

Queering the Postcolonial: Desire in Chudamani Raghavan's Yamini

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abstract

Indian women's writing from the mid-twentieth century that doesn't fit the dominant tropes of resistance in postcolonial and feminist literary critiques have largely been untranslated and undiscussed. Especially neglected are narratives of native queerness, stories of transgressive desire and sexual alterity. In this essay, I explore Yamini's complex desire in Chudamani Raghavan's eponymous novella and its potential to complicate feminist and postcolonial discourses on women's sexuality. Drawing on aspects of queer theory and poststructuralist notions of subjectivity, I examine how Yamini's asexuality challenges and destabilizes cisheterosexual gender hierarchies and colonization. By examining language and silence in Yamini through the devices of Indian literary criticism and intertextuality, I locate Yamini's queerness within the subcontinent's long history of multivocal desire. I build on the precolonial notion that desire is not necessarily located in the body, and suggest that the transgressive desires of Yamini's mind, the desire of ideas, is also a manifestation of queerness – capable of subverting hegemonic discourses of sexual and psychic normativity.

keywords

queer studies, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, feminism, desire

Indian women's writing from the mid-twentieth century has been scrutinized through many analytic lenses over the years, prevalent among them being postcolonial and feminist literary critiques. The former celebrates texts that subvert imperialistic logics, while feminist analysis applauds those where subaltern women explicitly challenge patriarchal norms. However, both these monolithic discourses often favor narratives with political value over those that focus primarily on women's psychosexual lives. In such a scenario, women's writings from this era that don't fit the dominant tropes of resistance have largely been untranslated and undiscussed. Especially neglected are narratives of queerness, transgressive desire and sexual alterity.

Chudamani Raghavan's novella *Yamini*¹ went against the norm in Tamil literature when it was published in 1960. While her female contemporaries wrote didactic prose that consciously sought social reform, Raghavan's stories explored women's desire in the main and the consequences of freedom on the periphery. The eponymous Yamini's life is marked by a lack of normative desire. She seeks solitude and transcendence of the body; she rejects marriage and motherhood. However,

her deviance from convention leads to social marginalization and the pathologization of her mind. She is diagnosed as a hysteric and locked up. In the end, she commits suicide. Feminist readings of *Yamini* usually regard the protagonist as a victim of patriarchal culture. Postcolonial discourses², meanwhile, ignore her because she isn't manifestly resisting colonization. I contend that in both these accounts, *Yamini's* queerness is lost altogether. Her silent resistance is disregarded. Her asexuality is overlooked. New possibilities of desire and psychic transcendence are left unexplored.

In this essay, I examine the complexity of desire represented in Raghavan's *Yamini* and its potential to complicate postcolonial discourses on women's sexuality. I build my critical exposition on existing research into the multivocality of desire in the classical South Asian past (Vanita, 2002; Menon, 2018) and employ the devices of Indian literary criticism to illustrate how queer desire manifests in postcolonial literature despite the "sexual moral panics" (Wieringa, 2020) of the colonial period. I place *Yamini* within the intertextual discourse specific to its linguistic and literary-critical traditions, and locate the mnemonics of queerness in Raghavan's writing by looking for alternative ideas of desire. Further, I argue that Raghavan challenges the heteronormative logics of sexual normativity and expands the feminist discourse on gender in postcoloniality by subverting linguistic tropes.

Of deviant female sexuality

In the newly independent India of *Yamini*, sexual deviance was a shifty idea influenced by colonial notions of female respectability. For centuries, colonial authorities had policed desire as part of their civilizing mission and stigmatized a wide range of women "as sexual deviants, marked as aberrant, sexually unchaste" (Mitra, 2020: 6) when they performed gender in manners incompatible with colonial norms. Indian intellectuals and nationalists likewise promoted a puritanical ideal of femininity and sexual propriety. This was in stark contrast to precolonial India's rich history of plural desire. According to several accounts³, India was much more open in matters regarding female sexuality before colonization. *Kama*, pleasure, was considered one of the goals of ancient Hindu life, and both men and women were expected to pursue it. Alternately, it was common in medieval times for women to renounce conventional social roles to live as celibate saints or poets. By contrast, in mid-twentieth-century India with "postcolonial amnesia"⁴ (Wieringa, 2020: 205) a respectable performance of femininity in middle-class society demanded marriage and motherhood. All female desire that defied these norms was considered deviant.

