

Social Exclusion of Indian Brahmin Widows: A Case Study of M. K. Indira's *Phaniyamma*

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Abstract

M.K. Indira has contributed as a true representative of Kannada literary world. The novel *Phaniyamma* is her masterpiece that is based on childhood memories of the author. The novel on the one hand introduces the colonial period of India when post offices were in their infancy, and the distribution of mail was from house to house arousing nostalgia among the readers. The disadvantages of Kashi Yatra, cast, class, customs, rituals, and self-restraint on the other attract the attention of the readers. Indira gave voice to gender-centric violence which reveals the silent tale of pain. The novel is far from monotony and variation in plots is her specialty. The language of the text is simple that reflects the sweetness of the natural country language. *Phaniyamma* is the victim of widowhood later she raises her voice against the cruel customs which were followed by the elders of the family and society.

Key Words: Social exclusion, exploitation, trauma, widowhood, oppression, resist etc.

Culture is an important feature of human society that differentiates human beings from other beings. Human physical development and the developing brain is a blessing from which the power of thinking and understanding is generated. Culture is a broader term it is an interdisciplinary area of study. Patriarchy plays an important role to develop social norms and cultural beliefs. Hierarchy based on gender tame the behavioral pattern set in the system. Tim Wood discusses culture as a theory in her book entitled *Beginning Postmodernism* "...cultural theory have been extensive and varied since the late 1960s, often involving serious argument and vitriolic passion. Charge and counter-charge about the political, social and cultural value of postmodernism, postmodernity and postmodern culture have been flung left, right and centre." (Wood 18) Culture, custom, and diversity

are the salient features and integral parts of a text. Most female writers portray the domination of custom, culture, and rituals on women which were imposed by patriarchy as a symbol of hierarchy.

Mandagadde Krishnarao Indira known as M.K. Indira (1917–1994) was a well-known Kannada novelist and story writer, born in a prosperous agriculturist family in of British India. She began her writing career at the age of 45. Her first novel was *Tungabhadra* published in 1963. It is the story of a Brahmin family who lives in the hills. The novel is written in the local dialect and set in the pre-independence era. Her second novel *Sadananda* (1965) won the 'Rajya Sahitya Akademi Award'. The story is simple but touching, it is woven around a female character 'Chinna' who grew up in the lush green hills. The novel traces hurdles and frustration she faces in her life. Her next work *Gejje Pooje* (1966) deals with the life of a Devadasi's daughter Chandra and consequences she faced being a child of a Devadasi, *Navaratna* (1967) and fifty three other works are in her credit. "Despite any formal training or education, or a prominent literature background, M.K. Indira ploughed her way into a literary scene that was mainly male-dominated at the time." (ETimes) She received formal education only for seven years and married at the age of twelve to M. Krishna Rao. She had a good knowledge of Kannada poetry and Hindi literature. "Those who knew her, recognized her to be the most affable and warm individual who was devoid of any arty flair or intellectual pretense that most writers possess".

M.K. Indira is a renowned Indian writer who deals with gender-based discrimination and violence in most of her novels. Her one of the most famous novels *Phaniyamma* is the main focus of this paper. It unfolds a tale of a socially excluded female Phaniyamma who was born into a Hindu Brahmin family. Her childhood ends when she married and became a widow in her teenage. She was socially excluded by her family members. That was the turning point from there her life takes a new turn and the journey from happiness to misery begins. Amartya Sen discusses the concept of exclusion in her work entitled, *Social Exclusion: Concept, Application, and Scrutiny*, "...being excluded from social relations can lead to other deprivations as well, thereby further limiting our living opportunities". (4)

The author heard her story in childhood when Phaniyamma told the tale of her unfold suffering to Indira's mother. Once "...writer's grandfather Shanbhag Kittappa used to say that no other woman like his sister Phani had ever been born or would be in the future. The only thing the children knew was that all madi women were the same. They ate once a day, and had a snack at night!". (Indira 1) Including Phaniyamma few other novels by M. K. Indira were made into films such as; *Hoobana*, *Giribale*, *Musuku*, *Poorvapara*, etc. Moreover, several prestigious awards were in her credit such as; the 'Kannada Sahitya Akademi Awards', 'Annual Award' for the best Kannada literature of the year, Phaniyamma's English translation won the 'Sahitya Akademi of India', the 'Best Women Writers Award' in literature was constituted in M. K. Indira's name.

