
Narrating in Silence: Phaniyamma**Dr. Neetu Purohit***Assistant Professor, DAV College, Bathinda, (Punjab) India***Abstract**

The novel *Phaniyamma* narrates the story of Phani, who became a widow at the age of nine and lived to be 112 years of age. Despite a few advancements in terms of infrastructure, the society was being ruled by Brahmanical authorities. The protagonist Phani's silence almost throughout the text gives an objective approach to the story. She does not either believe in or oppose the practices followed during that period. Her forbearance, patience and silent struggle allows one a peep into the societal values and the web of hoary traditions which unfolds the ironical functioning and the layout of the social order of those times.

Key Words: Social Order, Brahmanical Authorities, Silence, Forbearance

Introduction

To narrate means 'to tell' or 'to describe' events and happenings as distinctly as possible. Do silences speak? Can the narrator make the protagonist narrate a story inside out by remaining silent?

Phaniyamma is the story of a child widow, published in 1976 by M.K. Indira and translated into English by Tejaswini Niranjana in 1989.

Phani's story was told to M.K. Indira's mother when *Phaniyamma* came to help her give birth to a child. The omniscient narrator in the novel *Phaniyamma* narrates the history of her great grandmother, lovingly called Ancheyatte, who is stoicism personified and opens her mouth for the welfare of others. The novel documents the social, cultural and personal history of those times. The mother narrates to her daughter about various customs, traditions, birth, marriage, death, seasonal festivals, religious observations, etc. It was an era when

advancement in the form of electricity, telephone, buses and schools had started to take place, people had started drinking coffee; they saw the gramophone, batteries, petromax light and many such wonders, but society on the other hand relied on the last word of the Brahmanical authorities.

The novel starts with the birth of *Phaniyamma* in 1844 in a village in Karnataka. It was a big joint family; with no count of how many people lived in the house. At her birth time, the old man who had sat for hours waiting at the door of the delivery room, could not keep awake for another hour and dozed off. The birth time could not be thus noted properly and a horoscope was made on the old man's wrong predictions. Based on those predictions, it was conjectured that *Phaniyamma* would live a long and fulfilled life and when *Phaniyamma*'s horoscope was matched with that of Nanjunda, it ironically talked about "lifelong bliss and the birth of eight sons" (28). *Phaniyamma* grew up in the big family, learnt all the things that a

young girl was supposed to learn. When she was nine years old, she was married off to a fifteen year old Nanjunda. Just a few months later, Nanjunda died, bitten by a snake. The juvenile couple had met only during their wedding and had not even dared to look at one another. The death of her husband, she is barely acquainted with and is married to, closes the windows of the world on to her.

The protagonist Phani's own enforced silence almost throughout the text gives an objective approach to the story. Her muteness drives home a poignant message in a subtle manner by not adhering to or being against the practices followed during that period. The strategy of Rhetoric serves the purpose. For e.g. "People follow whatever customs they are used to. If you examine everything closely, all customs may be wrong. But does this stop people from following them" (129) is there a story like hers in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or the Bhagwata? (132) aren't you her mother? Has your heart turned to stone? (110) they can always find people to do the work outdoors, but shouldn't there be at least one madi person in the kitchen? (107) Can she bear it if you make her take on madi at this age? (107)

The protagonist Phaniyamma's forbearance, patience and her silent struggle allows one a peep into the societal values and the web of hoary traditions which unfolds the ironical functioning and the layout of the social order. Having lived through the trauma, Phaniyamma chooses to maintain silence and bears the agony of a young widow. The narrator's tale exhorts the readers to interrogate into the morality and rules of the society, without at once hinting through the

eyes of the protagonist. At a very young age, this widowed girl is dictated the norms to lead a life of a widow, abstinence, in other words self control; not to think about sensual pleasures, in other words purity; to forget about your existence, in other words elevation of the mind over the body. "In other words" is the "community" dictating terms and considers it a right and a privilege to lay down fetters for the "weakling".