Writing in this time, Raghavan constructed female protagonists who refused “to buckle under the pressures of society in their need to fulfill themselves as individuals” (Parthasarathy, 1994: 254). From desiring mothers⁵ to women thinking about extramarital affairs, Raghavan explored controversial subjects in her fiction. Interestingly, even though she wrote about the messiness of women’s desire, she was consistently “viewed as a representative of the Tamil literary canon” (Mani, 2016: 26). Not only was her subversive style of writing lauded as a bequest of Tamil literary tradition, but her focus on transgressive desire wasn’t considered anathema to the canon either. Perhaps, this is because the “history of desire in India reveals not purity, but *impurity* as a way of life” (Menon, 2018: 12). Literature has mirrored this phenomenon throughout precolonial history, and I argue: this tradition continues in the postcolonial period.

Whether one reads *Yamini* in Tamil or English, the symbolism in Raghavan’s language is striking, especially when it comes to the matter of desire. “Her passion was reserved for the night, her romance was with solitude itself,” writes Raghavan, she wanted to “find out about everything there is in the universe – not just the moon, the planets, but all the other worlds too. Every nook and corner of this immense creation [...]” (1999: 29). These lines are erotic and brimming with desire. However, there is no body to ascribe the desire to, only a space: the night sky. So, what does one make of it? In Tamil poetics, space and emotion are always deeply intertwined, in keeping with the literary devices of *ākāṁ* and *purāṁ* – where imagery of place reflects the innermost feelings of the protagonist, known as *uri*. This is a kind of poetic syntax that is used to say “many things while saying one thing” (Ramanujan, 2009: 359). Within this scheme there exists the concept of *irāicchi*: where the “setting through a distinct emotional link evokes another meaning [...] ‘outside’ the image [...] beyond the word” (Chellappan, 1987: 68). In the above lines from *Yamini*, I find that Raghavan subversively employs this literary device to describe Yamini’s desire. By alluding to the boundless night sky, she suggests that Yamini’s desire is clandestine – the night is a symbol associated with the landscape of *kuriñci*, which in turn implies eloping with a secret lover. Yamini here seeks to escape everyday reality to secretly commune with the night. Hers, it would seem, is a desire for the infinite possibilities of thought. It is a transgressive desire. A desire for ideas. It is a non-desire for the body.

Since her youth, Yamini has had a tenuous relationship with her body. Menstruating for the first time, she “quivered with outrage as though the world had invaded and planted its flag upon her unsullied, solitary inner domain. And she struggled to free herself” (Raghavan, 1999: 11). Later, she is revolted by physical intimacy altogether. Even the maternal embrace of her mother repels her – let alone the prospect of a man or woman touching her in an erotic manner. “Maybe she hated the male sex, maybe she had a disgust for sex itself,” Yamini’s father,

Saaranathan, wonders: “Is she what they call ‘undersexed?’” (Raghavan, 1999: 30). In effect, Yamini dismantles essentialist definitions of female desire and womanhood.

To see Yamini as a woman then, one must deem that woman “itself is a term in progress, a becoming, a constructing that rightfully cannot be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler, 1999: 43). There is nothing about Yamini that fits the patriarchal stereotypes of femaleness. All through the narrative, the dark-skinned Yamini is depicted as the unknowable night. Raghavan describes Yamini’s body through *oppu*, a Tamil lament: “In the luminous dark [...] she dances, wild and free [...] Who is she?” (1999: 69). Like the beautiful night, Yamini is a mystery. By comparing her body to the night, Raghavan foreshadows its immanent disappearance from this world. Like the darkness, Yamini will dissolve into the light. It is a mourning for her ill-fated love of solitude, a lamentation of her ephemeral body. It is also a rhetorical question – *who is she?* What do her impossible desires signify?

Is Yamini queer?

Seeking queerness in a narrative from mid-twentieth-century India may seem contrived, especially since we see “sex and desire as discourses of modernity” (Puar, 2001: 175) and queerness as newfangled. To ascribe contemporary identities to fictional characters from another time may appear ahistorical. But as literary historian Ruth Vanita argues in *Queering India*: “If one were serious about using the languages of the past to describe the past, the only honest strategy would be to write about historical texts entirely in their own language” (2002: 5). Whatever the language, and irrespective of socio-political, historical, or cultural context, some human experiences are timeless. According to AVEN⁶, an “asexual person does not experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way.” Yamini’s story is primarily one of the absence of sexual desire. Asexuality may be a phase in her life, or a permanent state. In either case, her experiences are inherently queer.