The novel is the life story of a close relative of the author who was born in a traditional Brahmin family. Phaniyamma was married at a young age and became a child widow when she was thirteen years old. Shivalika Verma says, "Child widows... have undergone multiple violations of their human rights from very young age. Being widow at the tender age, they lack ingress to justice and are manipulated by various persons". M.K. Indira quotes one of her elder relatives who compares girls from the past as she says:

In those days, a girl's childhood, especially in a village, was circumscribed, untouched by the larger world. Phaniyamma's infancy and childhood passed in a kind of innocence. The Brahmin lord's temple school was only for the boys, and the girls never learned to read. Since the house was full of grandmothers, younger aunts, elder aunts, mothers-in-law, it functioned as a training centre for the little girls. Housework, cooking, cleaning, singing, washing the god's prayer things, swabbing floors and sketching rangoli - these the girls learned when they were barely two years old, as also the concept of *madi* purity. (Indira 5)

Phaniyamma lived 112 years and spent most of her life as a widow a midwife and a housekeeper; she even didn't know the meaning of marriage. The death of her husband turns her life in worst direction, being a widow she was completely excluded from society. Amirta Sain defines the concept of social exclusion "...social exclusion is seen as covering a remarkably wide range of social and economic problems...In this Aristotelian perspective, an impoverished life is one without the freedom to undertake important activities that a person has reason to choose". (Sain 7, 10)

This novel is not only about widows rather represents the condition of child widows. Their lives of difficult endeavors make us think deeply about the meaning of life. "Child widows are those young girls who have endured both child marriage and widowhood before the age of eighteen. They have undergone multiple violations of their human rights from very young age." (Verma) She observed several changes in society and generations. The novel is set in a small town in Karnataka in the colonial period. She silently observed the turn of this century, against the backdrop of an unrelenting orthodoxy, patriarchy, and customs that made her suffer. The novel witnesses, how a young girl confronts the grim reality of widowhood even before she has fully experienced childhood. Though one of the elders of the family checked her horoscope "Phani's horoscope is a fine one. All the six qualities came together when I matched the children's horoscopes. Lifelong bliss and the birth of eight sons is what I see ahead." (Indira 28) She did not fully experience childhood because she was born in a society that regards widows as the ultimate pollution.

"Chintu said, "...Phani's husband Nanjuda died from the bite of a cobra...in ten minutes the entire village had congregated outside Tammayya's house...in her dark room Phaniyamma could hear the villagefolk talking outside...Poor thing, she's a child who knows nothing yet." She hadn't even seen his face." (44-45)

Phaniyamma witnessed the change in society and customs from her teenage to old age. She spent hundred years to learn social norms which remained new to her. Her sheer willpower helped her to survive and grew. The novel depicts the belief of the Brahmin community and their lives. As Indira says that "our heroine was born to Sannamma, wife of Tamayya. It was no big event. Every month at least two births took place in that house. And our heroine was one of fifteen brothers and sisters." (4) Though, she was old enough but was not able to spare herself from the burden of social customs and rituals. The novel begins with a brief discrimination of Phaniyamma and M. K. Indras's relationship with her:

Born in 1840, died in 1952; she seemed to have lived an ordinary life. Those who lived with her did not know her innermost secrets. Only Banashankari remained to tell the story of her life, and pass it on to her daughters. Since, I, Banashankari's daughter Indira, had heard Phaniyamma's story from my mother, and had actually seen Ancheyatthe myself, I was able to write this little history. Although this is the story of a nameless widow, it seemed to me that there was something of significance here. Which is why this book was written. (1)

