munshi (1887-1971) is a historical romance, a genre popular in colonial India, for the spatio-temporal distancing in these narratives permitted certain issues to be raised which would be unacceptable in a contemporary setting. *Prithvivallabh* may be considered as an allegory, contrasting the ideal of discipline and austerity with that of creativity and enjoyment—the Spartan with the Athenian. It is a fictional account of a confrontation between the universally beloved King Munja of Avantika, and the autocratic widow Mrinalvati who, along with her brother Tailap, rules the kingdom of Telangana with an iron hand. Mrinalvati is the antithesis of a romantic heroine: forty seven years old, well past her youth, dark, gaunt and ill-favoured. Ever since the death of her husband when she was still a gentle and sensitive girl of seventeen, she has assumed the responsibility of the kingdom and of grooming her young brother to be a strong ruler. She has trained herself to lead a disciplined and ascetic life and succeeded in imposing her will on her subjects and the royal household. She has banished poets, singers and actors from the kingdom, banned festivals and celebrations and forbidden the expression of any kind of emotion in the palace, even grief. Her only obsession is the consolidation of power for her brother, the king.

King Munja of Avantika, renowned for his wisdom and charismatic personality, is defeated in a battle and brought to Telangana as a captive under a death sentence. He and his nephew, the poet-prince Bhoja,

are disturbing elements in the cold and forbidding world of Mrinalvati. She feels challenged by Munja's calm self-assurance in the face of defeat and takes it upon herself to humble his pride. She tells her brother to postpone Munja's execution and starts visiting him in his dungeon at night to uncover his vulnerability and make him grovel. Her initial anxiety about being defiled by this contact is overruled by her confidence in herself but in every encounter with Munja, she is disconcerted to find him relaxed, cordial and frankly enjoying the conversation with her. She is irresistibly drawn towards him and his attitude of snatching every possible pleasure from life, even in the face of imminent death. She devises various tortures for him but he suffers them without flinching. His gaze and his touch disturb her and she is torn by powerful emotions she had never acknowledged in herself. As she slowly surrenders herself to him she experiences an ecstasy she had not known before. Her hardness melts away and she finds herself responding to beauty and sympathizing with human weakness.

Munja is brought to Tailap's court and ordered to wash the king's feet. As he stands there, proud and unruffled, Mrinalvati finds herself identifying with him, rather than with her despotic brother who is ready to kill the offending Munja on the spot. She beseeches him to spare his life for a while and though he concedes her request, he is furious with her for protecting an enemy of the state and resolves to mortify her at the first opportunity.

Thus Mrinalvati commits a triple transgression: against the widow's code of celibacy, against family authority vested in her brother and finally against the power of the state. That night when she visits Munja in his cell, he allays her fear of having been defiled. She confesses her feelings to him and her desire to keep him as her captive forever. Munja tells her about the secret plans for his rescue from prison and she agrees to elope with him to his country at midnight.

After bidding farewell to Munja, Mrinalvati is assailed by doubts about the consequences of her elopement, the loss of her power and prestige. She betrays the conspiracy to Tailap's son Satyashraya but begs him to protect Munja from harm. In the confrontation that follows Satyashraya is killed, Munja is overpowered by Tailap's army and Mrinalvati's complicity in the conspiracy is exposed. Tailap berates her for it but she stands up to him and proudly declares that she loves Munja and considers him superior to anyone else in the world. This assertion of one's alliance with the forces opposing the power of the state was a recurrent feature in the historical romances of the pre-Independence period, which found an echo in the anti-colonial

sentiments of the readers.[10] In the final section of the novel the captive Munja is sent out with a begging bowl around the city. He performs this task with his characteristic dignity and good humour, winning the admiration of the common people. When he comes to Mrinalvati, he addresses her lovingly, releasing her from her guilt of betraying him and making the nature of their relationship public. Ultimately Munja is killed and Mrinalvati is plunged in grief but her trasngression is vindicated because Munja's humanism has won a moral victory over Tailap's tyranny. She cannot retain her lover in the flesh but her mind is set free from the sterile ideology that had blocked up her sexuality and destroyed her sensitivity. From a cold and power-hungry oppressor, she is transformed into a rebel and a martyr in the struggle for personal liberty and common humanity.