Hans Bertens aptly states: "Since we are all extensions of the discourses that we have internalized, we ourselves constantly reproduce their power..." (156)

Similarly Foucault in *Power/Knowledge* suggests:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. (119)

Likewise Phaniyamma in the specified settings has so internalized the discourse of patriarchy that she cannot bring herself to protest. The discourse of individualism has not been fed in her system. She is the one who belongs to the whole community.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues: "They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and unlike the proletariat, they have no solidarity of labour or interests. They even lack their own space ..." (p 8)

Phani's exemplary silence, standing up for others, where her help is required makes one bow in admiration. She lives her life without desires, but her eyes are constantly questioning the community's vicissitudes. She transforms her white garb of a widow

into an angel's attire, ready to stand, speak or help others, transgressing the codes laid down by the society. Her life is one of self effacement and serving others.

Flouting the rules and acquiring a voice fearless and bold is enough to term a woman mad by people. Never does Phani raise a furore, but her objections do gain a voice when coming for somebody's rescue. When Guddepalu's daughter Dakshayani, at the age of sixteen loses her husband, she is forced by everyone, including her own father to take up madi, rebels against the whole society, doesn't want to shave off her head, everybody raises a furore but at this juncture she is supported by Phani. The marginality inscribed upon Phani conditions her to a life of seclusion from her own self but gives her a voice to stand up for another widow, not to shave her head and follow unfair austerities.

Jasbir Jain states:

The real social problem is not waywardness or immortality, but deprivation of domestic and sexual happiness for hundreds and thousands of widows who are expected to forego all pleasures of life, right from bodily beauty, colour, to freedom and companionship. (127)

Silence being the frame of narration, Phani never questions or objects, but her suffering comes to the fore, when she finds a corner, sits there, closes her eyes whenever she is despondent, on many occasions such as after she is not able to convince Bhattaya.

Phani does not even approve of the tales from mythology coming to the fore. She takes up legends from mythology, the story of Parsurama beheading his mother Renuka

on daring to look at the reflection of another sage in the water is turned to stone by her husband, stories of Sita and Draupadi who suffer for no fault of theirs and had to prove their chastity for the so called guardians of religion. She feels helpless at mythology's turn of events "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 Arjun for a father, Indra for an uncle, why did my son Abhimanyu die? "Some good for nothings write the Puranas and we useless ones believe them. That is all there is to that" (119).

The stories that Phaniyamma narrated to little children were not of legendary characters like Rama, Sita, etc. but stories from Panchatantra, Arabian Nights, story of Alladin, etc.

Phani's infinitely richer lived experience ascribes the story the character of a purana. The omniscient narrator relating story of her great grandmother offers us a repertoire of lessons in fortitude and values inherent in the form of an embodied history.

It is a gesture par heroism to give up the world without for once questioning it and paradoxically being asked to live amongst the pulsing, throbbing world not asking anything from it but leading a life of service. Through the enforced silence of the protagonist, the codes and conduct perpetuating the miserable plight of widows scream through the sheer veneer.

Phani completed a century and a dozen years of her life but knew nothing about

bodily pleasures nor ever repented about it. She silently accepted her fate and was not only a stranger to the outside world but also to her own body till her last breath. The only thing she knew about her body was her menstrual cycle and shaving off her head by the male hand of a barber, by whose touch also she felt tarnished.

Ironically in the bloom of her youth, Phaniyamma helped her own mother deliver four children. In contrast to Phani, M.K. Indira presents the picture of a young girl, Subi, who when forsaken by her husband is aware of her bodily needs, is sexually aroused and has no feeling of guilt in maintaining physical relations with Putta Jois.

When she sees Subi, left by her husband on the charges of being barren and quarrelsome and Putta Jois, a tall, handsome married man with one child in the dark of the night making love, she could not stand the sight. This incident makes her shun the union of a man and a woman.

