CHAPTER 4

Plagued by Pleasure: Reading the 'Desiring' Female Body in Heteronormative Marital Relations and Widowhood

In her *Uses of the Erotic*, Audrey Lorde (1997) posits that the idealization assigned to the suppression of the erotic in women's lives, defining it to be symbolic of their strength is delusional because it is "fashioned within the context of the male model of power" (278). To explain this tactical circumcision of bodily desires from female embodiment, Lorde (1997) further asserts that such corporeal disciplining is a methodology to maintain oppression. She rightly claims that to be functional, any kind of oppression requires the sources of power and energy in the culture of the oppressed to be distorted. By making this claim, Lorde is recognizing the sexual, the erotic, the pleasure-seeking aspects of the female body as a mode of empowerment. However, traditionally heteropatriarchal societies have efficiently contained female sexuality within the ambit of monogamous utilitarian measures designed to benefit men, in terms of growing their families or addressing the pleasure they seek. Luce Irigaray (1997) critiques the phallocentric tendency of painting dominant narratives of sexual arousal with masculine acts like erection. Irigaray (1997) points out how such narratives identify the female body as "only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies", incapable of showing any bodily urgency for sexual desires as opposed to the phallic erection (250).

The tendency to disrupt the deep entanglement between feminist power and feminine bodily desires is often seen in the discourses of sexuality. Supporting this conviction, in their introduction to *Women, Sexuality, and the Political Power of Pleasure*, Jolly et al. (2013) discuss how the commonality of women being portrayed as victims, particularly in discussions of sexuality has made it almost impossible to imagine them enjoying themselves in any sexual capacity. Moreover, the overrepresentation of women being only objects of harassment and sexual harm appears to erase the potent pre-cognitive bodily urges of women's embodiment. Yusuf (2013) writes that such mediated assumptions on women being only victims in sexual narratives strategically omit the "primary aspects of women's sexual experience, centered around a desire for intimacy, love, curiosity, fantasy, mutuality, respect, adventure, and joy" (30). This traditional imposition of passivity on women's bodies in the realm of sexual desires discounts their corporeal agency to express

the kind of pleasure they seek. While in the West this might have been challenged over the years with sexual rights activism started by the second and third-wave feminists in the 1970s and 1990s, in the Indian subcontinent the battle for sexual freedom and the awareness of female pleasure is still far from its culmination. In many rural and middle-class urban societies of India, women's engagement with the erotic continues to be in a disguised existence in their roles as wives, either accomplishing their duties of fulfilling their husbands' bodily needs or through their reproductive roles in the prescribed pro-creative marital sex. Limiting the female bodily desires and representing female sexuality only within the space of conjugality circumvents other possible avenues where women's bodies can experience desires. This leashing of women's bodily desires within the boundaries of marriage is problematic because here something as innate and subjective as bodily pleasure is being disciplined by a social institution. What happens if the wife's body never achieves the pleasure it seeks? Married women in many lesser-developed places of India are not even encouraged to discuss these matters of feminine sexual urges on moral grounds and are taught to glorify chastity to maintain their social dignity. While discussing the silence around the notion of female pleasure in Indian contexts, Sharma (2013) reveals how even women's rights activists feel embarrassed to open conversations about pursuing pleasure among women in villages of India where it is considered taboo.

Sharma (2013) questions the larger 'political' contexts that even restrict women activists, who have otherwise ostensibly resisted gendered oppression in various domains of life, from engaging in a dialogue with their sexual desires. This also exposes how well-negotiated the patriarchal construct is, one that labels female "sexual desire (other than in the context of reproduction within marriage), and therefore the realm of sexuality, as being 'bad' or 'dirty'" (Sharma, 2013, 44). Such prominent prioritization of the negative outcomes of feminine sexuality compresses the space for pleasure-positive approaches to coexist. Female bodies gaining pleasure out of sexual encounters designed to meet male desires disrupt the power dynamics of heteronormative relationships. The element of shame associated with such pursuits of feminine erotic is to ensure that women do not transgress the power structure and politically mobilize to a higher stature in the relationship through their bodily intervention. Thus, women's vulnerability towards sexual offenses in public or domestic sexual abuse must not be discounting the alternate narratives of the pleasure-seeking attribute of their corporeality. It is important to recognize that the reason women are represented more often than not as victims and reluctant participants in

acts of sexual intimacies afforded by their hetero-patriarchal relationships is to enable men to control the action. This essentially makes the desiring woman a threat to the masculine model of power in marital relationships and a transgressive subject to the established norms. The continuity of such parochial perception around the female sexual agency post-marriage can be traced back to ancient Indian laws propagated through Sanskrit texts like *Manusmriti* that posit many problematic rules with barely any accountability for female bodily desires in their prescription for ideal conjugal life. For instance, *Manusmriti* identifies the wife as the husband's property and preaches that "the discipline of a household" depends on the "man's proprietorship over his wife's body" (Sinha, 2014, 64). Being one of the first ancient Sanskrit texts to be translated into English in the colonial period, *Manusmriti* aligned with the ideologies of the British Puritans or Victorian prudery and hence, served as a pivotal document in the construction of the Hindu Law Code (Sinha, 2014). The female body can indeed transcend these laws since it has certain pre-cognitive urges that precede any social inscription as pointed out by Merleau-Ponty's (1962; 1968) discussions of phenomenology. This argument provides a space for understanding that the embodied realm of female sexual pleasure can indeed precede "the inscriptive forces of history and hetero-patriarchal socialization" (Yusuf, 2013, 30). This dichotomy of the female body's pre-cognitive desires and the disciplining of its urges through the institution of marriage creates a contradictory corporeal binary. This chapter attempts to study how women negotiate this contradiction around the notion of their pleasure by focusing on its representation in the select body of women's fiction.

Since women are only allowed to engage with their sexuality within the boundaries of marriage in a typical Indian society, it is urgent to evaluate how in that limited capacity, the female body yearns for pleasure. This chapter traces the bodily disciplining of married women and their desires in the regional socio-cultural contexts. It studies the socio-political facets that are responsible for making female pleasure unattainable. The women characters in the select fiction expose how suppressing bodily desires in abusive marriages is normalized. Some of these women characters also demonstrate the constant battle to retain a sexually attractive body to prevent their husband's infidelity. Therefore, the chapter also brings into discussion the politics of beauty that drive female desires to their destination even inside a traditional marriage and examines how feminine beauty becomes a tool of power in the marital dynamics. What happens when the wife's body fails to maintain its desirability under the male gaze of the husband? Is the husband equally

leashed to his wife through the institution of marriage in case of sexual dissatisfaction or are there easy avenues for him to stray? What repercussions does the desiring female body face if it strays out of the marital bond and how does this transgressive act threaten the established hegemonic relations? These are some of the urgent queries the chapter dwells into in its first section. The first section weaves its arguments into these nuances of marriage and the challenges it poses for the pleasure-seeking female body. The second section follows the female body post the husband's death in Hindu marriages and studies how its desires are disciplined even in the absence of a husband. In its critique of marital ownership of the female body as re-iterated over the years through laws and cultural norms, this chapter also analyzes how women endure unaddressed sexual cravings even beyond the death of the husband, in their widowhood. As they continue to suffer through their parched days devoid of sexual fulfillment, how do widows archive the memory of their past sexual adventures? Most importantly, how do these widows navigate their pre-cognitive bodily urges under the stringent Brahminical strictures? This chapter urgently conducts a comparative study interrogating these aspects in its analysis of literary representations.

4.1. The Hunger of the Undesirable Wife's Body

Judith Butler (2011) emphasizes how bodies are indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and such bodily norms are consequences of the re-iterative power of discourses that maintain gender-based hegemonies. The reiteration of these regulatory norms is not a necessary obligation but is rather used as a tool for exploiting the female body to ensure it is apposite to the male imagination of beauty and sexual desires. To be considered beautiful under the collective male gaze translates to power, and to achieve this power women are often seen self-disciplining their bodies. In her work, Margaret Carlisle Duncan (1994) has attempted to explain this self-monitoring of the female body using Michel Foucault's (1979) metaphor of the panopticon. Duncan (1994) explains that as the prison structure of the panopticon allows the guard to keep every prisoner under "continual surveillance" without being observed by them, the possibility of permanent visibility forces the prisoner to practice self-surveillance (50). The pressure exerted by the male gaze translates to this sort of panopticon arrangement. The chronic vigilance of the female body results in appearance anxiety among women to maintain a certain definition of desirability. Such perpetual visibility induces a state of

consciousness, leads to constant surveillance of the self, and is an effective way of 'ensuring automatic functioning of power'. (Foucault, 1979, 201) This practice makes women garner a critical notion of the self, one that is primarily an observer's perspective but internalized as their own personal view. Furthermore, bodily criticism is mentally harassing when it is reflected in the behavior of a spouse in a marital relationship. Meenakshi Thapan (1995) notes in her study that women may get psychologically scarred in intimate relationships "if her physical self is continuously denigrated or remains unappreciated by her partner" (33). Bani Basu's novel *The Fifth Man* (2014) translated by Arunava Sinha from the original Bengali *Pancham Purush* (1990) presents a pertinent representation of such a case. It follows the life of a married Bengali couple Aritra and Neelam. As Neelam is forced to undergo a hysterectomy at the age of thirty, the novel deeply probes into the transitions it causes in their marital sex lives. Basu's plot explores how Neelam's de-mothered embodiment informs on the marital reservations against female pleasure and exposes the politics of beauty dictating non-reproductive sexual intimacy inside a conservative Indian marriage. Basu draws the character of Neelam, who is forced to undergo a hysterectomy because her condition is considered life-threatening with a high risk of developing uterine cancer.

