

**A Widow's Diet: Negotiating Politics of Food and Widowhood in
*The Anger of Aubergines***

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Abstract

Widowhood, in Indian society, is a dreaded condition of a woman after the death of her husband. It is an imposed performance that entails a set of ritualized practices and behavior to mark her transition to the state of a woman without. On many occasions, this state is ensured and maintained through multifarious rituals and practices, which range from restrictions on mobility, choices, and desires to injunctions on clothes, bodily demeanor, and food. This physio-social exercise of control and restraint alludes to a framework of religio-cultural discourse that renders widows as social and sexual non-beings. The present paper attempts to understand the state of widowhood through the analysis of two short stories in the collection, *The Anger of Aubergines* (1997) by Bulbul Sharma from the perspective of food. Food and eating, being the elementary aspects of everyday life, become important signifiers in studying the deprived state of widowhood. The paper intends to unpack the politics behind the imposition of a curriculum of gastronomic injunctions and food taboos on Hindu upper-caste widows. Further, the paper conceptualizes the appetite of widows as a subversive category not only in challenging the gender discourses behind their oppression but also in exonerating their status as desireless beings.

Keywords: food, gender, widows, appetite, patriarchy

In India, like elsewhere, widowhood is not a natural state of being for women. It is a transitional social, cultural, and material becoming of a woman after the death of her husband. Widowhood is an ordeal by the proximal society which seeks to impose this dreaded condition on them for multifarious reasons. The gender structure of Indian society, due to its patriarchal nature, makes the state of widowhood very excruciating. After the death of her husband, a wife loses her personhood and, hence, transpires the erasure of her existence. For Hindu widows, especially upper caste widows, this is particularly true, as their subjectivity is deeply contingent on the life of the husband. Uma Chakrabarti (1995), in her essay *Gender, Caste and Labour*, underlines the rooted patriarchal notion that “woman becomes a social entity only when as a wife she is united with her husband, the death of her husband represents the cessation of her social existence and the end of her personhood” (p. 2250). Taming of the sexual energy that women innately possess is the other reason why women have to be bound in the shackles of widowhood. It is written in Hindu *Dharmasastras*¹ that women, in general, have a wicked and licentious disposition which can be ascribed to the bad karma in their previous birth (Sogani, 2002). The very birth of a woman in the present life is premised on the negative connotation of karma which makes them as lustful and demoniac creatures whose destructive energy should be controlled and channelized within the boundaries of marriage or repressed at all other occasions. Hence, after the death of her husband, society contrives inhibitions and restrictions to control the unbridled sexual energy of widows, which culminates in the deplorable state of widowhood. Rituparna Bhattacharya and Suman Singh corroborate this argument with their study on the Hindu widows living in Varanasi, which finds that a widow is “perceived as a sexual threat” to the affinal family and the proximal society, resulting in social exclusion (2018, pp. 766–777). So, widowhood becomes a medium of socio-cultural apparatus to be exercised on these wanton widowed women to keep in check their promiscuous nature, and maintain the socio-moral order of the Hindu tradition.

On most occasions, widowhood in Hindu culture demands women to follow the rituals of penance for their committed sins that resulted in the death of their husbands. It behooves a strict sense of atonement for not being able to carry out her *stridharma*² in her present life. She essentially becomes the reason for the death of her husband due to her bad *karma* in her previous birth which she cannot counterpoise through her wifely devotions within the marriage. Uma Chakrabarti (1995) calls out the incriminatory aspect labeled on widows referring to the lack of their virtuousness, “A true *pativrata*³ can never be widowed because she will never

¹ *Dharmasastras* are ancient Hindu religious texts that lay down the moral principles and the religious codes of conduct for Hindus. It also prescribes the moral laws of punishment and atonements for righteous Hindus (Sogani, 2002). See more, Kane, P.V. (1974). *History of Dharmasastras: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

² *Stridharma* refers to the ordained duties and functions of Hindu wives towards their husbands (Chakrabarti, 1995, p. 2249). It entails a strict sense of fidelity and absolute subservience that the wives have to follow to lead a righteous life. In Indian society, it is also used as an ideological mechanism to ensure social control over women. See more, Leslie, J. (1989). *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Woman According to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajavan*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