By identifying Yamini as asexual, I seek to question the pathologization of her sexuality by postcolonial literary critics (Nandakumar, 1997) and to shift the discourse – to queerness. Asexuality destabilizes the idea “that all people are sexual” (Gupta, 2015: 132). “Acknowledging asexuality from both theoretical and phenomenological perspectives challenges strands of sexualized politics within feminist and queer circles, and requires us to think anew about what is so radical (or not) about having sex (or not)” (Cerankowski and Milks, 2014: 3). Yamini’s

asexual subjectivity not only disrupts the heteronormative logics of postcoloniality, but it also highlights the “irresolvably unstable” homosexual/heterosexual binary (Sedgwick, 1990), by redefining desire altogether as a transcendent state of mind. Her asexuality, in effect, queers the postcolonial and queers queerness.

“The night had found a natural echo in her. It strummed her as though she were a *yazh*, and she gushed forth like music from its tenebrous fingers” writes Raghavan (1999: 10). Clearly, the night referred to here is not a metaphor for a lover – as Yamini is not interested in sex. Then to whom do these “tenebrous fingers” belong? It is imperative that I investigate how Raghavan’s language draws on both the Tamil and Sanskritic literary traditions before I unpack the symbolism in her words. Raghavan comes from the Iyengar community which colloquially speaks a blend of Tamil and Sanskrit, and *Yamini* is also set in an Iyengar household. Accordingly, Raghavan’s work has previously been reviewed by Indian literary critics (Mani, 2016; Surya, 1999) using the theoretical devices of Sanskrit even though Raghavan wrote in Tamil. I intend to do the same, except that I do so not to point out the beauty of her craft, but to queer the narrative. In this instance, I employ the ancient Sanskritic literary device of *dhvani*, which deals with the suggestive quality of language. “If one gives up the primary denotative power of a word and understands a sense (secondarily conveyed by it) through its indicative power, it is because of a purpose” (Anandavardhana, 2009: 34)⁷. I contend that the purpose of *dhvani* in the above quoted line is to refer to the sense of Yamini’s sexual alterity. It is to convey that Yamini does not want to forego pleasure altogether; neither does she want to turn into a celibate saint. Her idea of pleasure does not originate in the body, but desire exists. It manifests from her limitless mind, a mind that is reflected by the endless dark night. As Gayatri Chakraborty-Spivak suggests: “Thought, as *jouissance*, is not orgasmic pleasure genitally defined, but the excess of being that escapes the circle of the reproduction of the subject” (2009: 241). For Yamini, *jouissance* is an ecstasy of the intellect. It is a pleasure that is pleasurable for the mind. The drive of desire(s) goes beyond the sexual. It is subjective, fluctuating.

Given “queer theory’s conventional commitments to antinormativity” (Jagose, 2015), it may appear conflicting to utilize the normative devices of Indian literary criticism to locate queerness in texts. However, I contend that to queer the postcolonial, it is vital to consider seemingly irreconcilable traditions. Taking cue from the authors of *Queering India*, who have placed several ancient, medieval and early modern texts within India’s intertextual discourse of plural desire, thereby challenging the notion that queerness is unrepresented in premodernity (Vanita, 2002) – I place *Yamini* in the intertextual discourse specific to its linguistic and literary-critical traditions. I locate the mnemonics of queerness in Raghavan’s writing by looking for alternative ideas of desire and pleasure, instead of

searching for the mention of sexual identities. But can “queer theory be recognizable as such when it emerges from elsewhere?” (Puar and Mikdashi, 2016: 215).

“We keep the values of multiplicity and unfixed naming in mind precisely because we are heirs to those kinds of desires” (Menon, 2020). *Kama* is bodiless in “all our tales of desire”⁸ Madhavi Menon asserts, and holds that “desire can attach to fantasy, object, story, person, institution, idea, or all of the above” (2018: 21). In *Infinite Variety – A History of Desire in India*, Menon provides various instances of such desires and writes that “historically in India, desire is seen as being everywhere. Anything can be considered an object or subject of desire. Desire is not confined to a (human) body” (2018: 14). Thus, all sorts of desires were accepted as valid in ancient and medieval times, it would seem. It was not considered deviant to passionately seek intangible forms of pleasure. Under British colonialism, however, Indians started to categorize their desires and fit themselves into straightjackets. Homosexual, bisexual, transsexual and asexual desires suddenly became taboo⁹.