The doctor warns her husband Aritra about her condition and lists out the repercussions this surgery might entail at the early age of thirty. However, it is interesting to note that he consults her husband and not Neelam herself for the final opinion on whether to go ahead with the surgery. In the novel, the doctor mentions that one of the consequences of removing the womb at such an early age is that Neelam would be hastened into middle age and unable to perform the role of a young wife. At first glance, this comment seems to be hinting at the deterioration of her libido and sexual performance. However, there is a subtle insinuation regarding the loss of her physical desirability. The doctor casually labels Neelam's youth to be a "joint property" belonging to them both but it is ultimately only Aritra who acquires the agency to make this decision for Neelam's body and whom he consults (Basu, 2014, 13). It is as if to disrupt her corporeality, the doctor needed her husband's permission since he is considered to be the one most affected by this disruption. The initial discussion between the doctor and Aritra about the consequences of Neelam's hysterectomy highlights that when the womb is intact, the beauty and youth of the female body are also retained. This also makes the womb a producer of these aspects, and such bodily parameters are crucial to access desirability under the male gaze. In that case, does

becoming womb-less make the female body undesirable? And how does an undesirable womb-less female body seek pleasure for itself? In *The Fifth Man* (2014), Neelam experiences a corporeal transition following her womb removal surgery and the implications of her changed corporeality are evident in the desexualized relationship she develops with her husband Aritra in the aftermath of the surgery. However, the text problematizes whether it is Neelam's body that rejects sexual engagement after her surgery or whether it is Aritra who no longer finds her de-mothered body desirable. Neelam responds to the idea of going through this surgery by categorically saying two things that are pivotal to the present investigation. Firstly, she says "If I am going to lose what matters, I might as well lose everything" (Basu, 2014, 11). This response distinctly acknowledges the womb to be the single most vital part of her embodiment and explains Neelam's reluctance to give up on it. As she is ready to sacrifice herself to keep her womb intact, the womb becomes the defining character of her corporeal value. Her second response reveals the underlying reason behind her affinity with this facet of her overall embodiment. She says to her husband while opposing the surgery, "I don't fear for myself, Ari. I am afraid for you. Of you. What use will I be to you anymore?" (Basu, 2014, 13).

Neelam's fear of being corporeally devalued in her heteronormative marriage with Aritra discloses the patriarchal and marital ownership of the female body. Her fear stems from her understanding of her bodily duties in her marriage where only she is expected to satiate her husband's desires and grow his family line. Her concerns demonstrate how women are initiated to perform in their corporeal capacity only for the benefit of male ownership. Although by choosing her life over her sex appeal, Aritra seemingly displays greater concern for Neelam's well-being, he also acts blatantly apathetic towards her bodily needs in her post-surgery reality during several instances of the plot. His indifference emerges out of his disgust for her undesirable unattractive womb-less body. The following lines describe Aritra's reflection on how Neelam's body has lost its charms after the hysterectomy.

> When he was a child, toy sellers commonly sold a sort of elongated balloon with a dimpled body, which the children loved. Neelam used to look like that once upon a time. Rounded, smooth, taut. And now she looked the way a balloon does when it is over-inflated, bulging disproportionately. (Basu 2014, 11)

These musings get provoked when Aritra witnesses Neelam deeply lost in her prayers. He addresses his wife as the priestess and by assigning this divine spiritual role to her, he alienates her from the notion of worldly pleasures or bodily desires. The description of her body in his thoughts aligns with the desexualized image of a priestess. Interestingly, the doctor also mentions in the beginning that Neelam would continue to perform the role of a housewife or a mother but not a young wife desiring to explore her body with her husband. This parochial view is not entirely scientific in nature and rather finds its roots in the aesthetic ideals of embodying these gender roles. Such an understanding is propagated by the belief that mothers, housewives, or priestesses are not required to impress with their sexual appeal and body aesthetics. Their bodies can very well be invisible in domestic or spiritual spaces. Their over-inflating bodies bulge disproportionately due to the lack of attention paid to their corporeal presence and physical grooming. The sterile narratives they are forced into do not paint them as having a conventionally sexually attractive body. This portrayal particularly shows how women possessing mature maternal bodies or menopausal or aging bodies, aren't typically expected to be sexually active in an orthodox Brahminical context.

Instances of such attitudes towards the aging female body can also be found in Nabaneeta Dev Sen's Bengali novella, *Sheet Sahasik Hemantalok*: *Defying Winter* (2013) translated from the Bengali by Tutun Mukherjee. Sen (2013) sets her novella in an old age shelter in Kolkata and the characters of the plot are its inmates, a fleet of old women who reminisce their pasts and the circumstances under which they chose to live in the old age home. In the novella, the character of Chiki's mother-in-law is shamed for her tendency to give out licentious details about her illicit sexual adventures during her youth. Chiki mainly finds this practice to be an embarrassment because of her mother-in-law's age. Chiki further reveals how these sexually ostensible stories of her mother-in-law are treated as a "result of her senility" (Sen, 2013, 45). She goes on to say that her mother-in-law has rather had a conservative existence, "stuck within the four walls" of her home, and that the father-in-law used to rarely visit her because of which she made up these stories to "make her husband jealous" (Sen, 2013, 45). It is noteworthy how Chiki's mother-in-law's deviant performance of senility distorts the normative image of the aging female body which is treated as if it never had any sexual desires nor it does. To propagate the narrative of sexual abstinence for elderly women, it can be seen how Chiki's mother-in-law's tales of sexual joy were falsified and interpreted as an act of making her husband jealous. It is interesting

how the figure of her husband is quickly placed at a central role in her narrative of attaining sexual pleasure. There is a stern conditioning at play here where any sexual narrative from the wive must be inspired to have something to do with the husband. Similarly, Neelam is imposed with an obligation to dedicate her unwavering focus in her performance of maternity post her surgery. She suffers an immediate detachment from her bodily desires as soon as she loses her womb, and consequently her ability to engage in reproductive sexuality in her marriage. This decoupling of Neelam's body from its desires after the loss of her womb and the imposition of the role of a mother and a middle-aged housewife on her embodiment demonstrates how women are robbed of pleasure at a certain age when they are only expected to perform certain desexualized roles. When the womb is removed from this equation of feminine corporeal servility, all that remains is the desiring female body. However, Neelam's pleasure-seeking womb-less body only receives ignorance and non-reciprocation of its desires in her marriage. While Chiki's mother-in-law has reached that senile age through the test of time, Neelam gets hastened into a menopausal middle age due to her hysterectomy. However, in both cases, with the supposed loss of their youth and the demands of a normative maternal performance, their conventionally 'unattractive' aging female bodies are socially commanded to follow a prescribed script of sexual abstinence.

Since maternity is so widely imperative in a female embodiment, it is considered to be the socially prescribed motive behind any sexual intimacy afforded by a typical heteronormative marriage in an uptight Indian society. It is ironic how only sexual enactments performed in a bid to procreate within the legitimate boundaries of a marriage are considered non-perverse while the mere pursuit of female desires within the very same permissible marital quarters is strongly condemned if reproduction is out of the picture. The asexual treatment of the aging motherly figure in both Basu's (2014) and Sen's (2013) plots unveils two major notions about the feminine bodily access to pleasure in marriage and beyond. Firstly, it shows that there is a tendency in the conservative Hindu belief system to de-couple maternity and sexuality. Secondly, it deconstructs the aesthetic ideals of a female body to entice masculine desires which is the only way for it to access pleasure in a traditional Hindu heteronormative marital relationship. Since maternity provides a legitimate space for women caged in such conservative marital setups to explore their bodily need for pleasure, motherhood essentially becomes the dominant paradigm of understanding female sexuality. Maternity becomes in that case the primary event leading

to women's discovery of sexual pleasure. However, once maternity is achieved, the maternal body is de-eroticised. Therefore, on one hand, there is a valorization of pro-creative female sexuality while on the other there is the danger of non-maternal female desires that threaten to transgress the chastity demanded from women in marriage. This dualism exposes how there is an assumed "incongruity between active sexuality and motherhood in a good wife" (Hooda, 2021, 3). Furthermore, even when there is an accessible space to engage in non-maternal sexuality women must possess a body that allures their husbands to even score an opportunity to explore their chances of achieving the pleasure they seek. Neelam's disproportionate body contours, prevalent in Aritra's perception of her do not resemble the popular beauty ideals under the male gaze and are therefore symbolic of her deviant corporeality. After the loss of the womb, her body becomes excessively corpulent while the beauty hierarchy of popular culture demands it to be timid and not take up an intimidating amount of space.