³ *Pativrata* is a term used in Hinduism to refer to the virtuous married woman who has made a religious vow to staunchly remain loyal and devoted to her husband in life and even after that. The concept of *pativrata* is instituted in Hindu tradition to make widows “control their own sexuality and avoid transgressing patriarchal norms” (Sogani, 2002, p. 5).

leave her husband, even in death. She will either die before him as a ‘*sumangali*’⁴ or will accompany him in death” (p. 2250). Hence, a widowed woman is not considered a true *pativrata*, and widowhood is used as a measure of atonement through which the woman can still have some chances of carrying out her *stridharma* even after the death of her husband. Here, the question arises then, how is the state of widowhood expressed in a patriarchal society like India for the widows, especially for the Hindu upper caste widows, and why?

In Hindu tradition, the state of widowhood entails a set of ritualized practices to mark the transition of a woman from the *Subhgyavati* (blessed) wife to an unfortunate widow. In order to establish the state of widowhood as a condition of a woman without, the symbolic ideas of patriarchy are given expression in ritualized patterns and cultural practices. The death of the husband, without whom the widow ceased to be a social entity, is ritually expressed through special ceremonies signifying the social death of the woman. The rituals and practices encompass social restrictions in terms of mobility, choices, and desires to cultural injunctions on clothes, color codes, and food. Uma Chakrabarti and Preeti Gill (2001), in their anthology on Indian writing on widows, *Shadow Lives*, state that:

Codes of bodily mortifications, food restrictions, symbolic relationship with colour, dress and access to spaces and ceremonies, were all elements that reinforced the patterns of belief wherein the upper caste widow was regarded as entering a state of social death when her husband died (p. 7).

The concept of widowhood stands as an antithesis to the idea of marriage which can be marked by the different yet resembling set of rituals performed on the two occasions. On the one hand, marriage encompasses rituals like smearing of turmeric, adornment of red *kumkum* and *sindoor*, braiding hair with flowers, and wearing a red sari, all of which symbolize female procreative power and fertility, on the other hand, widowhood involves rituals like smearing out of *sindoor* and *kumkum*, wearing white or ochre sari, ban on applying turmeric and in some cases tonsuring head. The female sexual energy and potency which was once considered to be an integral aspect of married women’s life and rituals, turn into destructive and disorderly in the case of widowhood. Hence, the rituals and practices during and after widowhood are performed with the intent to desexualize the women. They are pushed to the liminal state of physically alive and sexually dead, ultimately signifying their sexual death. Uma Chakrabarti (1995) brilliantly sums up this state, “The customs and rituals mark a social and ideological resolution of the tensions inherent in a conceptualisation of widowhood in which the widow continues to exist but is sexually a non-being” (p. 2249).

Along with the rituals of widowhood, there are some prescribed behaviors that the Hindu widows have to follow, so that these can be insistent reminders of their deprived state. They include sartorial injunctions regarding dress codes, impermissibility to access certain parts of

⁴ In Hindu culture, *Sumangali* denotes those fortunate women whose husbands outlive them. This indicates the materialization of their ideal wifehood (Chakrabarti, 1995, p. 2250). Find more, Samanta, S. (1992). Mangalmayima, Sumangali, Mangal: Bengali perceptions of the divine feminine, motherhood, and “auspiciousness.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 26(1), 51–75.

the house like the kitchen, insistence on observing fasts, the permissibility of eating only vegetarian food, and prescription on avoiding spicy food, amongst others. The *Dharmasastras* prescribed that “A widow should give up adorning her hair, chewing betel-nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments and dyed clothes, taking food from a vessel of bronze, taking two meals a day” (Sogani, 2002, p. 7). What is important to note here is that food being a daily act of sustenance, becomes one of the central mediums through which widowhood is persecuted on women in the physio-socio-cultural realm. Hence, food can be an important marker to read and understand the state of widowhood as “food and eating are at the core of lives, inscribed in psyches, embedded in culture, vehicle and substance of social interaction, enmeshed with the relationship of the self to the world” (Sceats, 2004, p. 186).