Yamini is therefore an oddity to her society. As an educated upper-caste middle-class woman, she is expected to make a good marriage or pursue a respectable career. However, she only desires to be left alone with her thoughts. “A luminous darkness – that was the only possible way to think of her. For wasn’t her mind impenetrable, weren’t her feelings an incomprehensible darkness to them all? And yet within that mind, veiled in obscurity, was an intense awareness, a throbbing glow” (Raghavan, 1999: 6) Saaranathan contemplates. While her community sees Yamini as an eccentric, to her father, she symbolizes primeval yearning for something beyond bodily existence. Perhaps Saaranathan is channeling an old way of knowing and unknowing. Although he doesn’t understand Yamini’s queer desire, he believes that she is in possession of some higher truth. He resonates with her surreal, deviant desire.

The dialectic of silence

As was her wont she was gazing enraptured at the night [...]. The light of the stars throbbed in the blue-black night. There was a fragrance in the air from the night-blossoms. Or was night itself a flower? She was softly repeating some verses to herself. A human sound – and yet it did not in any way diminish the silence. Perhaps poetry was nothing but the spilling over of an inner silence. (Raghavan, 1999: 28-29)

Yamini hardly speaks. The few sentences she does utter are fragmented and mostly spoken in response to questions. How, then, do we know what she desires? More importantly, how can Yamini’s desire be multivocal when she doesn’t have

an explicit voice in the narrative? I suggest that the spatial and temporal silences in *Yamini* abound with hidden meaning and unspoken desire. Especially when one places this text within the intertextual discourse of Tamil and Sanskrit literature, the language of silence assumes several implications and effectively becomes “a moment in language” (Kane, 1984: 17). In the *ākām* and *purām* modes of Sangam poetry¹⁰, meanings are always implied and never stated. It is the same case with the Sanskritic *dhvani*, which packs words and the spaces between words with allegory, trusting the reader to decode its various meanings. I contend that Raghavan uses these modes of writing to metonymically refer to Yamini’s desires.

A. K. Ramanujan calls the *ākām* and *purām* mode of writing “a language within language” where the heroine’s emotions are reflected in the surrounding landscape. “Tamil poets used a set of five landscapes and formalized the world into a symbolism [...]. By remarkable consensus, they all spoke this common language of symbols for some five or six generations” (2009: 359). By employing this ancient mode of poetics not to write about a heroine pining for her male lover, but to describe a woman’s yearning for solitude, Raghavan subverts the trope (and the language¹¹). The landscape that she refers to in the above passage is that of *mullāi* – with the jasmine blooming in the cool night. The symbolism associated with this space is that of separation from a lover. Yamini here pines in silence for the nebulousness of the night. Although we don’t know what she desires exactly, because of the context we know that she is lost in love, love that we cannot fully understand but can passionately imagine through comparison.

“How does one learn to hear resonances of familiarity, and understand their grammar in a different location and moment of utterance?” (Najmabadi, 2012: 173), or, in the case of *Yamini*, in a moment of silence? Is it right to categorize Yamini as asexual at all – given that “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (Edelman, 2004: 17), and by naming her non-desire for sexual pleasure, am I also un-naming her desires for the unknown? Identities, after all, are multiple and fluid. Literary texts are aporic. One “can’t talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women’s imaginary is inexhaustible... their stream of phantasms is incredible” (Cixous, 2010: 1943). Here, I must own up to my own subjectivity and desire to locate queerness in postcolonial texts. Perhaps, I am reading into the silence and speaking for Yamini. Yet I believe that this is exactly what Raghavan expects her readers to do – interpret the text through their own subjectivities.

Through Yamini's silence, Raghavan constructs meaning by speaking of what is and leaving to the imagination what could be. It is a silence that respects difference. Raghavan does not claim to know her enigmatic protagonist's mind in its entirety. "Just as we can't understand a person fully in real life, so it is in literature," she once remarked¹². Her discursive silence on Yamini's desires comes from a place of respect for the unknowable. The unknowability of sexuality; the limits of knowledge. "I am listening to you rather as the revelation of a truth that has yet to manifest itself – yours and that of the world revealed through and by you. I give you a silence in which your future – and perhaps my own, but *with* you and not *as* you and *without* you – may emerge and lay its foundation" (Irigaray, 1996: 117, emphasis in the original). Much like feminine communication through unspoken words that Luce Irigaray talks about¹³, Raghavan allows Yamini's queer subjectivity (and mine) to manifest itself through silence.