Neelam's womb-less body is deviant to the normative fertile well-curved female bodies and this deviance attracts Aritra's disgust. Basu expands this idea in the instance where Neelam gets dressed up to sexually entice her husband, Aritra, and to rescue her parched bodily temptations from her husband's ignorance. Basu cleverly portrays Neelam in a horrifying avatar in this scene of attempted seduction. When Aritra sees her lying on the bed wearing a saree, with her unkempt hair and vermillion smeared across her forehead, he gets "overcome with fear" (Basu, 2014, 67). In her pursuit of pleasure, Neelam terrifies Aritra and induces horror in the scene rather than being aesthetically pleasing. She challenges the norms of femininity both externally and internally. The post-hysterectomy corpulent body of hers betrays the beauty norms of slenderness as negotiated under the male gaze. Such non-normative deviant female bodies like that of Neelam offer themselves as texts that aggressively demand to be "read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender" (Bordo, 1994, 94). Mahasweta Devi (2020) in her short fiction, 'Sindhubala' (2020) translated from Bengali by Radha Chakravarty presents another such protagonist whose body also deviates from the heteropatriarchal beauty hierarchy. Devi's character Sindhubala is described as ugly by not only outsiders but her own mother as well. Expressing her concern regarding her marital prospects, at the beginning of the short story, Sindhu's mother describes the undesirable aspects of her appearance. She says, "Seen the girl's face? Bulging forehead, snub nose. Black skin?" (Devi, 2020, 60). Sindhu's mother wonders who would marry her daughter with such an unappealing appearance. When

Sindhu does get married, she is brought back by her mother-in-law a couple of years after the marriage due to her physical undesirability. Sindhu's mother-in-law complains to her mother that her son Sanneshi "hasn't taken to her at all" and strays out of the domestic space to avoid his wife (Devi, 2020, 60). However, the straying of the husband is problematically not questioned at all. Rather it is conceived to be Sindhu's responsibility for failing to attract her husband with her body. Her mother-in-law justifies her son's act as she says, "Everyone says, 'Sanneshi's Ma, if you don't get a beautiful bride, how will Sanneshi stay home?'" (Devi, 2020, 60). Like Neelam's corpulent body, Sindhu's dark-skinned body is also discarded by her husband while her calls for pleasure remain unanswered. Sindhu's mother then promotes her as a divine-born *devangshi* girl who has healing powers at the touch of her feet. While this portrait of being divine and the treatment she gets as a goddess saves her from the public humiliation of being abandoned by her husband because of her undesirable body, it does not save her from the agony of her unfulfilled bodily desires and the pleasure her body demands. Lamenting over this lacuna, Sindhu ruminates,

> This sterile, barren body. This body that flourishes like a fruitless tree. No sons, no daughters, no birthing pains to break this body. With this body, unmarred and throbbing, Sindhu doesn't always enjoy sitting around as a *devangshi* woman. (Devi 2020, 64)

These lines show how the imposition of this spiritual role forces a sterileness on her embodiment but Sindhu's bodily desires do not align with it. Sindhu's body rather longs for pleasure and she longs to engage with her sexuality through maternity which as discussed above is the primary occasion for many women in conservative marriages to receive sexual fulfillment. Both Neelam and Sindhu are forced into these spiritual roles so that their sexuality suffers social invisibility. However, the female body does not contain its urges behind the veil of these roles. Sindhu ultimately resists this invisibility by rejecting to pose as a god-woman, as someone with healing powers. She rejects being pedestalized spiritually so that she can live her womanhood where having such bodily desires does not feel like blasphemy. Similarly, despite her deviant corporeality frightening Aritra, Neelam defies her body size as she scrutinizes her reflection in the mirror. She cognizes that beauty is culturally intelligible and analyzes how the culture she belongs to has historically manifested the glorification of plumpness in female bodies.

As she contemplates her reflection in the mirror, she compares herself to the figure of a dancing deity from the Khajuraho temple. Thinking of the ancient sculptures of "heavy-hipped and ample-breasted women" depicting images of female sexuality, Neelam realizes that the norm of slender female bodies is a relatively recent development in her culture (Basu, 2014, 68). Swami (2021) offers fascinating details of how cross-cultural beauty ideals were heterogenous in the past and how there is a growing trend of "homogenization of a thin ideal globally" in current times (104). Swami (2021) cites the interesting example of the South-Pacific Islanders who associated fatness with sexuality and femininity among women which overlaps with Neelam's observation derived from the ancient sculptures of voluptuous women in the Khajuraho Temple. He observes that the widely mediated images of supposed ideals of beauty ensure that women feel "their bodies to be deficient" and the need to rectify it with drastic body-altering measures (Swami, 2021, 108).

Similarly, Vanita Reddy (2021) criticizes the brutal colorism that women are put through in a colored nation like India. Reddy foregrounds that although the launch of the 'Dark is Beautiful' campaign by Nandita Das made a significant contribution toward improving the inclusivity of darker skin colors in popular cultural representation, it mostly represents 'dusky' or 'wheatish brown' skin in its advertisements while very dark or black skin like Sindhu's hardly feature in such discussions. Based on this limited range of darker skin shades that find a representation in the campaign, Reddy (2021) posits that even such an inclusive campaign "fails sufficiently to engage with the oppositional political force of anti-blackness in its reclaiming of darkness as beautiful" (99). Thus, the unconventional and undesirable body size and skin color of Neelam and Sindhu prohibit them from exercising their sexual desires due to the lack of reciprocity of needs from their husbands. Therefore, despite having enacted some form of resistance, both Sindhu and Neelam are helpless because their husbands deny getting sexually involved with them. Despite having such revolutionary thoughts about her body image, posing as a resistance to the established body ideals, Neelam in the end yields before her inability to arouse her husband and calls it "the defeat of a lifetime" while also identifying her act of dressing up as a mere "act of pity" (Basu, 2014, 69). Although sociocultural norms dictate their corporeality to serve their husbands' desires in their marriages, Sindhu's black-skinned body and Neelam's post-hysterectomy fat aging body are restricted from doing so. Their bodies are discarded from the realm of male desires and thus do not have access to other avenues of heteronormative pleasures while caged in a conservative marriage.

The repulsion for a corporeally deviating female body, re-enforcing non-normative beauty ideals emerges from the notion that it threatens to disturb the established patriarchal constructs of feminine beauty. The deviance is loathed to such an extent that it is often viewed as grotesque and monstrous. Rosi Braidotti (1994) identifies any human being with deformations, abnormalities, or anomalies as monstrous. Moreover, she recognizes the ever-changing female body, deviant to the standardized phallocentric bodily norms, as "morphologically dubious" and therefore monstrous in its effect (Braidotti, 1994, 64). This is also what Elizabeth Grosz (1994) posits in her discussion of "a corporeal universal" which projects the white masculine heterosexual as the unquestioned norm (188). Grosz (1994) further buttresses Braidotti's theoretical underpinnings by pointing out that such androcentrism leads to violent representations that reduce other bodies such as female, black, or disabled to a subaltern stature. In that case, as opposed to the normative female embodiment, the non-normative feminine body is a significant anomaly with no possibility of any reversing morphological change. That makes the female bodies that are aging, fat, black, or carrying other conventionally undesirable features, the distorted subaltern, the other of 'the other'. Such female bodies in the male imagination are more prominently appropriated as monstrous and this impression permeates all layers of social dynamics specifically within heterosexual marital relationships.

The monstrous is marked with a certain liminality and ambiguity in its embodiment due to its anomalies. Neelam's womb-less body is in that liminal space where it is identified as female but not quite because of its dysfunctional reproductivity. Similarly, Sindhu's femininity fails to excite her husband's desires because of her black skin color, and her body is, therefore, further de-sexualised with imposed spirituality. These bodies that are incongruous in conventional male fantasies can be identified as an "abject" in Julia Kristeva's (1982) terms, which materializes in the ambiguous, the in-betweenness of the normative structures, and disturbs the established order. Discussing this facet in her ground-breaking essay, Braidotti (1994) aptly writes "The monstrous or the deviant is a figure of abjection in so far as it trespasses or transgresses the barriers between recognizable norms or definitions" (65). Similarly, Åhäll (2012) corroborates this claim by asserting that when a female body is located in opposition to the norms of femininity, "the subject becomes the abject, a monster" (111). Åhäll (2012) aids this understanding further by proposing that there is a moral function performed by the monstrous non-normative female body as "it thrives on ambiguity and the transgression of taboos and

boundaries" (112). Thus, the non-normative, deformed, monstrous female body can be perceived as a corporeal feminist tool against patriarchal power structures. This also explains the masculine propensity to fear the abject or the monster which is why these bodies are invariably ignored, pushed to social invisibility, and discarded in marriage. This can be very well exemplified in two other texts from the select body of women's fiction such as Indira Goswami's (2021) novella 'The Blood of Devipeeth' anthologized in her *Five Novellas about Women*, translated from Assamese by Dibyajoti Sarma and Paramita Satpathy's (2019) short fiction, 'Alone, Together' from her collection of short stories, *Boundless Moments*, translated from Odia by Snehaprava Das. In both these narratives, there are women protagonists whose bodies are marked with spots of leukoderma and the plots revolve around how these bodies are ostracised in society and their parched temptations remain curbed. In 'The Blood of Devipeeth,' Goswami (2021) presents the character of Padmapriya who is abandoned by her husband and the family of her in-laws because she has a white spot on her back. Padmapriya spends her time in the loneliness that pervades her parental home as she hears the rumors that her husband has already gotten a new wife.