The present article attempts to study two short stories in the collection, *The Anger of Aubergines* (1997) by Bulbul Sharma to understand how Hindu widows, especially upper caste widows, are controlled by the structures of patriarchy through the restrictions and taboos on food and eating. The paper conceptualizes the appetite of widows as a critical category in which gender plays a significant part in keeping in check the alimentary and sexual desires of widows. Further, it also strives to depict how food, in general, and appetite, in particular, can bring out a subversive and agentic self in the widows.

Food, Women and Widowhood in Bulbul Sharma’s *The Anger of Aubergines*

Food is deeply enmeshed in Indian society and culture. The inextricability of food in Indian culture can be assumed by the array of rules and norms that are rooted and manifested through the culinary codes. The indispensability of food in birth rituals, marriage rituals, death rituals, and other turn-of-life events makes food an important signifier in the rites of passage of Indian life. Supriya Chaudhuri and Rimi B. Chatterjee (2011), in their introduction to the volume *The Writer’s Feast*, note, “Indian culture gives enormous importance to food, to the customs surrounding the preparation and serving of meals, and to the body of cultural assumptions and myths associated with eating” (p. x). The semiotic value of food is well captured in the Indian literary and religious texts that shed light on the condition of widows in Indian society. The critical intersectionality between food and widowhood can be found in the ancient religious texts like *Dharmasutras*⁵ and *Dhramasastras* to classical literary creations in Sangam poetry. The dietary injunction in the *Baudhayana Dharmasutra* pronounces that “A widow shall avoid during a year the use of honey, meat, spirituous liquor and salt” (Chakrabarti & Gill, 2001, p. 35). Similarly, the classical Sangam poetry describes the woes of widowed women in the following lines, “Now my great husband is dead, I eat at untimely evening hours and the lilies give me lily seed, a widow’s rice” (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 178). These ancient texts enunciate the age-old disapproving relationship between food and widows. These alimentary injunctions

⁵ *Dharmasutras* are the authoritative Sanskrit treatises on Hindu social and religious life, containing guidelines on social principles, moral precepts, and ethical norms that should ideally regulate the Hindu way of life. There are four surviving *Dharmasutras* in the present era, and *Baudhayana Dharmasutra* is one among them which contains lines on the appropriate dietary habits for widows. Read Uma Chakrabarti and Preeti Gill’s edited volume *Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood* (2001) to find such dietary injunctions on Hindu widows in the ancient religious texts like *Dharmasutras* and *Dhramasastras* that are collated in the volume.

still continue to haunt the lives of the widows which is also reflected in a number of contemporary literary texts, including *Chchinnamasta* by Ashapura Devi, *The Remains of the Feast* by Gita Hariharan, *Water* by Bapsi Sidwa, and the current text under analysis *The Anger of Aubergines* by Bulbul Sharma.

The Anger of Aubergines by Bulbul Sharma is a collection of 12 short stories and 20 recipes, where each short story ends with one or two recipes mentioned in the story. The collection explores the imbricated ways in which “food speaks about women and about how women speak about food, and about how women speak about themselves through food” (Sarkar, 2019, p. 38). The short stories become a kind of culinary testimonials through which women get “a powerful, highly charged, and personalized voice” (Abarca, 2006, p. 4). The individualized and nuanced food voices of women in these stories make the collection a critical area of feminist analysis. Further, the text comes forth as the gastronomic literature which “offers a rich and complicated history of value-systems implicit in the preparing, serving and eating of food” (Chaudhuri and Chatterjee, 2011, p. viii).

When women are associated with food, they are most often seen as the producers and provisioners of food rather than consumers, but Sharma’s narrative represents women as embodied eaters and cravers of food. By focusing on the consumptive practices of women, Sharma, in her stories, unveils several aspects and situations in the lives of women through the culinary perspective. Among these, widowhood remains central as the volume starts with the story of her widowed grandmother titled *Saying it with Cauliflowers*. In the story, she describes the culinary prowess of her grandmother and also delineates the eating practices of an orthodox Brahmin widow like her grandmother. Another story that primarily focuses on the unconventional dietary proclivity of a widow is *Constant Craving*. By focusing on the different consumptive ways of two widowed women in the two stories, Sharma represents the individualized and contextual subjectivity of widows, thereby not straitjacketing the state of widowhood into a singular version.