But then, one must also wonder why Raghavan does not explicitly comment on the social evils prevalent in *Yamini* – on how women were denied personal freedoms, of how they were forced into performing gendered roles, of how their bodies were violently abused. Especially since Raghavan's peers wrote prose that unequivocally sought social reform and women's empowerment, what explains Raghavan's discursive silence on this? Why does she romanticize Yamini's story instead of constructing her as a victim? Her translator, Vasantha Surya, is of the opinion that Raghavan provokes the discerning reader to examine the horrible state of affairs through her "questioning voice, like the *sutradhaara* in Indian dramaturgy" (1999: Introduction). For instance, when Yamini is married off to her cousin Rameshan against her will, her mother Perundevi says that it will "be a new dawn for our darling, wait and see!" Just after, Raghavan writes: "But how can night rejoice at the break of day? Dawn erases the night, puts an end to it" (1999: 32). Here she subtly questions the institution of marriage and how it often destroys a woman's individuality and subjectivity.

If "the political value of literary texts from the standpoint of feminism can be determined only by an investigation of their social functions and effects in relation to the interests of women in a particular historical context" (Felski and Felski, 1989: 2), then *Yamini* is most definitely a feminist text. For it prompts Tamil society to critically question gender, sexuality, marriage, and motherhood. By writing a radical character who defies the bounds of heteronormative femininity, Chudamani Raghavan "broadened the scope of feminist thought and women's literary expression in the immediate postindependence moment" (Mani, 2016: 21). Raghavan's intent is "not so much to provide the act of revenge with the valence of resolution as to show up the double standards inherent in most social institutions" (Tharu and Lalita, 1993: 89).

There is more to be said of Yamini's stubborn silence. In a society that refuses to acknowledge her desires as valid and dismisses her trauma as hysteria, I read her silence as an act of rebellion. Her mother, Perundevi, considers her to be an inauspicious *moodevi*¹⁴; Yamini's husband pities himself for being made to marry a psychologically deviant woman such as her; the gynecologist whom she approaches to abort her pregnancy calls her "bitter." Yamini is branded as an aberration. How can she not find erotic pleasure in her body? Why is she traumatized by touch? Just how could she not love her unborn child? While today Freudian hysteria has been done away with for its inherent sexism, in mid-twentieth-century India, it was a metaphor for all female behavior that didn't conform. If we were to read Yamini's story as a "hysterical narrative,"¹⁵ we would see that her hysteria is really a metaphor for the unconscious – "the knowledge that knows more than it knows" (Jacobus, 1989: 198).

Ultimately, Yamini is sent to a lunatic asylum. "Is Yamini unnatural?" asks Vasantha Surya, *Yamini's* translator. "She reminds one of the figure of Samjna [...] whose name means – Consciousness, Intellect, Awareness, Yamini is possessed by a self-sufficient and inner awareness" (1999: Introduction). Since the beginning, Yamini knows what she wants: solitude. While she is oversensitive and unable to communicate with others, which might suggest that she is autistic, she has a clear sense of self. In fact, recent research argues that "autistic people queer the lines of rhetoric, humanity, and agency" (Yergeau, 2017) and autistic people are "more likely to identify as LGBTQ" (Sarris, 2020). Yamini seeks a transcendent truth that extends beyond the body. However, for an ableist society that is in thrall of gender binaries and heteronormative desire, Yamini is an anomaly.

"Day by day Yamini changed. She seemed to be even more inclined than before to sit in her habitual pose, dull and bemused. There was a blank look in her eyes" (Raghavan, 1999: 37). What could she have been thinking about? Like the silence of the canonical Dora, is Yamini's silence a refusal to accept the world's narrativization of her story? Feminist critics of Freudian hysteria argue that in Dora's case, her stubborn silence is a rejection of Freud's narrative, in which he pathologizes Dora's behavior and ignores her own version of her story. Recently, Ilka Quindeau queered Freudian notions of hysteria arguing that Dora's case contests "heteronormativity, which is still one of the founding imperatives of our society in general and psychoanalysis in particular" (Finzi and Westerink, 2018: 15). Yamini, like Dora, is also challenging the norms of heteronormativity by finding pleasure outside her female body, outside sex. Her asexuality defies cisheterosexist and patriarchal understandings of sex, sexuality, and desire.