Lamenting her ill fate, her friend Lavanya tells her that she cannot rot alone and that her husband might not have even taken a proper look at the rest of her body. She says, "Most men are like wolves. If someone ever gets the taste of your flesh, he will be like a man-eater" (Goswami, 2021, 81). Lavanya validates other sexually attractive features of Padmapriya's body and complements her limbs and her "bosom that rises and falls like waves" (Goswami, 2021, 81). This validation of other conventionally beautiful features of Padmapriya's body is treated like compensation that her husband must consider against the undesirable white spot on her back indicative of a diseased skin condition. When Padmapriya gets ready to attend a wedding in her village, she experiences hypervisibility of her body in public and feels that she is under the scrutiny of other villagers who want to see the infamous white mark on her body. Similarly, in Satpathy's short story, the protagonist Maya is affected by leukoderma during her teenage years and subsequently endures harsh ostracization from society, including by her own parents. Her mother constantly reminds her that "no one would marry her because of her spots" (Satpathy, 2019, 37). Although Satpathy's protagonist Maya never gets married in the narrative, it is urgent to compare her characterization to analyze how such bodily anomalies restrict women from getting involved in a conjugal life that might fulfill their bodily desires.

Unlike Padma, Maya chooses the path of education and therefore has more freedom yet she gets exploited by her distant brother-in-law, Rabi bhai who is a widower and, in whose home, she takes shelter during her college days. Maya longs for Rabi and therefore when he tries to engage with her sexually, she does not resist as it is her only chance to explore her bodily desires. In that moment of ecstasy, Maya gets "locked in the strong arms of Rabi bhai" and is "sucked into its abysmal depth frantically struggling to explore the magic hidden there" (Satpathy, 2019, 40). It is evident in these passionate details, that Maya was urgently quenching the thirst of her body in this sexual encounter with Rabi bhai. It shows how her body longed for these desires to manifest in reality. However, when Maya gets posted far away for her teaching job, she gets forgotten very casually and Rabi gets married a second time. It is obvious that Maya's deformed body was just used as an easily accessible commodity for satisfying Rabi's bodily needs but the validity of this adventure for Maya was short-lived. The temporariness of this sexual adventure shows how bodies like that of Maya's are not perceived to be 'wife material' in popular lingo. Just as Maya submits herself to Rabi's sexual urges in her moment of vulnerability, Padma's friend Lavanya advises her to use her body to seduce her husband during the village wedding. Lavanya says,

> Not only through speech, try to converse with your body also. When someone talks to a young lover like this, all his orthodoxy, pride, anger, and wrath comes to naught. The tiger turns into a mouse. (Goswami 2020, 101)

Both Padma and Maya try to use the femininity of their bodies to win heteropatriarchal conjugal relations and a platform for themselves to explore their desires but fail to achieve that due to their skin which is marked with undesirable white spots. What Lavanya preaches in the above lines projects how women are expected to use their bodies to keep their partners sexually charmed despite their rejection of it. Here bodily beauty translates to power in the sexual dynamics of a marital relationship. In her novella, Sen (2013) draws the character of Nistarini Devi who reflects on how effective seduction in marriage puts the woman in control, and keeps her in charge. Nistarini Devi describes her current appearance in her old age as a witch and she contrasts this image with her desirable frame in her youth. Reminiscing how powerful her feminine beauty used to be, she says, "I was a juicy little fruit. I had what you call 'the real stuff', you know? For which men fall at your feet like obedient puppies" (Sen, 2013, 77). The character Nistarini Devi is looked

down upon by other inmates of the old-age shelter because she gives sexually explicit details about what her body was capable of doing and how many lovers fell at her feet due to that capacity. However, it is because of her prowess in seducing her suitors that she enjoyed wealth and freedom and could exercise a corporeal agency much better than other women in her vicinity. Nistarini Devi's body was apposite to the popular male fantasies and desires which gave her an advantage over others. Therefore, contrary to the negligence suffered by Neelam, Sindhu, Maya, and Padmapriya because of some or other anomaly in their bodies, Nistarini Devi's conventionally desirable body could incite her male partners' lust. That is why she could access multiple avenues to explore the pleasure her body seeks. The other deficient bodies lack the agency to address their desires in marriage and do not get an opportunity to exercise their choice of bodily pleasure because the sexual rapport in their marriage is scripted according to their husbands' desires. Maxine Leeds Craig (2006) analyses this dual effect of feminine beauty on women's bodies as she posits that beauty is framed both as "part of a structure of oppression" and "a potentially pleasurable instrument of female agency" (159). In the case of Neelam, Sindhu, Padmapriya, and Maya, the politics of beauty works oppressively since the disgust expressed for their bodies by their partners or society in general, is harassing in nature and restricts them from achieving bodily pleasure in a fulfilling sexual encounter. This exemplifies how "emotions like disgust and dread may serve as regulatory devices for women to think about, and 'contain', their unruly bodies" (Fah, 2017, 84).

External responses to the female body, ones that are especially facilitated by the husband's gaze permeate women's understanding of their own bodies. Whether their bodies are deserving of the pleasure they seek is decided by a masculine imagination of feminine beauty. Thapan (1995) investigates this facet of male dominance over the female body in marital relations through an extensive survey of case studies. Thapan (1995) illustrates through many of the case studies she deals with, how in intimate relationships the male partner's definitions of the woman's body emerge as violent and oppressive since "they are not congruent with women's own perceptions of their bodies and identities" (72). Interestingly, enacting such body aesthetics according to the husband's gaze is often treated as a tool for gaining agency as witnessed above in the case of Nistarini Devi. Rachel Wood (2017) discusses how the act of disciplining the body according to the husband's gaze is also treated by many women as an act of gaining power. Wood (2017) writes that "the monitoring and maintenance of the sexy body seen as evidence for, and a reinforcement

of, feelings of inner 'sexiness', confidence and being 'in control'" (321). Nistarini Devi's agentive characterization reflects this idea but it is also evident that her embodiment is dictated by male fantasies and had she digressed from such bodily performance, she would have lost the power over her multiple partners, and consequently her access to pleasure. The location of feminine beauty of the wife's body is therefore in most of these cases directly proportional to her chances of exploring bodily desires and achieving pleasure.

4.2. Adultery and Marital Ownership of the Wife's Body

A close reading of Kumkum Roy's (1998) analysis of the ancient text of *Kamasutra* reveals that this oldest Sanskrit treatise on sexuality and eroticism is "primarily directed towards" the male citizen (*nagaraka)* who is also often treated as the main actor of the sexual act (*nayaka)* (60). The man is the focus of all socio-sexual relations while the woman as Roy (1998) writes, is "the object of such relations" (60). The man's pleasure is considered primary while a woman's bodily needs are obliterated. How does the desiring female body negotiate this sexual hegemony when her corporeality is strictly limited by the boundaries of marriage? What happens when she yields to her desires and transgresses the boundaries of marital commitment and domesticity? This section studies such women characters from the select body of women's fiction who, unlike the previously discussed portraits of loyal and helpless wives, take offense at the incompetencies of their husbands in giving them bodily pleasure and choose to follow their desires outside of marriage. This section also examines the repercussions endured by the adulterous wife's body and how socio-political laws protect the husband's marital ownership of it. This aids in an understanding of how when the female body fosters agency and chooses to retaliate, it faces some form of corporeal punishment, ignominy, or a forced suppression of its desires. Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay (2019) in her novel *The Yogini,* translated from Bengali by Arunava Sinha, presents a strong, independent, and attractive female protagonist, Homi. Homi's character although seems at first glance pretty sorted in terms of sexual freedom and having an agentive body, goes through an arc of transition in her sexual experience. Bandyopadhyay (2019) depicts how Homi feels her body detached from experiencing any sexual pleasure even while sexually engaging with her husband. Unlike the above-mentioned cases, Homi's husband showers her with ample adulation yet fails to satisfy her bodily desires. Unlike other characters discussed above, Homi also belongs to a relatively liberating upper-middle-class society in Kolkata and works at a media company which

renders her with a stark voice in all aspects of her social life. This is why Homi is much more aware of her bodily needs and knows how to articulate them within her life decisions. She craves a sexual encounter with an unknown man in a sage-like avatar whom she fantasizes about recurringly while with her husband Lalit, she merely obliges to accomplish her wifely duties in bed. As Lalit seems more and more stranger in their sexual encounters, Homi wonders in a nuanced sense, that when he ejaculated, "whom he belonged to at the instant of orgasm- was it to her or to himself?" (Bandyopadhyay, 2019, 18). By delving into this query, Homi questions whether their sexual encounters are mutually beneficial and problematizes how her partner might only be bothered about his own sexual fulfillment and not hers. Due to this gap in their pace of achieving pleasure, Homi finds the sexual relationship she shares with her husband to be superficial and she longs for a much deeper connection. In the following excerpt, she brings her dissatisfaction to prominence.