Widowhood: A Curriculum of Forbidden Foods

Eating is a deeply personal act. But it is also a political affair in which “society, subjectivity and the body are interrelated” (Lupton, 1996, p. 6). Allowing particular food to go into one’s body involves taking into consideration a regimen of contexts, meanings, and socio-cultural codes. For Hindu upper caste widows, the codes and norms of widowhood are ingrained in their ways of eating as patriarchy finds women’s appetite and, by extension, their bodies “the locus of social control” (Sceats, 2004, p. 63). *Saying It with Cauliflowers*, the preface story to the collection *The Anger of Aubergines*, captures the personalized story of her Dida, the widowed grandmother of the writer whom she describes as an orthodox Brahmin widow following the rules of widowhood in the realm of culinary rituals. The writer describes her grandmother’s usual culinary practices in the following way:

Dida sits and cooks on the floor of the kitchen. I see her chopping vegetables into tiny pieces, cleaning rice, kneading dough or washing spinach leaves all through the day,

although she eats only once a day and fasts every other day like all orthodox Brahmin widows (Sharma, 2005, pp. iv-v).

The interesting aspect of this description is the sharp contrast between her grandmother's productive aspect of food and her consumptive behavior. The sharp contrast in her culinary behavior is hinged on the notion that a widow should eat a "bland vegetarian diet and on some days be denied food altogether" (Mukherjee, 2007, p. 219). In this way, she resembles the prototype of a Hindu widow whose appetite is constructed by the patriarchal mores of widowhood. Her appetite is not a biological one but a social one which is formed by the subjectivity of an upper-caste Brahmin widow. Hence, Dida's demeanor has been described as one "who has always been frail and dressed in a widow's white sari ever since I can remember, cooks and eats before the other members of the family" (Sharma, 2005, p. v). Her eating behavior is a "microcosm of wider social structures and boundary definitions" (Lupton, 1996, p. 7). It is also significant to point out here that the aged grandmother constantly remains anxious about maintaining the pure status of her expiating widowhood. Hence, in the story, there is "the invisible line that divides my grandmother's kitchen from the rest of the house" where "no one is allowed into this tiny, dark room which is swabbed and cleaned four times a day by Dida" (Sharma, 2005, p. iv). The grandmother's kitchen acts as the "symbolic borderland" (Maji, 2019, p. 8), where the culinary rituals of widowhood can be followed. Hence, the non-vegetarian and pungent-smelling items like onions, garlic, and meat are entirely forbidden into her kitchen. Her culinary curriculum can be viewed as the ritual of penance, since widows are believed to be the reason for the death of their husbands due to their lack of *stridharma*. But by undergoing her ritual of penance in the symbolic borderland, she can still fulfill her wanting *stridharma* by ensuring her husband's salvation. Further, the kitchen in its spatial geography can be understood as the oppressive structure of the patriarchal society that has formed Dida's consciousness of becoming an atoning widow. In the story, Dida's culinary curriculum is not only spatial and material but also becomes very symbolic. It can be assessed from her utter repulsiveness to even touch the dining table which has stains of "rich, red meat curries lashed with onions and garlic" (Sharma, 2005, p. v). The "polluted" dining table induces apprehension to the extent of fear of getting contaminated in her subjectivity as an upper-caste Hindu widow that she creates her own space of penance in the form of her kitchen. Deborah Lupton argues that "subjectivity is not linked solely to the organic constituents of food, but also to its symbolic meaning" (Lupton, 1996, p. 17).

Apart from observing the ritual of penance, the dietary ordinances on widows take up a different dimension of meaning, especially in the case of non-elderly Hindu widows. Sharma's story *Constant Craving* addresses this aspect of widowhood through the characters of Sumitra, a year-turn widow, and her widowed elderly mother-in-law. Sumitra's mother-in-law constantly exhorts her to keep fasts and remain steadfast to their dietary schedule based on the lunar cycle, "The moon, as it waxes and wanes, tells us when to fast. It protects the virtue of widows and keeps the souls of husbands at peace" (Sharma, 2005, p. 87). Like the grandmother in *Saying It with Cauliflowers*, Sumitra's mother-in-law, called in the story as Ma believes in the idea of ideal widowhood through the dietary form of atonement, but her exhortations of dietary deprivation mean much beyond that. Her insistence on Sumitra's alimentary