The desiring self

Desire is inherently complex. It is shifty and quirky. This is true not only for the queer community but for all people. Our desires never quite match social norms about gender. We're always trying "to find ourselves within existing and evolving conventions" (Butler, 2019). Everyone is "failing to meet normative expectations all the time [...]. Everyone's gender has queer potential precisely because of this ever-present failure" (McCann, 2018: 144). Queerness could be perceived to be a universal phenomenon: we are all queer beings, yet only some of us name or identify our queer desires. Yamini doesn't consider her lack of sexual desire as her primary identifier. Her asexuality is only one part of her story. The other part is that of her desire for transcendence. However, in a postcolonial culture that celebrates reasonable practicality, where new ideas of sanity¹⁶ hold sway, a firm line demarcates insanity from lucidity. And since madness is deemed a female malady, society immediately condemns Yamini's "deviant" desire and marks it as a symptom of mental instability. Her queerness, in this scenario, which manifests itself through her desire for thoughts and in her asexuality, is considered a curable condition. She is sent to the hospital many times, but doctors eventually give up on her – for how could they fix what is inherent?

Raghavan consistently highlights Yamini's struggle to protect the core of her mysterious inner self. A self that finds resonance in the night sky. A self that is genderless. Expansive. Fluid. Yamini is described through both feminine and masculine codes. At many points in the narrative, water is an allegory for Yamini's suffering and transcendence. She "drowned herself in endless tears" (Raghavan, 1999: 10), "she had melted into water [...]. Water? Flowing where?" (23). While water is a feminine symbol, where the metaphorization possibly refers to "the mysterious feminine source of life [...] she personifies the female creative and dynamic cosmic energy, *śakti*" (Knotková-Čapková, 2007: 164-176), elsewhere Raghavan uses seemingly masculine language to describe Yamini. "She stood calm before him, a kind of majesty emanating from her. From within the sombre aura of her unapproachable solitude, she looked hard and deep into his face" (Raghavan, 1999: 58-59). In Indian literature, it is usually men who are described with language that celebrates majestic unapproachability. By constructing Yamini alternatively with masculine and feminine semantics, Raghavan resists gendered language. Her very style of writing, I find, is explicitly androgynous¹⁷, because she does not assign feminine or masculine qualities specifically to any of her characters based on their sex. She draws from both sets of characteristics to write in a universal manner that privileges one's humanity¹⁸. The epitome of such genderless writing can be found in the passages describing Yamini. As though constructed to align with post-structuralist skepticism about the stability of identity, Chudamani does not settle into any one mode of telling her story. "Was

this 'woman' speaking to 'man'? A burdened spirit confronting its cage? Could this be a voice weary of its fetters, speaking to the world which had fettered it? A world which persisted in thrusting everyone into the same mould?" (Raghavan, 1999: 58).

Yamini's longings are masculine, feminine and at times, neuter. Her father, Saaranathan, is the only person who understands that her yearnings are beyond the body and that they are of the mind, of the genderless *self*. Perhaps by asking whether it was a "woman' speaking to 'man'" in the passage cited above, Raghavan is echoing the idea of an ungendered self from the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*. In a debate between a female ascetic and a king about the self and gender "Sulabha declares that her body is different from Janaka's but there's no difference between her self (atman) and his self or any other person's self [...]. A wise person knows that the Self has no real connection with his/her own body, let alone the bodies of others" (Vanita, 2005: 27). Although Raghavan doesn't explicitly write about this matter, there are several hints in the narrative that refer to this primeval truth. Such as when Saaranathan deliberates this matter in his head: "The plurality of qualities in which human nature manifests itself is unlimited. How absurd to look for a cause beyond that!" (Raghavan, 1999: 57). It is only after Yamini is locked up for lunacy and her life is curtailed, that Saaranathan sees this essential truth in its entirety. That the desiring self is above gender and beyond social roles.

Embroided in guilt, Saaranathan wants to help Yamini achieve her little desires. He installs a swing in her empty room. He organizes for her to be taken to the terrace of the house for an unhindered view of the dark sky. She spends hours staring at it. At times she sings, at times she talks to herself, but mostly she's in silent contemplation. Looking at the infinite stars in the night sky, at realities beyond this reality. While we could read her silence as defeat, in the face of patriarchal suppression, as I discussed earlier, I choose to see her silence here as resistance, as an effort to preserve her mind or what's left of it.

This hysterical queer woman, locked away in a room, holds on to her truths despite all odds. Unlike the hordes of passive women found in mid-century Indian literature, Yamini stands apart in how she owns her desires and refuses to change. She clearly states what she wants, in her queer language, but her words do not fit into heteronormative discourses. Her desires are stigmatized. She is marked as impure, sullied, mad.