> …but there was no sexual energy within her, no desire to return his kisses, no power to clasp Lalit's hand and ride the wave it washed up on the shore. His frenzied foreplay only made her feel lonely. (Bandyopadhyay 2019, 40).

Homi's pursuit of her bodily pleasure gets caged in her marriage as her husband fails to meet her demands and she becomes convinced that it is not in his capacity any longer to give her pleasure. However, when Homi decides to go for a separation from her husband, she is shamed for being selfish. In an ironic confrontation with Homi, Lalit humiliates her for choosing self-love over her commitment to him while in the same conversation, he declares that as a man it is "demeaning" for him to stay with a woman who has "no further need for love, sex, or friendship" (Bandyopadhyay, 2019, 113). This statement by Lalit shows that he desires a woman who is needy of him and he does not prefer to move from his patriarchal role as a provider. This also unveils a reluctance in him to accept his failure to provide Homi with sexual satisfaction. While Lalit boldly claims that he has many demands from a relationship and cannot continue to stay in one that does not meet those requirements, he shames Homi for doing exactly that. It is noteworthy that Lalit makes no effort to understand in what possible manner can he help Homi achieve the pleasure her body seeks. The novel does not open up any such conversation rather it shows Lalit's engagement with Homi's body solely to answer his own bodily needs. Despite Homi's privileged class and education, when she takes some action to cut off her ties from a

sexually unfulfilling marital bond, she is shamed for choosing her self-pleasure instead of committing to her husband's desires. Homi's character however stands out among all other women characters discussed in this chapter because she vehemently pursues her pleasure and ultimately achieves it with the man of her fantasy in the climax of the plot. Bandyopadhyay has set a tone of magical realism while describing the man of her dreams, a hermit from Banaras who she finally meets in that holy city. His dream-like presence leaves the reader confused about his existence, whether he is real or just a figment of Homi's imagination. However, when Homi finally achieves the pleasure she seeks with him in Banaras, the novel climaxes in a celebratory tone. Through her rigorous pursuits of sexual pleasure and deeply meaningful sexual engagement, Homi performs an act of bodily resistance. But not everyone is liberal enough to accomplish what Homi does, and not everyone can overcome or ignore the moral shame like Homi did. Brinda Bose (2017) defines the "sexual as an irritant expanding to a threat (towards the moral balance in the nation)" and that "there is a sense of risk that blooms out of a moral panic rooted in the conviction that pleasure in sex connotes the corrupt" (4-5).

This risk that Homi could afford is typically whimsical to women trapped in pleasure-less mechanical marriages. Bose (2017) aptly arrests the crux of the problem of the feminine pursuit of pleasure in her observation by targeting this preconditioned moral panic which acts as the primary hurdle women face in orthodox societies. In Yashodhara Mishra's (2020) collection of short fiction, one meets with such characters whose desiring bodies have trespassed the boundaries of marriage but subsequently fell victim to the traps of such moral shaming. Specifically, Mishra's short stories, 'The Picture Within' and 'Worm on the Bough' from her anthology *The Picture Within*, translated from the original Odia, depict such desiring subjects. 'The Picture Within' (2020) follows Amita's life, a government doctor posted in a remote locality for her work. Amita is seen leading a lonely life away from her husband and son within the confines of her workplace. Mishra has used a language of innuendoes implying Amita's brief extra-marital affair with her colleague Rohit in her workplace. In the opening scene, Amita seems to be struggling to write a letter to her husband since her past closeness with Rohit has created a divide between them. In her description, Mishra (2020) has constantly quarantined Amita's space for exploring her deep desires from her distant familial domestic life. Amita's grievances about the confining space her work limits her to, the immobility and the lack of versatility it entails, suddenly transition into the realization of a positive opportunity after she meets her colleague, Rohit.

The fact that she identifies this phase as “temporary” and “self-contained” explains how she is aware that these pursuits cannot be quoted with a sense of permanence; that these are short-lived pleasures because of the social constraints the institution of marriage is endowed with and are treated as culpable. Jyoti Puri (2002) points out that marriage “ensures the chastity of women and leashes the threat of their sexualities” (135) and as Amita is acting upon her desires, her body jeopardizes this equation. Interestingly, there is a subplot that runs parallelly complementing Amita’s inner monologues. As a doctor, she deals with the case of a tribal couple who are in a dispute about whether to go for an abortion or not. The tribal man claims the pregnancy is illegitimate since he has had a vasectomy done. Their fight ultimately resolves when the wife yields to agree with the abortion but at the end moment, the husband dreads for her life, about the surgery going wrong. He desperately tries to stop the surgery and tells Amita that he excuses her this one time. The fact that the tribal man excuses his wife for straying out of the marriage in search of pleasure also reveals that if at all this privilege is offered, it comes from the husband as he holds the authority over her body. This is well evident in the following lines by the tribal man: “But then I thought, between a couple, the man is the master after all. Shouldn’t he overlook a few mistakes of the woman occasionally?” (Mishra, 2020, 20).

There is the danger of a paradigmatic shift in power when the wife decides to pursue pleasure and not depend on the husband’s authority any longer, aspiring for complete bodily autonomy. Homi achieves that paradigmatic shift through her body but Amita fails to. Amita ponders on the fact that although her husband has his curiosity and vile imagination about her relationship with Rohit, he has no interest in knowing how her body is carried within “an arid land” for ages now. Her usage of dry metaphors like these suggests how Amita has been leading a sexually unfulfilling life because of a long-distance marriage and more importantly, how her husband is not bothered about her bodily desires but is hell-bent on knowing the nature of her rapport with her colleague Rohit. The female body is treated here as a passive receptacle of male desires and a site for a contest of ownership. The female body in this context is not expected to actively challenge the norm by seeking pleasure for itself. Since it is a potent agent for disrupting the hierarchy in social relationships, it is disciplined through the normativity around Brahminical monogamy. However, Mishra (2020) brings into light a vital question regarding the inherent role of a nurturer assigned to the female body since pro-creative sexuality defines the prescribed

female sexuality in the context of traditional Hindu marriages. She interrogates the notion of abandonment in the marriage due to promiscuity and shaming of the desiring woman.

> In the old times, elders used to say that the woman is like earth. Whichever seeds you put into the soil grew into plants. But how could one say that no other plant could ever sprout there? And if it did, did one leave the fields and go away? (Mishra, 2020, 17)

Here Mishra is questioning the ownership of the female body and suggesting that the female body can be an active agent as well, that it can afford to stray from the socially prescribed sexual behavior. Feminine desires cannot universally be contained within a heteronormative monogamous relationship. In that case, even the widely promoted procreative sexual intimacy has certain parameters to be considered legitimate for women's embodiment and this shows how the female body is owned as a child-bearing commodity, as a tool of honor for the masculine family order. The seed must belong to the master or else the fertile body of the wife deserves no admiration. For this association of male honor with the female body, women are corporeally punished for any deviance from normative sexual behavior. This is prominently exemplified in the story 'Worm in the Bough' (2020) where the protagonist Anjali sets herself on fire when her husband Ajit finds out about her illicit affair with Bikash. Anjali takes this drastic step out of shame of faltering in her marital commitment and submitting to her desires. In her final moments, as Anjali lies with her charred body, she wonders if the image of her once beautiful body in Ajit's mind has also turned charcoal black. She also characterizes her sexual deviance as a way of her "testing herself", to verify whether she has any "hold over her own body, which she had once tamed, even as the reins were lying in another pair of hands now" (Mishra, 2020, 109).

This desire to gain a certain bodily autonomy in an imposed monogamy also poses as a resistance to the marital ownership of the female body. However, these conflicting notions of desires and social commitment ultimately lead Anjali to mutilate the body that urged her to take such a liberating step. She introduces her marriage as the alter for deities where she is expected to give unfaltering devotion and receive a "cast-off, stale flower" in return but she compares her temptation for Bikash, her proliferating desires to a "living blossoming bud on a tree" (Mishra, 20202, 109). Anjali's attempt to answer her corporeal urges provoked by Bikash's entrance into her dreary life is a transgression that eliminates

her existence altogether. This deviating act shames her to the extent that she is ready to sacrifice her body for it. Mishra ends the story with a declaration that Anjali's once beautiful body is now "a grotesque corpse" (Mishra, 2020, 114). In its occasional straying, the sexually deviant female body is more often than not punished corporeally, sometimes even amounting to a complete demolition of the body. This majorly exposes how the female body is disciplined from a heteropatriarchal understanding, to be of service to other men. In this discussion, it is most urgent to de-historicize women's bodies as objects to be shaped under the male gaze and normalize them as potentially desiring subjects that can transgress the established sexual hegemony in heteronormative marital relationships. It is urgent to consider what really motivates the female body to stray out of marital boundaries. A common point in all the literary case studies in this section is that of a lack of effort from the husbands toward understanding the female bodily demands. Thapan (1995) while studying the forms of corporeal violence points out that one of the common forms of violence experienced by married women is the "withdrawal of sexual activity when the woman may want it as opposed to the imposition of sexual activity on a woman who may not desire it" (73). Thapan's (1995) finding implies how men dictate female sexuality based on their needs and when women stray it becomes an event to thrust them into public ignominy, to encourage them for self-punishment and humiliation.