Both Shubhada and Prithvivallabh are romantic novels, a part of the liberal male discourse, aiming to give a little more space to widows within patriarchy so as to accommodate their sexuality. Lalana's story is a tragi-comedy: although she is cast out of her own family she finds a good protector for herself. Prithvavallabh is a tragedy, for the release Mrinalvati finds in her lover's arms proves to be short-lived. Both Lalana and Mrinalvati are alienated from the community of other women and strive alone for fulfilment at a personal level. The success or failure of their enterprise depends on the attitude of their lovers and that of other men related to them by blood-ties. The assumption that the ultimate achievement for a woman is to find a suitable husband, protector or sexual partner is a patriarchal assumption. To look at the problem from the point of view of women, who are at the receiving end of patriarchal oppression, we have to turn to the texts written by women. Though these texts belong to the same literary tradition, they lay a greater emphasis on the anger and frustration of women, their unorthodox views, whether openly articulated or not, their productive labour and their joint enterprise in countering male domination. They highlight the subjectivity of women, the need for their empowerment and their subversion of patriarchal authority even within the framework of a conventional romantic narrative.

Pia: The Emergence of Feminine Consciousness[11]

Usha Devi Mitra (1897-1966) was one of the first women novelists to write in Hindi. She came from a Bengali family, settled in Uttar Pradesh and her novel *Pia* (1937) may be read as a rewriting of Bankim-chandra's stories of widows' tragic involvement with other women's husbands. *Pia* is the story of two child widows Nilima and Pia, in love

with married men. Nilima is a poor and uneducated village girl, chafing under the tyranny of her mother who does not allow her even the simplest of pleasures on account of her widowhood. She is forced to wear coarse garments, keep innumerable fasts and shoulder the entire burden of housework while her young sister Kavita is being educated and groomed for marriage and a comfortable life. Nilima resents this discriminatory treatment bitterly for she is a rare beauty and longs to be loved and appreciated. The restrictions imposed on her and the thwarting of her expectations from life turn her into a self-centered, quarrelsome person, totally alienated from her family and dreaming in vain of escape from her onerous situation. She attracts the attention of a rich, middle-aged landowner Sukant Chaudhary in whose house her mother has taken employment as a housekeeper.He makes a proposal of marriage for her sister Kavita which their mother eagerly accepts but his target is Nilima who succumbs easily to his advances and becomes his mistress while Kavita languishes in silence and suffers the humiliation of a neglected wife.

It is a common strategy in fiction to juxtapose the transgressor with another character who is the standard of perfection. Papihara alias Pia is also a child widow, who falls in love with a married man but does not compromise herself. She is the much pampered niece and heir of Sukant Chaudhury, brought up and educated in the city and given every opportunity for self-development. She is a plain looking but high-principled and lively young woman who can speak her mind without fear, ride a horse expertly and move about alone. A proto-feminist, she cannot tolerate any injustice to women and is ready to challenge any man who harasses his wife and to horsewhip any ruffian who dares to tease unprotected women Rejecting the conventions of ritualism, caste and gender relations, she treats men with a cool familiarity, scarcely hiding her contempt. She believes that women should work for their livelihood and live with self-respect instead of clinging to the notion of '*pativrata*' which makes them a slave to their husbands. As one of her admirers exclaims:

> How can you be compared with anyone else, Pia? You are an ideal woman in this modern age. You are not tied down by any stupid conventions or rules. You are like a full river, flowing and singing freely, happy with your own music. The world is eager to listen to that music.[12]

Unlike Nilima whose life is circumscribed by rules which she must transgress in order to breathe freely, Pia is given total freedom which she never thinks of abusing. When she discovers that the police inspector Nishith Ghoshal, with whom she has fallen in love is a married

man, she conducts herself with great dignity and self-control. She is not ashamed of acknowledging her love but scrupulously maintains the relationship on a platonic level, channelizing her energy in helping others, settling family discords and plunging wholeheartedly in the freedom struggle. She is happy that Nishith is a good husband and father and does not want to disturb his family life in any way. She places a high value on '*ekanishtha prema*' or total commitment in love and looks upon a loveless marriage as prostitution.[13]