Indira movingly tells religious practices against women who bare the hypocrisy of patriarchs, their approval of inhuman things in the name of tradition. This story is the documentation of the life of widows. "The ordinary term for a widow in India is "vidhwa" which originates from the Sanskrit word "vidh" which means "to be destitute". There are around 55 million widows in India that is around as same as the entire population of South Africa and Tanzania." (Verma) Phaniyamma is a woman who accepted painful things as a destiny of a widow. While others shared their desire and anger among themselves but didn't dare to raise their voice against the system. On the contrary, today's widows are asserting and denying this kind of humiliation and punishment from the beginning. They refuse to accept widowhood as their fate. Rather, they challenge their oppressors. "I won't let them do this to me... Was I born to slave in their household? I'm staying here!" ...Phaniyamma said softly: "...How can you ask a full-frown girl to sit in front of the barber without cloths to cover herself properly?" (Indira 108) Mahat Ishrat remarks in an article entitled "Women, Religion and Spirituality in South Asia One Does Not Have to Be a Man in the Quest of Truth" that:

There has been a quite shift in practicing the religion and spirituality particularly in relation to the gender norms, and with the categorization of class and the castes. Women were often secluded from the public arena throughout the history regardless of their active engagement in both public and private space. (Ishrat)

Phaniyamma was a quiet woman who was not demanding anything from society. A well-known film director Deepa Mehta reveals a similar situation in her film *Water* (2005) which is based on the lives of Indian Hindu widows and the role of tradition, and religious rituals in culture. The movie was set in the British period like the novel and the role of purity in the life of a widow was mandatory to maintain in their entire life. Rekha

Pande studies the life of widows in *Religion and Theology: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice* (2020) one of its chapters entitled, "The forgotten widows of Vrindavan in India" she says, "In India, social mores inhibit women from re-marrying, resulting in an increased likelihood of women ending up alone. In many conservative Indian Hindu families, widows are shunned because they're seen as bringing bad luck." (61)

The narrative technique of the novel grips the reader successfully. It attracts readers to think about the morality and rules of society. Readers are observing the world from the eyes of the protagonist who was the victim of society changes our perspective and leaves a sad mark on our mind. A. Judith Czerenda discusses the problem of vulnerability in "The Meaning of Widowhood and Health to Older Middle-class Hindu Widows Living in a South Indian Community" as she says, "Indian widowhood has long been associated with victimization and vulnerability, but traditional attitudes toward widowhood are changing and reflect the rapid changes occurring in India".(351)

According to the survey by Kamla Foundation, "India is the country of the largest widow population in the world. It is estimated there are 40 million widows in India today-10 percent of the country's female population". (Widows-Kamla Foundation) Hindu sacred texts like *Manusmriti* decrees the options of a widow, "After the death of husband, widow should lead a very simple life. She should take fruits and simple vegetables in her diet. Even the name of a stranger should not come on her tongue" (Kaur, 25). She has to lead selfless life and devoted herself to her dead husband. This concept reveals social, economic, and political exclusion which is accepted by the community. Being a widow, it is a common belief that the focus on material belongings should be detached and such ideology implies in India.

The text is a bildungsroman of Phaniyamma that documents a meaningless journey of a widow from teenage to death. It is unfolding the tales of collective traumatic lives of widows in our surroundings. M. K. Indira says, "In Phaniyamma's one hundred and twelve years of existence, the tulasikatte had to be rebuilt each year after the rains, which washed away the mud structure". (Indira 135-136) Their single day was like a year, they were waiting to embrace death to get rid of this circle of karma. French writer, existentialist philosopher, and feminist, Simone de Beauvoir seems correct when she says, "Women are not born but are made by the society."