In Sarojini Sahoo's (2009) novel *The Dark Abod*e, translated from her Odia novel *Gambhiri Ghara* (2005) by Mahendra Kumar Dash, the protagonist Kuki in the fear of facing such humiliation leads a dual life. Kuki is a middle-aged housewife who is trapped in a passionless marriage with her aggressive husband, Aniket, and has two sons. Her world revolves around them when they are home but when she is alone after everyone leaves for their respective business, Kuki channels her desires into the virtual world of an internet love affair. Kuki exchanges passionate love letters with a Pakistani artist, Safiq, in the form of emails. These passionate letters offer a stark contrast between the treatment Kuki receives for her bodily desires from her internet lover Safiq and her husband Aniket. While Safiq almost worships her body and writes of the many ways of physical intimacy that he imagines himself performing on it, her husband Aniket sees "more bacteria than feelings in a kiss" (Sahoo, 2009, 181). Kuki indulges herself in virtual sex and enjoys being the object of Safiq's fascination while dealing with a husband who has anger issues and tends to be physically violent with her in reality. Sahoo makes the character of Kuki torn between her righteousness of prioritizing emotions, love, and a deeper sense of attachment

over physical desires while also enjoying being in power in the sexual dynamics of the relationship she shares with Safiq. In her relationship with him, she is beautified and fancied like an angel as Safiq devotes himself to her and this imaginary beauty of hers renders her a higher pedestal in the relationship. In her virtual world, Kuki is in charge of her sexuality but the biggest irony remains to be the fact that this shift of power only takes place in that virtual world. Safiq and the exciting opportunity to explore her bodily desires he brings with him were "only something to be tucked inside a folder of her in-box" (Sahoo, 2009, 120). While her upbringing urges her to denounce Safiq's perversion and polygamy, she is also impressed by his sensitivity as he is open to understanding the way she wants to be loved. Contrary to Safiq's sensitivity, Kuki reveals her husband's possessiveness for her and describes it as his form of ownership. Sahoo (2009) writes, "Kuki was his property; he would scold her, beat her, adorn her with sarees and jewelry" (140), and by this statement, she makes it apparent how Kuki's body is only an object treated with utilitarian sense in her marriage while being policed for its chastity to be preserved. Sahoo further expands on this notion of bodily negligence that Kuki faces in the following lines that Kuki writes to Safiq:

> Regarding this world of corporal pleasure, I have little experience. I had a 'love marriage' with Aniket, but we didn't have any physical relationship before marriage. After marriage, I discovered that Aniket was not very sensitive or open to understanding female physiology. Sex is just a game for him. I am yet to discover what an orgasm is. You will be astonished to know that I have not been kissed for the last fourteen years. (Sahoo 2009, 165)

These lines portray how Kuki is alien to any bodily pleasure in her marriage and how this lack of attention paid to her body over the years has urged her to trespass her boundaries even though in a virtual sense. Kuki's alienation from orgasm and other corporeal expressions of affection like kisses, disciplines her body against the pleasure it seeks. Her body is rather institutionalized in her marriage to perceive sex as an act majorly designed to answer her husband's needs. It also seems that Kuki like many other women in India was mostly allowed a pro-creative sexual engagement in her fertile years. Brinda Bose foregrounds in her study on pleasure that any transgression of pro-creative conjugal codes even in heterosexual contexts was feared as an excess of the "allowable erotic" (Bose, 2017, 13). Women's longings for sexual pleasure even inside the permissible marital

spaces are deemed an excess of the allowable erotic since it is not scripted upon the pro-creative norms. This note of shame is socially imposed and re-iterated with media and cultural texts. Anandhi S. (1998) brings forth the ideas regarding contraception propagated by influential political and cultural leaders. For instance, she reveals in her study that M. K Gandhi was strongly opposed to the use of contraceptives because he believed that it "would only lead to uncontrolled sexual desires and the break up of marriage" (S, 1998, 147). Gandhi even goes on to claim that the only difference between a prostitute and a married woman using contraceptives is that "the former sells her body to several men and the latter sells it to one man" (S, 1998, 148). These debates on birth-control methods reveal that female sexuality is only deemed as a supplementary tool to facilitate reproductive sexuality. The traditional character assassination of the women seeking non-reproductive sexual engagement even inside the boundaries of a marriage institutionalizes Indian women into considering their natural longing for bodily pleasure as something to be rectified, something sinful. The non-maternal psyche opens up a space for the self and presents an opportunity to explore the self's demands for pleasure without being bound to the duty of reproduction (Alizade, 2006). Moreover, Meyers (2002) reveals in her study that menopause offers "greater freedom for sexual activity" (104).

Kuki's limitations within the realm of the 'allowable erotic' isolate her from a sense of corporal pleasure that her body pre-cognitively demands. Her body is rather disciplined to serve her husband and be dependent on his desires to access any chance to achieve pleasure. And yet when she experiences a sexual awakening through her amorous exchanges with Safiq, the pleasure is rather intangible, manifesting only in the cyberscape. It shows how ingrained the ideal of chastity for a wife in marriage is when Kuki contemplates the embarrassment, she will have to face she openly enunciates her virtual infidelity driven by her bodily pleasure. Kuki ponders the consequences if she ever opens up about her affair with Safiq and imagines how she will be shamed for acting upon her "selfish desires". Sahoo plants a query through Kuki's psyche that asks, "Could she suppress her nature and desire for her family and state?" (Sahoo, 2009, 288). The self-inflictive suppression of bodily desires for the sake of the family is one of the most effective methods of leashing women's bodies against the pleasure they seek. The female body is a socio-corporeal tool to maintain the established norms which is why "the honor of the family is centrally located in women's behavior" (Viswanath, 1997, 316). Female corporeality is too often defined through the contexts of purity and pollution, which is

determined by whether it restricts itself to permissible social spaces or trespasses them. The purity of a female body in India is determined by its virginity before marriage or chastity after marriage. The typical patriarchal belief is that if not controlled by stern social regimes, women may transgress social boundaries to seek pleasure and as a result pollute the socio-religious identity of their households and bring disgrace to the family honor. Kuki unlike Homi does not risk doing that and belongs to a more conservative patriarchal setup where she has little voice in the marital hegemony. Kuki like Amita accepts the transitory nature of these short-lived sexual adventures, the briefness of the pleasure it delivers, and realizes that she would never be able to perform this sexually empowered role in her reality. Kuki submits to the fact that she belongs to her husband Aniket and ultimately goes back to yearning for some affection from him.

This is apparent in the scene where she silently wishes her husband to address her with a loving term like "baby" but never demands it ostensibly breaking away from her repressed desires. This clearly objectifies her embodiment where she is not confident to even express a harmless desire of getting conjugal love from her husband. Her husband's possessiveness also shows that even though he is not very actively invested in her bodily desires, he keeps her body preserved for himself. This is also seen in the case of Basu's narrative when Neelam attempts to be coquettish towards other men like their common friend Bikram and her former lover Mahanam. Her mildly straying from the marital monogamy is indeed inferior in comparison to her husband Aritra's desperate trials to win his former lover Esha's admiration and yet it is he who admonishes Neelam about her growing closeness with Bikram. Basu through her depiction of this multi-layered sexual tension between the characters shows how it is the married woman whose sexuality must be contained within the limits of the domestic space. In the following lines, Neelam expresses how her embodiment is caged within the boundaries of marriage.

> Once a woman is married, no matter how torrid the romance might have been, she is considered married for life. A well-thumbed book, a familiar story, a conquered kingdom- no man tries to understand her further, does he? But he always feels the need to tighten the patrolling. (Basu 2014, 41)

Neelam utters these lines in response to Aritra's opposition to her playful closeness with Bikram. In these lines, it is evident how her identity of being married controls her socio-sexual demands. The label of marriage inflicts upon her the responsibility of maintaining

chastity and also categorizes her as inferior to an unmarried woman who has her virginity supposedly intact. This is why even while seeking to answer her sexual desires outside the marital context, outside of maternal contexts, Neelam finds herself being labeled as an owned sexual property of her husband, "a conquered kingdom". While the wife is patrolled over by the husband and is under constant surveillance of morality, the husband on the other hand has the liberty to wander around to allure other women for his pleasure. The duality of this order is evident when Aritra claims that he could only dedicate his complete attention to Esha when he is secure about Neelam. He predominantly prioritizes the need to keep Neelam's honor and purity intact before he can wander off to romantically pursue Esha. Aritra although keenly notices Neelam straying to other men, does not understand that she feels the need to stray out of the marriage only because he is not responsive to her bodily desires. This is the understanding Neelam implicitly deems unattainable in their marital relationship as the greater focus of her partner lies on tightening his leash around her sexuality.

