

**TRADITION, PATRIARCHY AND WOMEN A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF  
PHANIYAMMA AND AGNISAKSHI**

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**Abstract**

*For centuries women have always been responsible for the protection and upholding of tradition. They have been pivotal to the shaping of cultural traditions, linking generations and preserving the past for the future. In spite of this they have always been marginalised as they are part of a society entrenched in patriarchal and hierarchal ideologies. Patriarchy is understood as a general system of social organization and social structure which accords privileges to men, and denies them to women. The patriarchal norms supposedly derived from the religious texts were kept alive down centuries through the supremacy of the male and the subjugation of the female. Honour is one of the most valued ideals in patriarchies and most communities pay constant attention to gaining and maintaining honour. A family's honour depended on the proper or improper behaviour of its women and to curb women's evil and weak character society ensured she remained within the restrictions tradition thrust on her. This paper looks at how patriarchy and tradition treat Phaniyamma and Devaki (Thethi), both Brahmin women, the protagonists of M.K.Indira's Phaniyamma (Kannada) and Lalithambika Antharjanam's Agnisakshi (Malayalam).*

**Keywords:** *tradition, patriarchy, women, marginalized, supremacy, subjugation, privileges, restrictions*

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*Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is other- outside, below,  
underneath, subservient .I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control.*

-Ursula K. Le Guin

**T**radition and women have always been closely bound, as the protection and upholding of tradition has always been the responsibility of women. In the Indian context it becomes more complex as class, caste, religion and gender are so intricately linked that they interact with and impact one another. Women have been pivotal to the shaping of cultural traditions, linking generations and preserving the past for the future, yet her position has always been marginalised as she was and is still part of a society entrenched in traditional and patriarchal ideologies. The ideology of the authority of patriarchy and women's submissiveness to it had 'conditioned them to silence their feelings, diminish their needs, restrict their freedom and have firm conviction in the values of self-sacrifice and self-effacement.'(Dodiya ) The patriarchal society of earlier times ensured that the women kept themselves at home, kept home and in following the dictums imposed on them, kept their traditions pure and alive.

This paper looks at how tradition and patriarchy treats the protagonists, Phaniyamma and Devaki (Thethi), in M.K.Indira's *Phaniyamma* (Kannada) and Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Agnisakshi* (Malayalam) respectively. The former, Phaniyamma, is a child widow who lives up to the ripe old age of 112, living a cloistered life, totally cut off from the world beyond. Yet she is uncomplaining, subservient and helps others deal with critical situations through her wisdom. The latter, Devaki, is a young bride whose husband is too caught up in the world of temple rituals and the dharma he has to uphold that he unconsciously neglects her. When her brother is arrested, her family is excommunicated and Devaki is denied permission to visit her ailing mother. At the tether of her tolerance, defying the restrictions imposed upon her, she leaves the house, later joins the freedom struggle and then turns to spirituality. Their exploitation, struggles and transition are portrayed by women authors who are familiar with the happenings within these confined spaces. Both are voices from the inside, by, of and for women.

Lalithambika Antharjanam was born to progressive Namboodiri parents, and was fortunate to be married to an equally supportive and progressive man who encouraged her literary engagements against the social evils present in her community. During her life spent within *illams* (Namboodiri homes) she had had firsthand knowledge of the pitiable lives of the women within. Lalithambika was very much inspired by the reformers and the nationalist movements and by showing affiliation to those ideologies she incurred the wrath of her community. She was severely criticized for not only depicting the malaise of her community and their treatment of their women but also for being part of the revolutionary changes around her. Her *Agnisakshi* is about the life of a Namboodiri woman, an antharjanam, like her. M.K. Indira a few years younger also grew up in an India that was caught in the throes of change. It was praiseworthy that someone whose education stopped at the primary level wrote her first novel at forty five, followed by many more. *Phaniyamma* is a biographical account of M.K. Indira's grand aunt and is based on what Phaniyamma had shared with the author's mother. Indira faced criticism for *Phaniyamma* from two opposite groups, her community and the feminists, the former for portraying the orthodox traditional rituals in poor light and the latter, for what they thought was the glorification of widowhood. It was their poignant portrayals that elicited such responses.