What, then, do we make of Yamini's last words: "Set me free. I'll forgive you" (Raghavan, 1999: 58), which she says to Saaranathan when he asks her to pardon him. Clearly, these are lucid words. Words that are extremely aware of reality. Perhaps,

madness is itself a shifting between states of lucidity and fugue. “All extremes of feeling are allied with madness,” writes Virginia Woolf in *Orlando*, and contemplates about the “variety of selves” that we possess, “one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains [...] and some are too wildly ridiculous to be mentioned” (1998: 294). Yamini seeks to end her life in this world. Is that a sign of madness, or is it a desire for psychic transcendence? In *Yamini*’s narrative, how else could she escape the prison that holds her captive? For a woman who considers her body as transient and temporal, who seeks to be one with the *self* and the cosmos, existence on earth is a hurdle. Yamini wants to fly away to another reality.

“What woman hasn’t flown/stolen? Who hasn’t felt, dreamt, performed the gesture that jams sociality? [...] Who, by some act of transgression, hasn’t overthrown successiveness, connection, the wall of circumfusion?” (Cixous, 2010: 1954). Yamini desires death. The ultimate transgressive desire. One that can never be rationalized or given sanction. Saaranathan recognizes the sin of such a proposition, but he also sees that she is suffering her desire. There is no earthly solution to her cosmic troubles. “When life cheats you, you cannot fill that void with the world’s alms, its paltry satisfactions. Only death can compensate for life,” her father decides (Raghavan, 1999: 59). So he opens the door to darkness, and leaves her alone to do what she desires.

But can wanting to die be named as desire? Aren’t desire and death complete opposites – one to be had in life and the other in the nether, as naught? Much has been written in this regard. However, it is “illicit” desire that perturbs the world more, where death becomes a compensation for the forbidden. Always “defeating itself, desire comes to seem destructively insatiable, a permanent lack whose attempted fulfillment is at once the destiny of the self and what destroys it, leading the poet to cry, in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 147, ‘I desperate now approve / Desire is death’” (Dollimore, 2011: xvii). Yamini’s “illicit” desire for solitude is her destiny. It destroys her. But it is also what constructs her identity. Her (universal) queer desires define her personality, her being and her selfhood. When those desires are thwarted, death becomes her only desire.

Yamini’s story is poignant, and her fate horrid, yet *Yamini* does not fall within the familiar category of subaltern women’s narratives, for “the implied cultural lack of the ‘third-world woman’ fortifies the redemptive ideological/political plenitude of Western feminism” (Gandhi, 2012: 86). Yamini is not that woman. She consciously makes a choice in keeping with her truth. There is no cultural lack, only the memory of primeval queer knowledge. For Indian feminism, Yamini’s choice to end her life makes her a feminist failure and a victim, but the clarity with which Yamini speaks her mind is agentive, even when she asks for death.

As “crystalline waters reveal themselves once algae and moss are skimmed away [...]. It darted out of her, like lightning streaking across the face of the night, visible and distinct. ‘Set me free” (Raghavan, 1999: 58).

Saaranathan knows Yamini will end her life by jumping into the deep waters of the well. Before she does, he leans over the parapet to gaze into it. “The black sky, the twinkling stars – they could be seen clearly reflected there, in that splendid hall which was so eminently suited to receive his cherished one” (Raghavan, 1999: 60). He knows about Yamini’s passion for the night and believes that in its infinity she will find what she longs for. In Sanskrit, Yamini means the night, sometimes, it is also the light in the dark. By naming her so, Chudamani subtly draws on several themes. “The endless night is a common motif in Indic love poetry, intensifying the loneliness of the abandoned, waiting lover” (Venkatesan, 2014: 107). Since Yamini is the night, she is both the symbol of loneliness and the lover seeking solace. Only, her beloved is not another being, it is the *self*, the self that is an extension of the universe. The night in this narrative is an aeon; it reflects her desire for the infinite. Yamini is an enigma.

Conclusion

Queerness is quintessential to *Yamini*’s narrative. By focusing on Yamini’s asexual, transcendent, and transgressive desires, Raghavan subverts the trope of the eternal desiring feminine and creates a female character whose desires are not bodily, sexual, or heteronormative. Writing within the intertextual discourse of Tamil and Sanskrit literature, Raghavan employs a diverse range of styles and literary devices to convey suggestive meaning that points to the multivocality of desire. While Raghavan does not categorize Yamini’s desire, keeping in line with India’s history of tolerance and non-categorization, by writing Yamini’s stubborn silence, she has left open the possibility of a queer reading. She has created a space where Yamini’s multivocality can play out and manifest itself. *Yamini* challenges and destabilizes colonization by reaching back to precolonial ideas of desire, and it expands the feminist discourse on gender and sexuality by exploring the life of an Indian woman who refuses normative ideas of desire. Yamini’s queer desire, I contend, is the ultimate resistance to hegemony of all sorts.

notes

- ¹ Titled *Iravu Chudar* (Night Spark) in the original Tamil, the novella was translated by the literary critic Vasantha Surya and published as *Yamini* in English. Chudamani Raghavan wrote several short stories in English, apart from writing in Tamil. She also translated her own works from Tamil to English – but not *Yamini*.