Despite his lack of interest in her body and his unattractiveness towards it, Aritra feels the urgency of disciplining Neelam's sexuality which threatens to trespass into the forbidden quarters of adultery. Being married into heteronormative marriages, women's conjugal lives are "legally recognized" and thus also "legally policed" (Menon, 2021). Therefore, law and judiciary also largely interfered with the personal sphere to constantly police the pleasure-seeking female body. Samita Sen (1998) conducts an extensive historiography of how the Indian Penal Code protected "the husbands against the seduction or enticement of the wives" through the criminalization of adultery (78). Moreover, Saumya Uma (2021) discusses how the criminalization of adultery in the Indian Penal Code targeted only men who sexually indulged with or seduced married women without the consent of their husbands. Uma further comments that such a law was premised on the notion that the "wife's body" is "the husband's property" and "that its transgression by another man entitled the aggrieved husband with a remedy in criminal law" (29). However, a wife could not access legal privileges and "initiate a criminal prosecution against the woman that her husband indulged in an adulterous relationship with" (Uma, 2021, 29). The fact that this law was only struck down in 2018 demonstrates how marital ownership of the female body was normalized until very recently and protected by the Indian Penal Code. It shows that while male desires are protected across multiple socio-political institutions, women's desires are constructed to be passive subservient reactors to those desires. Like Kuki,

Neelam also puts herself through a mechanism of self-surveillance and inflicts a corporeal punishment on her body. In the culmination of her character, she renounces her pursuit of bodily pleasure and decides to practice sexual abstinence to discipline her body against transgressing the norm. Much like Anjali, Neelam also self-inflicts a form of corporeal punishment when she chooses sexual abstinence. In Mishra's (2020) short fiction, Anjali erases her sexuality by completely demolishing her embodied self as she sets her desiring body on fire while Basu makes this erasure for Neelam subtle and metaphorical with sexual abstinence. The characters of Amita, Anjali, Neelam, and Kuki exhibit how adultery is more often than not a short-lived secret performative solution to marital sexual dissatisfaction. It shows how systematically any discourse that legitimates a woman's pleasure, "acknowledges her sexual knowledge, values her performance and places it under her control, is potentially threatening' to their partners" masculinity (Holland et al., 1994, 30). Most of the women characters discussed in this section are heavily affected by the notion of moral panic around female sexual pleasure and therefore could only trespass the marital boundaries in secrecy. The anticipation of shame upon the possible disclosure of these secrets leads these women to self-harm and self-discipline their own bodies. Apart from the character of Homi, all other characters ultimately choose to return to their sexually unrewarding lives as they suppress their bodily pursuits of pleasure and continue to uphold their chastity while being owned by their husbands, keeping their honor intact.

4.3. Bodily Pleasure and Brahminical Widowhood

The wife's sexuality is leashed within the marriage as her body is labeled with the husband's ownership. This controlling of the wife's sexuality and her bodily urges for pleasure continues even beyond the death of the husband in Hindu Brahminical society. Widowhood in the upper caste context is primarily concentrated on keeping the chastity of the married female body intact and prohibiting any space for pursuing bodily desires in the absence of the husband. The verdict of social death imposed on the widows in India thrust upon the female body a range of corporeal punishments and extreme modes of disciplining to ensure its chastity. Uma Chakravarti (1995) problematizes this stringent treatment of a widow's sexuality and points out that all rituals of widowhood are to facilitate a "sexual death" of the widow. Moreover, in the conservative Brahminical society the wife is "primarily a vehicle for reproduction" and thus "the sexual death of a woman is simultaneously a social death", morphing the widow into a "sexual non-being"

(Chakravarti, 1995, 2249). How do women whose bodies are treated to be devoid of any urges and desires negotiate this tormenting ordeal? How does the danger of a widow's sexuality threaten the heteropatriarchy of social institutions? To delve into these queries, this section undertakes a comparative analysis of two novellas such as Kuntala Kumari Sabat's *The Dark Bride* (2014), translated from the original Odia by Mary Mohanty, and Indira Goswami's *In the Shadow of the Divine Flute Player* (2019) translated from Assamese by Gayatri Bhattacharyya. The two novellas revolve around the trials and tribulations of widows, representing the bodily disciplining they endure against their desires. The texts show how the rituals of widowhood embody the widows as the object of ill-fate, a marginalized member of the household, one whose sexuality threatens the dead husband's honor. The wife's chastity being considered the most prized possession in a marriage translates into one of the most vital facets to be maintained after the husband's death. This maintenance of monogamy and bodily loyalty helps propagate the dead husband's efficiency in fulfilling the wife's desires so much so that she can spend the rest of her life with the memories of his engagement with her body.

However, it is not always the case that the wife is initiated into sexual engagement with the husband before the husband's death. Sabat's *The Dark Bride* (2014) presents such a case as the protagonist is a child bride Lakshmi who suffers the tragic corporeal implications of her husband's death before she can even embrace conjugal life and explore her sexuality. Sabat has portrayed Lakshmi's beauty as a wasted asset in her narrative. She depicts how her beauty is her striking feature yet is of no use because her body has already suffered a sexual death before it could bloom into its potential capacity. Sabat's narrative shows how Lakshmi's body was denied the 'pleasure of womanhood,' demonstrating how marital ownership can be functional after the death of the husband even when the female body is not violated and the marriage is never consummated. The plot shows how a ten-year-old Lakshmi is forbidden to eat any meat or fish and is allowed only one meal a day. Her favorite ornaments are forcibly removed from her body and she is forced to wear a white coarse saree. Lakshmi observes these stringent religious customs meant for a Brahmin widow from a very tender age when she is even unable to fathom properly what could the loss of a husband mean. Sabat weaves a bildungsroman following Lakshmi's growing-up years and how a life devoid of any luxury or temptations is imposed upon her body. Lakshmi's sexuality is leashed via her dietary and sartorial restrictions. This methodology ultimately serves the purpose of bottling up her sexual appeal by controlling

her body size and physical appearance. This is more apparent in the writer's commentary on how paradoxical the treatment of the male widower's body as it vastly differs from that of a female widow. Sabat draws this contrast by comparing the lived embodied realities of Lakshmi and her father post her mother's death. After her mother dies of the agony of seeing her child endure the struggles of widowhood from such a tender age, her father remarries despite having three other wives. In the following lines, Sabat criticizes the lifestyle Lakshmi's father leads as opposed to the colorless ordeal she survives, especially the fact that Lakshmi's father could easily access a different avenue to access pleasure unlike her just because his gender offers him that privilege. Sabat writes,

> Alas, child-widow! Today you are a celibate … And your old father is indulging in riotous fun with a woman called Hira. Your (Lakshmi's father's) body smells sweet with sandalwood paste and perfume; your lips are red with betel juice; cannot do without a maniabandhi and tussar loin clothes. But your nubile daughter wears no ornaments and pale-faced, moves before you clad in a coarse, white borderless sari. (Sabat 2014, 11)

This stark contrast between the bodily restrictions of widows and widowers shows how the female body is disciplined against its desires in the absence of a spouse while the male body is allowed to remarry and enjoy the conjugal life not required to acknowledge a sexual loyalty to the dead wife. It can be seen that the imposition of dietary restrictions and the colorless white sari is to defile the beauty of the female body so that she does not become the object of any male fantasy. The traditional controlling of the physical appearance of upper caste widows in terms of "plain clothing and shaved head- was meant to eliminate the possibility of widows becoming the objects of sexual desires" (Sreenivas, 2008, 114). Sabat describes how on *Ekadashi*, the day for widows to observe "fasting without drinking even a drop of water," the child-widow Lakshmi faints of hunger and thirst, yelling for water yet her parents could not come to her rescue (Sabat, 2014, 4). Aishika Chakravarty (2002) quotes from ancient texts like *Manu Smriti* which dictates the widow to "emaciate her body" by eating only one meal a day (912). Chakravarty's study (2002) further reveals how the *Ekadashi* was designed to tame eleven (*Ekadash*) sense organs of the body. Such traditional codes represent the banishment of the widow as a sexual entity and such containment is to uphold the Brahminic masculinity. Child brides like Lakshmi who are inducted to understand their sexuality as a forbidden zone of their

embodiment and that it needs to be leashed in all manners possible, the widow is institutionalized into upholding her chastity. While there are moments when Lakshmi as a young woman laments her destiny of never being able to enjoy marital bliss or the joys of motherhood, she never falters from the customs when she gets approached by other men. For instance, when her stepmother's brother Nabaghana's lustful eyes fall on her body, Lakshmi resists all his advances, determined to save herself from rape as he resorts to brute force. Lakshmi rather elopes from the comforts of her home to save her chastity. Commenting on her mental strength, Sabat writes, "She was all alone in this vast world but she was determined to protect the glory of her virginity" (Sabat, 2014, 21). Lakshmi's preference for her saved chastity over any materialistic comfort exposes how ingrained the glorification of celibacy is in her mind. When Lakshmi embraces the life of an ascetic by joining an ashram in Brindavan, she comes across a reality that makes her sexually uncomfortable. She witnesses many widows like her getting sexually engaged with God-men and saints who perceive it as getting sexually involved with the human form of Lord Krishna himself. Her chaste body is seen fit to be offered to God's human avatars.