Patriarchy is understood as a general system of social organization and social structure which accords privileges to men, and denies them to women. It has been used to explain gender inequality, the pervasiveness of female subordination and male supremacy. Studies of major brahmanical texts have shown that 'class/ caste stratification, control over production and control over reproduction were legitimated by the rituals' (Chakravarty 44). While the state rituals remained under the control of the raja (king) the household rituals were controlled by the yajamana (head of the family). In this way the patriarchal control over some men and *all* women, both as social and economic beings and as reproductive beings was clearly established.

The rights and duties of individuals and their interaction to others were all decided by the head of the family. Interior parts of colonial India were very much steeped in traditions and customs although changes had begun to happen. In *Agnisakshi*, it is Unni's uncle (Apphan) who, though not the head of the family guides Unni (the young head of the family) through domestic and temple matters. He had been 'in power' even while his older brother, Unni's father, was alive. It is he who decides Devaki's *brasht* (ostracization) when she defies family restrictions to visit her ailing mother. In *Phaniyamma* it is the Aanchetamayya, head of the Aanchamane (Phani's house) who decides where Phani has to live after her husband's death. His position in the community gives him the upper hand to put in place Phani's marital family when they accuse the girl's people of tampering with her horoscope that has resulted in their son's death. They quietly leave without much argument leaving Phani to live in her natal home.

The patriarchal norms supposedly derived from the religious texts were kept alive down centuries through the supremacy of the male and the subjugation of the female. Although

Meena Kosambi discusses the pitiable plight of the upper caste women of the 19th century India, the conditions appear to be relevant to many Indian women even in this century. 'Marriage was central to a woman's life as the only sacrament she was entitled to while men were entitled to many.' (Thorner 104) It was imperative that women be married off at the 'right' age, after which they became the property of the husband. The men in the family enjoyed economic privileges, while the women were denied inheritance fearing disintegration of ancestral property. The patriarchal system established that the men were 'insiders' while the women always remained 'outsiders'. Women, irrespective of caste or class were like the members of the lower castes as they were both 'socially frail, economically needy and politically powerless.' (Kumar 9). They were the silent and silenced victims of 'institutionalized inequality'; both deprived of the privileges enjoyed by the upper caste men.

Devaki of *Agnisakshi* is an *antharjanam*, belonging to the highest caste in Kerala. The *antharjanam*, as the word indicates, was one who lived within. These women lived in seclusion within their own *illams*, and when they got married, moved into their husband's *illams*. According to Namboodiri norms only the eldest son inherited the property and ancestral rights and so, only he had to marry from within his own caste. The younger sons could marry outside their caste. But a Namboodiri woman could marry only a Namboodiri. So girls were married off as early as possible to the eldest Namboodiri of a family, irrespective of how old he was. It was quite common for a girl to be married to a man, sometimes even older than her father. So within each *illam* were many wives, widows, unmarried women and young girls, kept secluded to uphold the purity and honour of the family. They lived their lives in frustration never daring to even express their feelings for fear of the *smarthavicharam*, a trial conducted to judge women who 'erred'. Devaki is considered 'lucky' because she is married to Unni, the eldest and young heir of a prosperous family. Young Phani too belongs to a Brahmin family and is married off early at the age of nine. 'It was already a year since Phaniyamma had started wearing a sari – it was imperative that she get married soon.' (Indira 23) Sadly within two months of her marriage, her fifteen year old husband dies of a snake bite leaving her a widow. That a nine year old is to spend the rest of her life as a widow, head tonsured, no ornaments, clad in a white sari and deprived of even the simple joys of life, is of no concern to the family, as such happenings were not uncommon. The satisfaction of the community came from the fact that the girl was married off at the right age, her purity intact and the honour of the family safe.

Honour is one of the most valued ideals in patriarchies and most communities pay constant attention to gaining and maintaining honour. A family's honour depended on the proper or improper behaviour of its women and to curb women's evil and weak character society ensured she remained within the various *lakshmanrekhas* tradition thrust on her. The concept that women had to be controlled was prevalent from ancient texts. Women are expected to uphold traditions by conforming to them; men, on the other hand, uphold