- 2** While such figures “as V. S. Naipaul [...] are often examined under the rubric of ‘Post-Colonial Literature,’” the canonization of a “small coterie of writers seems to have precluded a more dialogic, cross-cultural, and contextualized approach to a burgeoning number of writers” (Pirbhai, 2004: 387). Women writers are largely excluded from this small coterie because they do not fit into convenient categories and ideologies. Queerness, for instance in the works of Kamala Das and Suniti Namjoshi, has been ignored altogether.
- 3** See Madhavi Menon, *Infinite Variety – A History of Desire in India* (2018), Ruth Vanita, *Queering India* (2002) and Giti Thadani, *Sakhiyani – Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (2016).
- 4** “Sexual moral panics” were a central aspect of imperial power, notes Saskia Eleonora Wieringa, who holds that in postcolonial societies “memories of certain sexual practices, cultures, or norms, specifically related to women’s sexual agency and same-sex practices got lost, leading to a postcolonial amnesia on these topics” (2020: 205)
- 5** See ‘Sriram’s Mother’ (Raghavan, 2002).
- 6** The Asexuality Visibility & Education Network.
- 7** Anandavardhana (eighth century ACE) proposed the concept of *dhvani* in his Sanskrit classic *Dhvanyaloka*. The compendium opens with the words *kavyasyatma dhvanih*, the essence of literature is *dhvani*.
- 8** Madhavi Menon stated this in a speech titled ‘A History of Desire in India’ which she delivered at the Sarmaya Arts Foundation on April 26, 2019.
- 9** This is not to say that ancient and medieval India was a haven for queer folks. Analysis of medical literature from the Late Vedic Period shows that while the flexibility of sexes and alternative sexualities were tolerated, they were frowned upon by the mainstream. Sometimes medical interventions were sought to rectify these variations (Sweet and Zwilling, 1993: 590-607).
- 10** Historians locate the Sangam Era broadly between 300 BCE and 350 CE. A large corpus of texts falls within the category of Sangam poetry – which intimately depicts several aspects of Tamil civilization.
- 11** Tillie Olsen opines that language “is a symbolic system closely tied to a patriarchal social structure” (qtd. in Kolodny, *Dancing through the Minefield*, 2009). Chudamani disturbs the patriarchal symbolism in the Tamil language by using its literary devices to create a radically defiant woman.
- 12** In a 2002 interview for Mangayartilakam, (qtd. in Mani, 2016: 36).
- 13** Irigaray’s work does not account for queer desires or language, as she is focused on the essence of the difference between male and female. But it’s possible, as Caroline Godart suggests, to expand Irigaray’s categories of sexual difference to recognize queer identities: “all bodies have a particular ontology [...] Their alterity needs to be affirmed in the same way [...] in their singularity and independently of a normative standard” (2016: 14).
- 14** The converse of Sridevi, the goddess of fortune.
- 15** Towards the end of the twentieth century, “hysterical narrative” became a sort of synonym for women’s writing in literary criticism. Elaine Showalter takes much offence to this in ‘On Hysterical Narrative’ (Showalter, 1993).
- 16** If one agrees with Foucault’s contention “that psychiatric power responded to a wider scientific episteme in the modern era by delineating artificial barriers between

reason and madness" we'd also question "the connections between psychiatry and politics, the importance of gender and race for mental health discourses, and the ways that medical technologies have combined with social policies to enhance psychiatry's coercive power in the twentieth century" (Keller, 2001: 295).

17 I understand androgyny here as defined by Virginia Woolf: "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death" (2010: 900-905).

18 In fact, Chudamani identified herself as a writer, *not a female writer*. Preetha Mani believes that she must have done so to mainstream women's writing instead of letting it be categorized as "the other." After all, Chudamani primarily wrote about women's psychosexual lives and it was prone to be termed as women's writing. However, her style was not similar to other women of the time. Chudamani wrote in "a language that universalizes feminine desire by expressing it in distinctly humanist terms" (Mani, 2016: 21).

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