The female saint addressed as Mata shelters Lakshmi in her ashram and tells her that she is "a flower not enjoyed by anyone yet and so fit to be offered to God. Sanyasi Trilochan was a God-like being; she would be exalted by serving him" (Sabat, 2014, 26). Lakshmi considers suicide against this proposition as she questions whether an Aryan woman like her can forgo her chastity in exchange for happiness. Sabat (2014) sketches the culmination of Lakshmi's character by stating that she "craved for piety alone" and therefore she immerses herself in Yamuna to be rescued later. Although Lakshmi later remarries Chandrodaya, one of the men she was rescued by, her unwavering determination to save her stature as a virgin widow facilitates the patriarchal notion of forbidding female sexuality outside the realm of marriage and in the absence of a husband. It shows that women are allowed to explore their bodily desires only in legitimate spaces where they can also serve as reproductive tools. Unlike Lakshmi who glorifies her commitment to remain chaste until she remarries, Saudamini in Indira Goswami's *In the Shadow of the Divine Flute Player* (2019) transgresses many of the boundaries set for her body as a widow. Saudamini arrives at Vrindavan with her parents as a young widow to cleanse her conscience of getting romantically involved with a Christian youth post her husband's death.

Unlike Lakshmi, Saudamini is troubled by her proliferating bodily desires and she navigates her loneliness by wandering Vrindavan's streets, contemplating the philosophy behind the religious disciplining of women's access to bodily pleasure after the death of their husbands. Saudamini observes the destitute life led by the old widows who have dedicated their lives to the devotion of the Lord Krishna and are thus called *Radheshyamis*. She wonders how these women answer the calls of their bodily urges and whether it is possible to lead an entire life devoid of sexual fulfillment solely with the help of the husband's memories. Saudamini does not wear a white sari, the quintessential costume of widows. She also ostensibly interrogates some Radheshyamis about how they deal with their bodily loneliness. In one instance, a widow tells her that long ago she used to wander in the jasmine gardens where men used to throw fruits at her. She claims that she visited the gardens for many days also mainly to test herself. The sexual connotation behind the expression of throwing fruits at her is evident here and the fact that she used to test her control over her own body by exposing herself to such temptations while also practicing sexual abstinence projects how widows are victims of self-surveillance. Their bodily desires and the self-surveillance of whether the religious custom of sexual abstinence is being followed present a chaotic dichotomy, constantly at battle with each other.

Goswami (2019) depicts in her narrative that no matter what the scriptures and shastras dictate, the female body will have to face the torments of its pre-cognitive desires. Goswami makes her protagonist act through her bodily desires, making it a tangible event even though the event is that of exploring self-pleasure. There is a plethora of instances in the plot where female pleasure and the image of female masturbation are depicted by Saudamini. For instance, at the beginning of her arrival in Vrindavan, Saudamini examines her body and traces how lovely, soft, and young it is. Saudamini ponders how her mental disturbances and past trauma "had not been able to leave any permanent mark on this lovely body" (Goswami, 2019, 25). As Saudamini ascertains during moments of loneliness that her body is still desirable and has not lost its beauty despite the circumstances and the external forces imposing stern rules on it to curb its sexuality, her act deconstructs her underlying urges to render her body with the pleasure it seeks or rather the pleasure it deserves. Goswami also portrays how she masturbates, exploring the notion of self-pleasure when she gets aroused by looking at a couple lying under a tree near the Jamuna River. Saudamini describes this moment of ecstasy in these lines:

> Something happened to me, I do not know what. That unnatural smell from the river, that couple lying under that tree… I lay down on the sands of Jamuna and started rolling about. At one time, my clothes slipped off. The feel of the sands on my naked body was something very strange, unusual. I am sure you understand what I am trying to say. Even at that time, you understand, I had many golden dreams. (Goswami 2019, 99)

This description shows how Saudamini's bodily desires and her urges to explore pleasure have a hypnotic effect on her. Her longing for sexual pleasure is so strong that she does not mind not abiding by the moral codes laid down by society. It is this proliferation of female bodily desires that threatens the masculinity of the male spouse. The upper-caste Brahmin women are designated as "gatekeepers of their husbands' masculinity and honor" while the lower-caste women although have access to public life, are disempowered in the absence of a husband through rapes by landlords, perpetuating the hegemonic relations (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2016). Saudamini fails to exercise a stricter self-surveillance and lapses into her bodily calls for desires. The inherent tendency of a female body to have sexual urges is also one of the major reasons cited by the proponents of widow remarriage in the colonial period. One of the major supporters of this view was Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar who denounced the assumption that with the loss of a husband the widow's body will also lose its desires and will no longer be under the influence of its passions (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2016). However, the problematic aspect behind all these liberal criticisms of traditional codes of controlling the widow's sexuality re-locates it back into the realm of marriage.

Moreover, levirate marriage was the most acceptable form of remarriage in the colonial state and Government of India and also by the in-laws of the widow. This is because it allows to retain the widow's sexuality "within the household into which she has been married" (Chakravarti et al., 2001, 9). This practice also exhibits that the brother of the dead husband is the closest to sharing his codes of masculinity and genetics and therefore marrying him is the next most loyal thing the wife can do. This works with the assumption that to engage with him sexually would carry remnants of the dead husband's memories while with someone unrelated it would be a completely different experience, more like infidelity. Interestingly, the widows like Saudamini who would express their agony of leading a lonely life and get romantically involved with another person unrelated to the dead husband, are treated like polluting objects. Throughout the novel, Saudamini's

mother tries to purify the scandalous thought that made her fall for the Christian youth by taking her to different saints of Vrindavan, seeking their blessing for her daughter. However, Saudamini breaks free of any such attempts and rather moves about the place seeking the answers to her own queries. Goswami also has written of the sexual predators in Vrindavan who are hungry for the flesh of the abandoned widows and sometimes even the old ones. This facet of widowhood shows that it does not only involve curbing the sexual urges of the female body but also protecting it from the lustful eyes of other men. The policing is only valid for the widow's embodiment while men can act upon their uncontrolled sexuality since the widow is no more in the shelter of a husband. Goswami paints the character of Saudamini with a lot of rebellious attitudes and sexual boldness but ultimately shows her to be a victim of the societal moral codes. The moral lapses that drive her to fall in love with the Christian youth fail to last long enough for her to change her destiny. When in the climax her father calls the Christian youth and allows Saudamini to meet him privately, Goswami writes of the torrents of passion her body feels for her lover. Upon meeting him, Saudamini immediately takes charge of her sexuality and passionately asks her lover to kiss her and engage with her amorous advances. However, with a storm, it dawns upon her that she is forbidden to take this immoral path and might not be able to sustain her happiness if she continues on it.

Unlike Lakshmi, Saudamini commits suicide forever to be erased from everyone's memory and not rescued by anyone. Although Saudamini retains her chastity, her not being rescued like Lakhsmi almost makes her end poetic because she did not prefer life as a celibate and could not handle sexual abstinence as Lakshmi does. While Saudamini was more agentive of her corporeal pleasure, Lakshmi albeit felt the agonizing absence of it, abided by the moral codes of widowhood. Therefore, even though Lakshmi is rescued, she is only allowed to explore her desires within the realms of remarriage. However, Saudamini who exudes corporeal agency faces complete corporeal erasure in the face of death. Much like Yashodhara Mishra's (2020) character Anjali inflicts this corporeal punishment on her own body for being a transgressive desiring subject, Saudamini also attempts an irreversible corporeal erasure. This self-infliction of corporeal punishment is also apparent in the infamous ritual of *Sati* (widow immolation) which promotes wives climbing the funeral pyre of the husband to be rewarded with extra-terrestrial marital bliss (Loomba, 1993). The figure of *Sati* being a silenced subject is idealized as intense female devotion in the male fantasy. The widow's corporeal erasure following the death of her

husband is her greatest achievement as it immediately erases all her sexual and bodily urges that might hinder her practice of sexual abstinence in widowhood. Ania Loomba (1993) aptly identifies the figure of *Sati* as the "vanishing point for a theory of female subjectivity" (224). The silencing of the widow's subjectivity renders her a subaltern stature as Spivak (2010) famously foregrounds but the implications of this subalternity can also be seen in the transgressive widowhood where the widow is bound to kill herself erasing her corporeality from the face of earth. Saudamini's act is also a form of *Sati* as she chooses to die with her chastity intact rather than giving in to her bodily desires even though she desperately seeking her pleasure in the Christian youth. Saudamini under the influence of amorous passion subtly reveals that she is not being able to function rationally any longer in the presence of the Christian youth. This mind versus body divide plays out poetically where the mind ultimately wins as she chooses to act upon her second thoughts on following a moral path.

4.4. Summary

The question of female pleasure is largely neglected in Indian social contexts and it is therefore urgent to read into narratives that bring out stifled voices of desires and women characters that challenge this disembodied erasure. Women although traditionally known to suffer a violation of their sexuality, must not be neglected as passive receptors of male desires. The female body as a potent sexually charged agent threatens to destabilize masculine orders of power and thus is contained and caged in marriages, even beyond the death of the husband in order to keep their chastity protected. In its occasional straying, the sexually deviant female body is more often than not punished corporeally, sometimes even amounting to a complete demolition of the body. This majorly exposes how the female body is disciplined from a heteropatriarchal understanding, in order to be of service to other men. Thus, in discussions of female pleasure, it is most urgent to de-historicize women's bodies as objects to be shaped under the male gaze or patriarchal social strictures and normalize them as potentially desiring subjects that can transgress the established distribution of power in heteronormative marital sexual relationships.