tradition by enforcing them - not upon themselves but upon women (Chakravarty 144). Anthropologist NurYalman has argued that a fundamental principle of Hindu social organization was to construct a closed structure to preserve land, woman and ritual quality. These three are so linked that it is impossible to maintain all three without stringently controlling female sexuality. Women, who formed the pivot of this structure, had to be closely guarded to ensure purity of caste. Women's compliance and subordination was ensured through ideology, their economic dependence on the male head of the family, class privileges and respect, with the use of force or with the threat of ostracisation. In the Malnad region of the 1840s things were not much different. M.K.Indira writes, '*madi* was cherished, which gave special place to that which was sacred or 'pure'. Along with *madi* went the upholding of tradition, ritual and above all the attitude of frogs-in-the-well.' (Indira 3) She mentions that any incident that went against tradition was to receive punishment, the most feared being excommunication. The moment Devaki steps out of her marital house to visit her mother, disregarding Apphan's words, she is declared an outcaste. By stepping out of her small world into the national arena and mingling with people of all castes and religion she breaks yet another taboo, the 'purity' of her caste. Society has always been prejudiced against women, as it fears her power, her sexuality and how she may use it to bring dishonour.

Women were considered only as vehicles 'for the production of sons' for the perpetuation of their pure lineage. If she could not procreate there was no blemish greater than that. Young Phani is not taken back to her husband's house after his death as she is of no more 'use' to that family, just as her cousin Subbu is sent back home as she is 'barren'. Phaniyamma is never harassed verbally or physically, may be because she lives the part of a widow without a whimper of complaint, or is among her own relatives. Devaki on the other hand is always reminded by the women of the *illam* that she does not deserve Unni, is criticized for her passion for reading, always chastised for her inability to conceive, in spite of the fact that it is the household rituals and vows for the 'good' of the family that keep her husband away from her.

Lalithambika's Devaki, the docile bride is not a rebel, but she is different from Namboodiri girls her age because she was home tutored by her progressive brother and knew about a world beyond the *illams* she was confined in. She was ready to do all the household chores without complaint, suffer all the taunts that came her way from the women in the house and even bear Unni's neglect if only she could read at will. She respects Unni, the epitome of goodness and the upholder of dharma and is even intimidated by his aura of righteousness that leaves her wondering if she deserves to be his wife. She also recognizes his love for her which he has no time to demonstrate. She realizes that he will never step out of line because he is in awe of everything- his family, traditions and even the dharma he so piously upholds. On the other hand, Devaki shows immense courage when she defies the elders to visit her ailing mother, knowing very well that she will never be welcomed back. For a young married Namboodiri woman of those days to take such a step

was sacrilegious, yet Devaki does so. She has to decide between honouring relationships and emotions and submitting herself to irrational societal norms set down by traditions. Her defiant step is an escape from the stifling sacred space of home to free breathing space for herself. Following her brother she joins the freedom struggle travelling to places, delivering spirited speeches and even rises to a level to be closely associated with Gandhiji. After Independence, realizing the hollowness of the principles of some of the leaders, a disillusioned Devaki withdraws from the political world to that of a spiritual one. From Thethi/Devaki she moves on from being DevakiManampalli to DevakiBehen and Sumitrananda. It is not only Devaki's name and physical self that steps out of her traditional bondage, her mental and spiritual self acquires worldly wisdom at different stages of her life. The different phases she chooses are her own decisions – decisions that she could take when she broke the shackles that bound her.

M.K.Indira had heard stories about her resilient widowed grand aunt and decided to write *Phaniyamma* because she felt that 'there was something of significance here.' The inmates of the renowned Anchemane were ardent followers of traditions and rituals and were very superstitious. When a thief cuts off Phani's hair for the gold clasp there is more panic that her hair is cut off than the loss of an ornament. She is bundled off before her husband's people know about it and even at home, she is kept indoors so that no one knows about her 'misfortune'. The women are upset again when she drops the platter of kumkum and turmeric on an auspicious day- for they are all signs of the ominous future. In those days it was not uncommon for houses to have young widows but Phani was a child widow and such a problem had not been faced by any household in that area. The elders of the community are in a quandary about what is to be done and so her father sets off to get directions from the *mutt* head at Sringeri .The directions are harsh on the child widow, but come with an ultimatum, 'If these instructions are not followed to the letter, the entire household will be excommunicated.'(Indira 46) There is no hesitation or sorrow in keeping a young child indoors for days, shaving her hair off, breaking her bangles and condemning her to a life of deprivation. Though very young she just slips into the life of a widow without ever passing through childhood, youth, without ever knowing what it was to be a teenager,wife, mother or grandmother. Stoically she follows all rituals and does all the work assigned to her and more, never shirking, never grumbling and gradually even feeding herself less. Indira writes, 'In the bloom of her youth Phaniyamma became a true *tapasvini*.'(Indira 54) Uma Chakravarti's words aptly describe Phani's condition 'She (awidow)came to be institutionally marginalized: while she was physically alive she was socially dead' (Chakravarty 84).