She says:

Was this how children were made? I have lived in this house for forty years and not seen a sight, such as this, thought Phaniyamma... How disgusting! Marriages, menstruation, children, childbirth, family life, Puja and prayers, madi...All rubbish! (61)

One of the reasons she felt in such a way was that she had grown watching the insistence on the purity and the prescribed code of conduct for women. The spaces the omniscient narrator talks about are a separate room for menstruating women, kitchen and the four walls of the house. These spaces worked as different kinds of

seclusion for women like the 'zanana and murdana'. The outer world was for men – employment of men in the postal services, men watching the plays, while the women worked in the kitchen, within the four walls of the house, serving the members of the family and the guests or giving birth to children in "separate rooms".

Outdoor life was a male domain, especially among the 'bhadralok'... for women the 'antahpur' was their legitimate domain and constitutive of much of their experience. (Jasbir Jain 48)

Every month there was a celebration of pregnancy or birth. "It was like a factory" (55) Life for women in those days was circumscribed only till kitchen. Little girls barely two years old were trained in housework like cooking, cleaning, singing, washing the god's prayer things, swabbing floors and sketching rangoli. At this age they were also aware of the concept of madi purity. They did not know anything about the outside world. Life for madi women was "chopping vegetables, pounding, grinding, scraping, straining, cleaning" (51), milking cows, churning buttermilk, bathing newborn infants and their mothers.

The novel Phaniyamma does not articulate many dialogues Phaniyamma is engaged in, forget about arguing with anybody or projecting her own thoughts or feelings, but communication with her own self is there, often she thinks of severing all bonds of customs and traditions and going to Kashi but she "did not have a single coin to her name" (93). Economic dependence is also a major factor, which curtails widows' movement. In the name of customs and being long used to the inhuman treatment at

the hands of their own families and society, they are either deprived of their voices or when raise their voice expressing their inner desires and temptations are termed as mad by the people. Even for Phaniyamma love, dignity and respect are accorded to her for her usefulness and her not poking nose in to others business where it is not required.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* states “Even when her rights are recognized abstractedly, long standing habit keeps them from being concretely manifested in customs” (pg 9-10). There are varied examples of men, gods, heroes and warriors, who follow and interpret religion according to their own convenience and in the process demonstrate ruthless and callous behaviour.

Phaniyamma lived a kind of a life in exile, but she was available 24*7 for everybody irrespective of their class, caste or religion. She lived till the age of 112 years, but knew nothing about the outside world. Only once she had gone on a Kashi pilgrimage. She felt at a loss in matters of code and conduct laid down by the elders of the house. When a child was born, it was a gift from god, a lot of blood flowed from a woman’s body, but “when her own blood flowed every month, a woman was defiled...Hundreds of questions about these things plagued Phaniyamma” (91). When talking to herself or narrating her story to Banashakri, she states:

If a man touches an outcaste woman, all he needs to do is to bathe and change his sacred thread and he is pure again. If a woman even looks at another man, she is a whore...(96)

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 are not allowed to begin any auspicious ceremony with it! How many blind traditions we have! (96)

Instead of the external spaces it is the body which has been centralised. Phani’s character is an angel spirit, who gifted with incredibly small hands help deliver the baby with the minimum medical assistance possible and attends to various physical ailments but is herself unaware of the need for ‘mating’ between a man and a woman, unacquainted with the pleasures and pangs of being a mother and a woman.

After the death of a husband, the girl is expected to live on others charity, chanting, praying, seeking refuge, waiting to die, in the anticipation of a better next life. On the death of her husband, Phaniyamma’s head was shaved, kumkum removed, bangles broken, was confined to a dark room, and had to practice madi rites, which meant only one meal a day and to live with a shaven head till death. She was robbed of all her pieces of adornment, her jewellery, her colourful clothes, her hair, her voice, her glances, her space and she spent a life perpetually in one or the other kin’s quarters, helping them in the kitchens without ever thinking about her own self. The author states, ‘But life was not paradise-like for one class of people, the widows’. The sight evokes pathos and compels the readers to think as to why the greatest assets of womanhood should be snatched away from her.

It has never been a woman’s will, but rituals and ceremonies dictate their life, no matter how uncomfortable it becomes for them.