Pia is an affectionate girl, deeply attached to her uncle Sukant who has brought her up as his own daughter. She is delighted when she comes to know that he has married Kavita, a girl of her own age, and ingoring the malicious remarks of others, immediately rushes to the village to meet her "little aunt". There is more than a hint of homoeroticism in her exuberant reception of Kavita: for a couple of days and nights she is totally absorbed in Kavita, adorning her, doing her hair, applying 'sindoor' on her forehead and showering her affection on her.[14] It is as though Kavita is compensated for the indifierence of her middle-aged husband by a deeper and more tender relatioship. A few days later, while wandering about in Sukant's sprawling mansion, Pia encounters Nilima and is transfixed by her beauty. "Who are you? How have you come here and from where?" she exclaims, "You must be a Vidyadhari from paradise to be so ravishingly beautiful!"[15] Pre-occupied by these new relationships and her growing interest in Nishith, she fails to notice her uncle's adulterous affair with Nilima. Matters reach a climax when Nilima becomes pregnant and fearing a scandal, Sukant tells her to abort the child. Kavita, who had remained silent so far, now speaks up for Nilima and tells Sukant to marry her and give her and her unborn child their legitimate place in society Sukant remains adamant and driven to desperation, Nilima commits suicide, shattering Sukant's image as a respectable householder and an upright man. When Nilima's mother starts railing against Nilima for her misconduct, Kavita rises in her defence, blaming the unfair social conventions and her guardians for depriving her of her basic rights and driving her to death. She says:

> What did the world give her? Only unending misery, neglect and poverty. Only drudgery and a mountain of rules and regulations. Was she ever given anything good, anything beneficial, even a drop of sympathy? . . . And then if the world demands a great sacrifice from the poor widow, how can she meet it? I ask you, mother, do you want to murder her or protect her?"[16]

Kavita comes out of her self-imposed isolation and takes charge of her husband who is overcome by guilt and depression and wants to

retire from society after renouncing all his possessions. However, it is Pia who cannot get over Sukant's culpability in Nilima's tragedy. She withdraws from him and immerses herself completely in active politics, addressing public meetings, picketing at shops selling foreign goods and challenging the power of the colonial administration and the police force of which Nishith is a member. Her excessive grief for Nilima turns her, in Kavita's words, "into a comet which has come into the world to change the old system and find fulfilment in its own fiery spirit. The dwelling place of that comet is very far away, out of the boundary of life and death, love and affection."[17] She becomes a target of police firing, and dies, as much a victim of state brutality as of the treachery and insensitivity of the men she loved and trusted. A celibate fighter like Joan of Arc, she is sacrificed for her integrity and her idealism and the inability to come to terms with injustice to women and to her fellow countrymen. Nilima the transgressor, Kavita the steadfast wife and Pia the crusader merge into one another in their effort to achieve a common goal, a dignified place for women in a society governed by men.

Phaniyamma: Subversion and Rebellion[18]

Phaniyamma (1976), a Kannada novel by M.K. Indira (b. 1917) recounts the life of an upper caste widow, spanning the period from 1840 to 1952. It is located within the insular and orthodox Brahmin community of Malnad in Karnataka with its joint family system and its strict adherence to the ideology of 'madi' or caste purity. There are elaborate rules for conducting every activity and 'madi' is maintained by avoiding contact with all phenomena considered ritually impure such as birth, death, sex, dirt and bodily functions and by keeping a safe distance from outsiders like Muslims, Christians and the lower castes. The main burden of observing 'madi' falls on widows specially selected for the purpose, who have to renounce their sexuality along with their hair and ornaments, keep themselves confined to the kitchen, the puja room and the infirmary and ensure that the purity of the household is maintained.

Phaniyamma is a 'madi' woman in a large and relatively prosperous household. Married at seven and widowed at eleven she remains in ignorance of the facts of life till the age of forty two when she accidentally witnesses the clandestine affair of a cousin Subbi who has been discarded by her husband for her barrenness. At the onset of puberty she is tonsured, allowed to wear only white saris and to eat one meal a day and taught the skills needed to carry out her duties as

a 'madi'. A quiet and obedient girl, Phaniyamma takes her duties very seriously, never complaining of her lot and winning everybody over with her gentle and affectionate manners. Internalizing the ideology of the community and abiding by its rules, she becomes a true '*tapasvini*' limiting her needs to the barest minimum and doing her utmost to make others comfortable. She applies the juice of a wild berry on her scalp to remove her hair permanently so that she may not require the services of a barber and be defiled by his touch.[17] When a child is beaten up for disturbing her while she is eating her frugal meal, she gives up eating cooked food altogether, surviving merely on buttermilk and a banana.[20] Yet she works the whole day to feed and serve the large household and devotes all her spare time to worship. She prays to God to make her a flowering tree in her next life so that she may be saved from the perils of a sexual being.[21] The giving up of cooked food, the end of her menstrual cycle, her permanent tonsure, her pilgrimage to Kashi, the performance of her last rites or '*Shraddha*' in Gaya re-stages in the transcendence of her physicality, the ultimate goal of an upper-caste Hindu widow. As a person who has attained liberation from all physical desires in her own lifetime, and one who always puts others before herself, she becomes an icon of Brahminical ideals and feminine virtue, a person universally loved and respected in her community.