Phani is illiterate, innocent and quiet, yet had a mental strength unseen in women of those times. When it came to a dilemma her decisions are clear, quiet and quick. From the inner quarters of her small world she recognizes the changes happening in the outside world and is broad minded enough to adapt or accept them according to the situation, while the men who are well connected with the outer world would rather chain their

women to inhuman practices in the name of tradition. About eighty years later, when a relative Dakshayini, is being forced to follow the rituals for a widow, Phani reminds them that times have changed and so should they. 'So what if a woman has hair on her head? Does all the impurity rest there? What punishment do you want for a child who has just begun to open her eyes?' (Indira 109) To Phaniyamma's dismay the girl is taken back to her husband's house shorn of all traces of the beautiful young girl she was, and to take *madi*. Dakshayini's later actions shock and challenge the elders who had imposed widowhood on her and hers is a story of defiance as against Phani's total submission.

Once an untouchable mother approaches Phaniyamma, as her daughter is going through a difficult delivery. The Brahmin household is aghast that the untouchable had dared to come to disturb the pious Phani and is sure that all the *punya* she acquired through her Kashi trip is going to go waste. Phani does not hesitate to help with the delivery, which is a first for her. Once she is assured that the baby and mother are fine she leaves the house cautioning the grateful family to keep her role a secret. On her way back she bathes in the river, purifies herself with her prayers and *panchagavya*. She informs her family that the baby was already delivered by the time she reached, saving them from their 'concern for her purity.' Later she wonders if she had defiled herself but finds comfort at the thought of having saved two lives. Her strength is her wisdom.

Tradition is so forcefully dinned into the social system that both Phaniyamma and Devaki are never fully out of its clutches. Phani keeps *madi*, follows all traditional rituals, keeps fasts and constantly recites from the Puranas, for the prosperity of her family. Sometimes she wonders why the women in the Puranas to suffer in spite of being mothers, wives and daughters of gods. When lost for answers she says, 'Some good-for-nothings write the Puranas, and we useless ones believe them. That's all there is to that.' (Indira 119) She does not believe in wasting her time tormenting herself with her doubts; when in a dilemma she applies her mind and does what she feels is right, without any guilt. Though Devaki has physically moved very far from her husband she retains and reveres her mangalsutra, as she believes it to be her protector. It is only when she decides to leave the materialistic world; she sends the mangalsutra back to Unni. Her protest was never against Unni. Theirs is a unique relationship of love and respect for each other to the end. She, who has been a spiritual guru for years, is thoroughly shaken up at the sight of Thankam, her soul sister from a past life. Her memories torment her that she withdraws into her ashram for two days to regain her composure. 'It is through Thethi's (Devaki) vulnerability to people and happenings that her portrait takes on the varied nuances, the transformations, that Lalithambika wished to suggest in her character.' (Krishnankutty 58) Devaki defies the system that pinned her down, but appears less strong than Indira's Phaniyamma, who gives in to the system, yet finds answers on her own terms. Phaniyamma remains the invisible, silent presence throughout till she is very old and her opinions sought, while Devaki is visible in her many avatars - the docile bride, the freedom fighter, the social worker and then an ascetic; both living for others.

While Devaki breaks tradition by stepping out of her world, Phaniyamma remains within its confines and breaks tradition silently by being practical and working around outdated traditional customs. Phaniyamma's life is one of silent suffering as she is deprived of everything life has to offer, but she never complains, yet the reader feels the suffering. The throes of alienation and restriction that even women belonging to the upper most caste face have been portrayed by the writers through their different styles. The protagonists are plagued by doubts, they are vulnerable, they face crises, yet they make their decisions. Tradition and patriarchy had ensured that society remained unfriendly towards women. Rigid societal rules with the sanction of religion kept her confined within the four walls of her house. Ignorance of a world beyond her small world and illiteracy kept her in harness. The novels under study were written by authors who had both broken the traditional bonds when they wrote about the inner worlds till then unknown and so it is only natural that their protagonists follow suit. External contexts impact them differently yet there is a spirit within each of them that binds them together, that takes them from being victims of societal dictums to victors within the same society.

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