Little Phaniyamma had to wear an eighteen yard Puttana Paitne sari, and more jewellery than she could carry. By the end of the day, Phaniyamma was sore with the burden of her ornaments...for the next eight days she had to wear all the jewellery owned by the Postal House. This was the tradition; this was what was considered appropriate for such an occasion (25-26).

Phani on the other hand, like a phoenix bird, giving up her brightly colored plumage, rose stoically from her own ashes after her girlhood was burnt by the society. She instead of donning an attire of a broken-hearted, shattered, vulnerable, helpless woman pulls on the green foliage of “a jasmine plant”, “a shady tree” spreading her fragrance in the form of love, care, affection to one and all.

As Phaniyamma was growing older and had witnessed all, she acquired a mystical aura. She became a source head of love and compassion for all, irrespective of their caste or creed. She was “wanted by all and had to be present at every child birth” (69). Given to her spirit of service, Phani, at the age of seventy helps an untouchable, a Muslim lady, deliver the baby. The narrator does show that with the passage of time, there is an attitudinal change in the mindsets of people of both the genders, however the percentage may be very small. When Dakshayani, a sixteen year old widow is forced to take up madi, she rebels against the whole society and gets pregnant by her brother-in-law. She violates the prescribed code of conduct and is termed mad by people but she finally acquires a voice, a

voice fearless and bold which for the first time in the novel, makes Kittapa, a male, comment: “Are those people cattle, or donkeys? What was the big rush to shave the head of a sixteen year old?...The girl did the right thing” (115). Towards the end of the novel where Kitappa, Phaniyamma’s brother is asked about why he did not stop Phaniyamma from becoming a madi at a tender age, he says,

“Oho, you want to get at the root, do you? Listen to me. There’s only three months’ difference in age between Phani and me. Besides she lived in Hebbalige and I in Heerahota. You want to know about something that happened eighty years ago? If things are like this now, don’t you think they were much worse then? You’ll see, things will change even more in the future” (115).

Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* terms “the language of trauma and silence of its mute repetition of suffering” (pg 9).

Phani’s story is orally passed on to a sympathetic female relative Banashakri, which is later passed on to her daughter Indi, who later records it in the form of a book. It is thus thrice removed from Phani, consequently Phani’s own voice gets dimmer and lost in the acts of serving society. M.K. Indira is therefore not shackled to the constraints of language.

David Lodge states, “Repetition is the first step towards offering an account of the way language works in... novels” (83-85). The collective voice “they say”, structurally enhanced by the colloquial tag “don’t they” reminds one of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (chap. 5) where she uses the

“people said” pattern. In both cases an authoritative but unspecified voice (“people and they”) is introduced. To add or to confirm information, question tags have been used in Phaniyamma:

Why do you badmouth yourself? That’llie committing suicide. Our elders say that, don’t they? (104)

On the contrary, we probably cause you a lot of trouble, don’t we? (104)

My brother’s children or grandchildren are likely to be in the Anchemane now, if I die there, someone or the other will touch my body, won’t they? (105)

The narrator here uses a refreshingly new spoken language, particularly the familiar language used between women. It resonates the collective pain of women.

Phaniyamma’s life story leads one to think, if the novel offers us a story or let us hear

the voice in a few words uttered and acting till the last breath of her life.

Widowed at a very young age, Phaniyamma, did not have any family to call her own. She was totally ignorant of a husband wife relationship, was not biologically a mother, but her surrogate action of bestowing unconditional love, care, concern, affection on the children, giving her share of food, narrating tales to them exemplified her maternal instincts. In the face of all troubles, she unfolded her lap for everybody. She being the eternal mother figure draws a parallel to our motherland, who because she remains quite, is not meek or subservient, but an embodiment of the fountain of love, a nurturer, a provider, displaying her strength in bravely surviving the atrocities inflicted upon her, providing succor in gloomy spells of fate, exuberating a positive energy and instilling in a person a sense of devotion and appreciation.

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