The text highlights harsh practices in the households of our society where a widow was like a scar and a stigma deprived of happiness or normal life. In South India widow live a life of 'madi', she devote herself to chanting the name of the Lord, household work, and sparse meals. We can't deny the fact that females were always considered as second citizens of any nation. Not only India every first-world nation has a dark history of female domination and exploitation. Religion dominates the culture and customs of every nation that turn situations according to the wish of the patriarch. Ironically females are not able to fight back against the religious trap. Shivalika Verma says in her article entitled, "Widowhood in India" "She explained that many conservative

families see widows as a liability. [...] There is no sole concept with respect to widowhood, it is subjected to diverse experiences, varied inter personal and social implications and various changes in the life of women across varying cultural settings.

Although there are many questions about the belief of the time, nothing is shown outwardly; here is a life of silent struggle against the conflict of ideas within and the exploitation in the name of tradition outside. The widow shaved her head after the death of her husband as those who were teenagers do when menstruation began. Phaniyamma, who lived like Panchamrita, choose to serve her family and society. She was an example of a hardworking female she was the supportive hand during childbirth. There was a time when the shadow of an outcast was not acceptable. There were those widows too who shave their heads every month after touching the 'hajama' or to pure themselves. There were several issues common for widows such as misbehavior, molestation, and social boycott. No one can understand the pain she faced as a child widow at the age of playing she lived a colorless life.

With the course of time, Phaniyamma saw a lot of events that surprised her and gradually changed her outlook on the regress practices. She did not have any regret as she led a huge part of her life as a saint. Because of her accepting behavior, she was loved by everyone. This can be a familiar and heartfelt story of someone in our families or surrounding who has a similar tale of misery. A female who must be our aunt, grandmother, grand grandmother, or neighbour lived her life like her. Indira says, "Being a widow, the girl did not drink any milk...although she milked the twenty-odd cows twice a day, boiled the milk, and churned the butter. She never thought about food. Around four in the evening, she sat with the other madi women and ate a few morsels." (52) The text haunts the dark reality of the bygone time that discloses the socially excluded life of widows.

Once Phaniyamma says, "A man who commits innumerable mistakes is cherished and revered while a woman is ostracized for no fault". (58) This is unfortunately true to a larger extent even today. "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". (94) Parvathama, the aunt, according to Phaniyamma she was a "woman who always spoke her mind". Once she said, "Subbu is one of those who can't keep his dhoti on. Lacchi's going to have her child in a month or so, and he still doesn't leave her alone...That man doesn't bother about caste or clan. He sleeps with some Gowda woman or some untouchable at night." (95)

In present scenario the subject of 'marginalization of women' is a large and rapidly growing genre of literature. The notion was already made substantial space in writing. A text like *Phaniyamma* is not just focusing on a single issue rather covers a wide range of social and economic consequences that crushes the identity of a female. Even though, the novel depicts the life of a widow in British India, evoke sympathy

among readers even today. “Phaniyamma would tell the younger woman all the detail of her past, softly, almost under her breath, and only if there is no one else around. If she saw anyone, only words to escape her lips were, “Rama, Rama.” (118) Phaniyamma was not familiar with the meaning of taste, celebration, happiness, marriage, or family life. She was learning things from her own experience and observation that makes her confused too. She says:

“My father died giving advice from the Ramayana. All the Puranas and fables fill my head and my mouth, Banashankari. It's just a hobby, it seems to me. What kind of happiness did the great mother Sita experience, having wedded the Lord Rama himself? 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's all there is to that.” (Indira 118,119)

Those who became widows at a tender age never saw the pleasures of family life, if she is mature enough to understand things such a woman was not ready to accept her fate as a widow. Phaniyamma sets a benchmark for others through her soft-spoken nature and believes in equality. It is visible in an incident when she helped Hasala's woman during her complicated delivery. Now, there are several foundations, writers, and social activists who are working for the removal of inequalities prevailing in the form of any type of crime against women and girl child.