The text of *Phaniyamma* has multiple layers. The seemingly idyllic life of the rural community, its closeness to nature and its rhythm harmonizing with the seasons, the regular cycle of births, deaths and marriages interspersed by the excitement of various festivals, ceremonies and an occasional pilgrimage, conceals a world which is very harsh to women. In this world a woman is born only to labour in the house or the fields and to bear the burden of numerous pregnancies and childbirths. Her life is totally governed by the elders in the family. She is married off in childhood and sent to her husband's place in much the same spirit as a cow being offered to a bull and if she proves to be barren, she may be kicked unceremoniously out of her home. A woman's natural reproductive functions such as menstruation and childbirth render her impure while a man is not defiled even if he spends every night with an untouchable. The myths of Renuka and Ahalya are held up as an example for all women: Renuka's husband, the sage Jamadagni got her killed by her son for daring to look at the reflection of another sage in water. Ahalya was turned into a rock for sleeping with a god who came to her in the guise of her husband.[22] The punishment for transgressing widows is the severest of all. If a widow becomes pregnant, she is excommunicated by the

order of the highest religious authority, the Shankaracharya of Sringeri and becomes the property and bonded slave of the entire village, her children being classed as untouchables.

Born and brought up in this environment Phaniyamma goes about her work silently, observing all the prescribed rituals and conventions, but from time to time the text reveals her secret, subversive thoughts and her independent mind which sees through the hypocrisy of the Brahmins and the gap between their beliefs and practices. She wonders at the arbitrariness of the conventions of purity and pollution; why the right hand is pure and the left impure, why a tonsured widow is pure though she is periodically handled by a barber and why a widow who has long hair is impure even if she has never been touched by a man. She questions why a menstruating woman should be considered unclean, but only for three days though she may continue to bleed long after that.[23] She ponders on the double standards of morality for men and for women and the hypocrisy involved in sexual relationships. She is amazed that women submit themselves to the indecency and brutality of sex, forgetting the pain of childbirth which they have to suffer repeatedly.[24] She considers the whole business of husband and family and children disgusting. Questioning the fundamentals of patriarchy and the wisdom of the scriptures she say:

> My father died giving advice from the *Ramayana.* All the *Puranas* and the fables fill my head and my mouth. It is just a hobby, it seems to me. What kind of happiness did the great mother Sita experience, having wedded the Lord Rama herself? A life of trouble she had. And did her husband give her joy? He made her jump in the fire and sent off a pregnant woman to the forest. And Draupadi, did she not suffer? Doesn't she say, "With Arjuna for a father, Indra for a godfather and the Lord Krishna for an uncle, why did my son Abhimanyu die?" Why did the Pandavas suffer so much if Krishna was on their side? Some good-for-nothings write the *Puranas* and we useless ones believe them. That is all there is to that![25]

It is not only in her thoughts that Phaniyamma subverts Brahminism. At the age of eighty two she is approached by an untouchable whose young daughter has been in labour for four days and according to the Muslim midwife, Jabina-bi, only Phaniyamma's hands are small enough to pull the baby out. She agrees to help them in this medical emergency though as a 'madi' woman she has never entered a labour room before or gone into the untouchables' quarters and knows that she is transgressing her caste rules and incurring the displeasure of her family by taking such a bold step. By bringing an untouchable child into the world with the help of a Muslim woman she transcends

the narrow conventions of her community and becomes a universal mother-figure. On another occasion, she accompanaies a young Christian midwife Premabai across a river in the pouring rain to deliver a child, Premabai acting as her assistant. The two women are united by their shared enterprise, inspite of the vast difference in their upbringing. Phaniyamma becomes a spiritual mother for Premabai who gives up eating meat and resolves to remain celibate like the older woman, dedicating herself to her vocation rather than the service of a husband and children.