deprivation can be read as a preventive measure to keep in check her widowed body after the death of her husband, since the widowed bodies can destabilize the socio-moral order of the society. Hence, Sumitra's mother-in-law sermonizes her, “You are not old like me as yet...but try to be pale and thin as if the blood has drained from your veins. It is safer...no man will look at you” (Sharma, 2005, p. 87). So, the food injunctions on non-elderly Hindu widows like Sumitra call into question the material and cultural apparatus of patriarchy which causes alarmist fear and apprehension around widows. In this regard, Uma Chakravarti (1995) states that “the widow of the dead husband is the object of real moral panic” (p. 2250). Hence, the strictures on the Hindu widow's diet are nothing but the physio-cultural apparatus to establish control over the widow's body so that she does not cause moral dyspepsia in the society.

Patriarchy demands not only control over the body of the widows but also their prospective desires. Feminist Scholar Tanika Sarkar (2017) corroborates this notion by stating, “widow's life was circumscribed by Hindu ritual injunctions, which insisted on the self-abnegation of their body and desire” (Sarkar qtd. in Shandilya, p. 21). In order to bring into action the control of a widow's desires, food taboos become one of the potent sites of patriarchal hegemony. Sarah Lamb (2000), in her work *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes*, observes that:

The most common rationale as to why widows were pressed to eat vegetarian diets and rice only once a day, and fast on the eleventh day of the lunar month... was that these were defensive measures aimed at controlling a widow's sexuality. The widow's diet was said to ‘reduce sexual desire (kāma),’ ‘decrease blood (rakta),’ make the body ‘cool (thāṇḍā),’ make the widow ‘thin and ugly,’ to keep her from ‘wanting any man.’ (p. 220)

Hence, in the story, the dietary dictates of Sumitra's mother-in-law are not only predicated on keeping an emaciated body through food deprivation but also on creating a “desireless body” through food abnegation. She instructs Sumitra, “Fast, Sumitra, fast when the moon tells you. Your body should not be warm and plump, smelling of rich food, onions and garlic” (Sharma, 2005, p. 87). The mentioned foods inhibited by Sumitra's mother-in-law are categorized as *rajasik* and *tamasik* in Hindu belief and are believed to produce heat in the bodies of those who consume them. They are further believed to excite sexual desires and worldly passion in the consumers. Then, the dietary proscriptions on the rich, spicy and odorous food by Sumitra's mother-in-law in the case of Sumitra can be located within the regimen of physio-sexual ordinances of patriarchy that is contingent on the view that women's sexuality after the death of the husband is ineffectual and should be curbed at all limits. The culinary curriculum of food taboos aims at this transformation of widows into sexual non-beings, resulting widowhood into the sexual death of widows.

“Constant Craving”: Appetite as Subversion

The dietary practices in Sharma's short stories are not only used as a medium to establish and symbolize control over widows' bodies and desires, but they also become an arena for positing subversion and harboring resistance. Thus, in her stories, the widow's consumptive practices

“participate in a complicated relationship between power structures and human agency” (Malhotra et al., 2021, p. xvii). In *Constant Craving*, Sumitra’s life of widowhood is marked by the strict abstinence from all kinds of foods to bring her into the religio-cultural framework of renunciation, discipline, and salvation, but her frank appetite for forbidden foods defies such patriarchal underpinnings of widowhood. Hence, she thinks to herself:

What she found bewildering was that, instead of getting used to the strict regime of fasting and eating less and less food, her body had turned defiant and decided to rebel. It craved foods she had never tasted even as a young girl. For the last one month, on Monday fasts she had dreamt of choley, paneer tikka, dahi kachori and even tandoori chicken – which she had never eaten in her life (Sharma, 2005, p. 88).

Sumitra’s appetite for these foods stands sacrilegious to the dietary code of Hindu widowhood which bans all kinds of non-vegetarian, hot, and spicy foods. But at the same time, Sumitra’s appetite can be seen as a stark defiance of the religio-cultural order of widowhood which tries to essentialize her as a model of patriarchal subservience. But through her appetite for tabooed foods, she contrives to subvert the gender structure as “food acts as an agent of political and cultural resistance against the dominant social order” (Malhotra et al., 2021, p. xiv).