The text provides a window to peep inside the social values and the web of horrible traditions that reveals the ironical functioning of those days. Several texts in Indian literature highlight religious orthodoxies and patriarchy that oppressed women of every caste and class. Munshi Premchand's *Godaan*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, U.R. Ananthmurthy's *Samskara*, Urmila Pawar's “Mother Wit”, Ismat chughtai's “Chothy ka Joda” and many more. Indian literature is full from religious abuses existing in Indian system from different names and rituals. These texts exhibit double standards of caste, and class. They are attacking the power of men to subjugate women and marginals. M.K.Indira says in the preface of the novel, “It cannot be called a novel or a biography as some incidents have been modified here and there. But this work unmasks that some of the superstitions practiced in Sanatana Dharma were pushing women's lives into a pit of darkness”(ii). As in the past after the death of husband female ‘Sati’ burned herself in the upper cast and spent her life as ‘Devdaasi’ in the lower caste. We usually overlook the message of *Vedaas* and *Puranas* as it is mentioned in *Manusmriti*, Chapter 4 was translated by Wendy Doniger and Brian Smith, “यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः । यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः ॥ मनुस्मृति ३/५६ ॥ (जहाँ स्त्रियों की पूजा होती है वहाँ देवता निवास करते हैं और जहाँ स्त्रियों की पूजा नहीं होती है, उनका सम्मान नहीं होता है वहाँ

किये गये समस्त अच्छे कर्म निष्फल हो जाते हैं।“ Where women are honoured there the gods delight, where they are not honoured there all acts become fruitless”. (Morgan)

Though in the Vedic civilization, women hold the highest place as ‘Shakti’ or ‘Addi Shakti’. Her origin was considered from ‘Brahma, Vishnu, Mahaish’ while in present scenarios females are treated as a ‘commodity of sex’. It is ironic that in the twenty-first century women are victimized by men and misinterpreted by society. We still need to work to improve the condition of females. Like Phaniyamma there are several women victim of such kind of abuse that are washed every beautiful memory of their past, the social customs making their lives hellish.

The condition of widows has improved from before they are struggling for normal life and equal rights. The turning point of the novel refers to the freedom of widows, independent India implements a law “Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act 1956[...] which legalized remarriage of Hindu widows in all jurisdictions. [...] Due to which widows are entitled to remarry on their choice.” (Verma) The later part of her life was quite revolutionary as she showed the right path to others as a ‘Karmayogi’. She took the initiative in the case of Dakshaini to demolish the rotten rules which were converted into rituals. She resents against the aimless life of widows.

As we all know in India women don’t have equal social and economic rights like men. According to the Indian social system, marriage is the ultimate aim and the real beginning of every woman’s life. Female writers examine the intersection of religious violence which brings to light the paradigm of gender-based victimization and bring into notice the gender, violence that cripple the psyche of women. They are oppressed and caught in social absurd norms. There are revolutionary females addressing female centric issues through their works as Deepa Mehta, an Indian-born Canadian film director and screenwriter shows the life of an eight-year-old widow ‘Chuyia’ and ‘Kalyani’ a beautiful young widow in her film *Water* (2005). Urmila Pawar is a Marathi writer, dalit, and feminist activist. She discusses the social discrimination in one of her story “Motherwit” that reflects the exploitation of female as a widow in society for small benefits. Innumerable women like them are leading difficult lives making us think deeply about the existence of females.

As Shivalika Verma says, “According to the Hadith, Prophet Mohammad believed, “The one who looks after and works for a widow and for a poor person is like a warrior fighting for Allah’s cause.” The government of India is also working on the objective of providing opportunities for equal participation of women in education, health, employment, social security, and political, economic, and social development in the country. “National Policy for Women’s Upliftment, 2001’ was announced and also determined to implement the provisions clearly expressed. Under this policy, it has also been assured to make necessary laws for the proper development of women and to provide them adequate protection”. (Husnain)

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