The story of Phaniyamma's secret transgression is set off by that of the beautiful and spirited young girl, Dakshayini who is widowed at the age of sixteen and is coerced into taking up 'madi' so that she might take over the heavy work in her mother-in-law's house. Dakshayini puts up a stiff resistance to the suggestion, much to the annoyance of the community. Only Phaniyamma sympathizes with her plight and pleads with her family to leave the girl alone. Ultimately Dakshayini agrees to have her head shaved and departs to her husband's house, secretly resolving to take her revenge on her oppressors. Within a few months of her arrival, she becomes pregnant by her brother-in-law and refuses to leave the house in disgrace, saying that her child belongs to the family and her mother-in-law will have to assist at its birth. She stops the village elders from going to Sringeri to get an order of excommunication for her by declaring that she would accompany them and put her case before the Shankaracharya herself. She has her baby and establishes herself as the mistress of the house, grows her hair and dresses like a married woman, defying the entire village. The scandal spreads and the family is ostracized but in the process their 'madi' practices are thrown on the rubbish heap.[26] The age old tradition of Brahminical patriarchy is successfully overthrown by a single woman. It is a definitive step towards modernization and is approved of by the progressive elements in the community like Phaniyamma's cousin Kittappa, when the story travels up to Tirthahalli and Shimoga.

Phamiyamma can be read as a radical feminist text, striking at the foundation of Brahminical patriarchy. Not only does it ridicule the elitist notions of the Brahmins as a "pure" caste but also challenges the wisdom and authority of the men who undertake to predict and control the destiny of individuals through horoscopes, control family resources and oppress and enslave women. It also satirizes the corrupt religious establishment that presumes to sit in judgement on the sexual conduct of women. The text privileges the autonomous community

of women which existed before male doctors entered the labour room and male teachers took charge of girls' education. Women are united by a common bond of sympathy as members of a disadvantaged group which is stronger than the tie of sex. The power struggles among women within the family are deliberately kept out of the narrative. Phaniyamma has compassion for Subbi who is abandoned by her husband and has an clandestine affair with another man, Dakshayini who openly floats the code of conduct for a widow, Premabai who is sent out to earn her living at the age of sixteen, and all the women who suffer the pain of childbirth and labour for their husbands and children. Towards the end of her life she breaks her silence and passes on her story to her niece Banashankari for the women of the future generations. It is thus an alternative history of the community privileging women over men and virginity over sexuality. Men are entirely peripheral in this narrative. They appear in an unfavourable and ridiculous light on the whole: as pompous, foolish and driven by lust and vanity. There are a few exceptions like Kittappa and his son-in-law who hold Phaniyamma in great respect. As her grand-nieces jestingly remark, Phaniyamma's white saris are whiter than the dhotis worn by men.[27] Kittappa calls her "a goddess born in the guise of a woman under the curse of a sage."[28] Her life, in spite of the severe restrictions imposed on her, turns out to be a fulfilling one. She maintains her integrity and her spirit of independence till the end and her peaceful death at the age of a hundred and twelve is a fitting culmination of her story.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Tanner, Tony; *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression.* Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979, p. 3.
2. See, for instance, Rabindranaath Tagore: *Chokker Bali* (1902), Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay's: *Bada Didi* (1913), *Pathanirdesh* (1914), *Pallisaraj* (1916), *Srikant* (1917-1933), *Charitraheen* (1917) and *Shesha Prashn* (1931) and Premchand: *Premashram* (1921).
3. Chattopadhyaya, Sharatchandra: *Shubhada,* Calcutta: Punashcha, 1992 (Reprint).
4. *Shubhada,* II. Ch. 4.
5. Dasgupta, Shashibhushan, *Obscure Religious cults.* Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1976 (Reprint), p. 124.
6. Marglin, Frederique Apffel, "Types of Sexual Union and Their Implicit meanings", in *The Divine Consort: Radha and Goddesses of India.* Ed. John Stratton Hawey and Donna Marie Wulff. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1984, pp. 305-7.
7. *Shubhada,* II. Ch. 13.
8. For instance *Charitraheen* (1917) was condemned and publicly burnt for its perceived immorality.

9. Kanhaiyalal Mankeklal Munshi: *Prithvivallabha* Tr. Pravasilal Varma. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 1990.
10. Cf. Ayestha's declaration of love for Jagat Singh in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's *Durgeshnandini.*
11. Mitra, Usha Devi: *Pia* Banaras: Saraswati Press, 1946 (IV Edition).
12. *Pia.* ch. 14.
13. *Ibid.*, ch. 22
14. *Ibid.*, ch. 19
15. *Ibid.*, ch. 19
16. *Ibid.*, ch. 30
17. *Ibid.*, ch. 31
18. Indira, M.K.:*Phaniyamma* Tr. Tejaswini Niranjana. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989.
19. *Phaniyamma,* pp. 65-66. 14.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 93
22. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-9.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 132.