Speaking on the politics of eating, Margret Atwood suggests that “consumption embodies coded expressions of power” (Parker, 1995, p. 349). In the story, Sumitra constantly ruminates about foods that are prohibited to her as a widow, since widowhood entails a set of food taboos and consumptive prohibitions to bring widows under the patriarchal yoke, leaving them no sense of agency. But food in itself is power and can allow “the possibility of challenge and therefore of shifts in overall power relations” (Sceats, 2004, p. 142). Sumitra’s unabashed appetite for tabooed foods throughout the story foils the social and cultural expectations of widowhood. Hence, at one time, she imagines a tantalizingly creamy and sweet jam sandwich and on the other, she dreams about sumptuous *chole* with crushed *samosa*. Her culinary ruminations are so graphic that they propel her to act on her proclivities. Thus, she schemes to send the houseboy, Raghu to the confectioner’s shop and bring one plate of *choley* with two *samosas*. The idea in itself was so scandalizing to her that “she was so shocked by it that she had to hold the tap for support” (Sharma, 2005, p. 90). The trepidation can be located at all the mores and codes of the socio-religious discourses of widowhood and her own temerity in violating it. But at the same time, her anticipation for consuming the forbidden food is very telling:

She would eat very slowly, nibbling at the hot green chilli which always came with the chole. She would savour the slightly sour and spicy grains of choley and then bite into the crisp pastry of the samosa, letting the potato filling melt slowly in her mouth. She would not swallow quickly but allow only tiny morsels to go down the throat, bit by bit, so that the delicious, hot, spicy, sour and salty flavour would linger (Sharma, 2005, p. 92).

Sumitra's description of consuming the desired food almost reaches an orgasmic expression in its details. In her mental process of relishing the dish, food almost becomes tantamount to sexuality. A.K Ramanujan (1999), in his essay *Food for Thought*, writes that food in Indian culture is often associated with the "metaphor for sex" (p. 88). Thus, food here can be read as a "metaphoric expression of displaced desire" (Raja, 2005, p. 75). Further, in a vindictive patriarchal culture that forbids and punishes widows for expressing their desires conspicuously, the desire for tabooed food is nothing less than an act of subversion.

In Sharma's story, Sumitra's aberrant appetite ends in her unmaterialized desire of having the longed chole with samosa, as her mother-in-law arrives at the crunch moment of Raghu delivering the food parcel to her and she kicks it away, thinking it to be garbage brought through the misgivings of the crows. Though her appetite does not come about to be fulfilled within the story, through her simple act of desiring forbidden foods, she de-essentializes her subjectivity as a desireless non-social being. Further, through her non-abiding appetite, she poses an actual threat (though temporary) to the normative socio-cultural codes of widowhood. Hence, Sumitra's act of transgression in the culinary realm offers possibilities of reclaiming subjectivity and gaining personal agency for the widows.

Conclusion

By reading the consumptive practices of the widowed characters in Sharma's short stories, the paper staunchly argues that widowhood is a performance scripted by patriarchy to hand over social and sexual death to women so that they can be brought into the normative gender structures. Despite having centuries elapsed and the laws like The Widow Remarriage Act, The Widow Property Act, and The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act being passed, widows still reel under the socio-religious regime of patriarchy. Martha Chen (2000), who conducted wide-scale research on the condition of widows in India, writes that "The orthodox ideology... continues to remain quite powerful in women's lives, conditioning their identity, behavior, and perspectives" (p. 11). Similarly, a recent study by Rituparna Bhattacharya and Suman Singh also indicates that the lives of Hindu widows are "tangential upon an assemblage of structural, cultural, spatial, and familial violence" (2018, p. 770). In spite of such orthodoxy and vulnerability, widows still manage to carve out spaces and ways of surviving and resisting the patriarchal structures in Hindu tradition through different mediums (Bhattacharya & Singh, 2018). Hence, the paper proposes the simple act of eating as a site of micro power to resist the subservience to patriarchy and subvert the gender structures, which primarily actuate the state of widowhood. Further, through the analysis of Sumitra's subversive appetite, the paper also debunks the notion that widows are entirely desireless or non-agentic beings. But they are fully embodied beings, grappling with the ways and routes to assert their "real" selves and desires.

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