

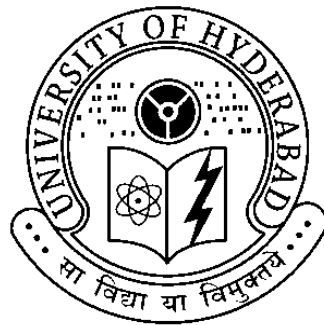
**THE WOMAN WHO WALKS THE NIGHT
YAKSHI AS MYTH AND METAPHOR IN KERALA'S
CULTURAL IMAGINARY**

**A thesis submitted in December 2016 to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English**

By

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “The Woman Who Walks the Night: Yakshi as Myth and Metaphor in Kerala’s Cultural Imaginary” submitted by Meenu B bearing Registration number 11HEPH02 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in English is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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1. *Sambalpur Studies in Literatures and Cultures*, Series 3, 2013 (ISSN Number 2231-5616), Chapter 1.
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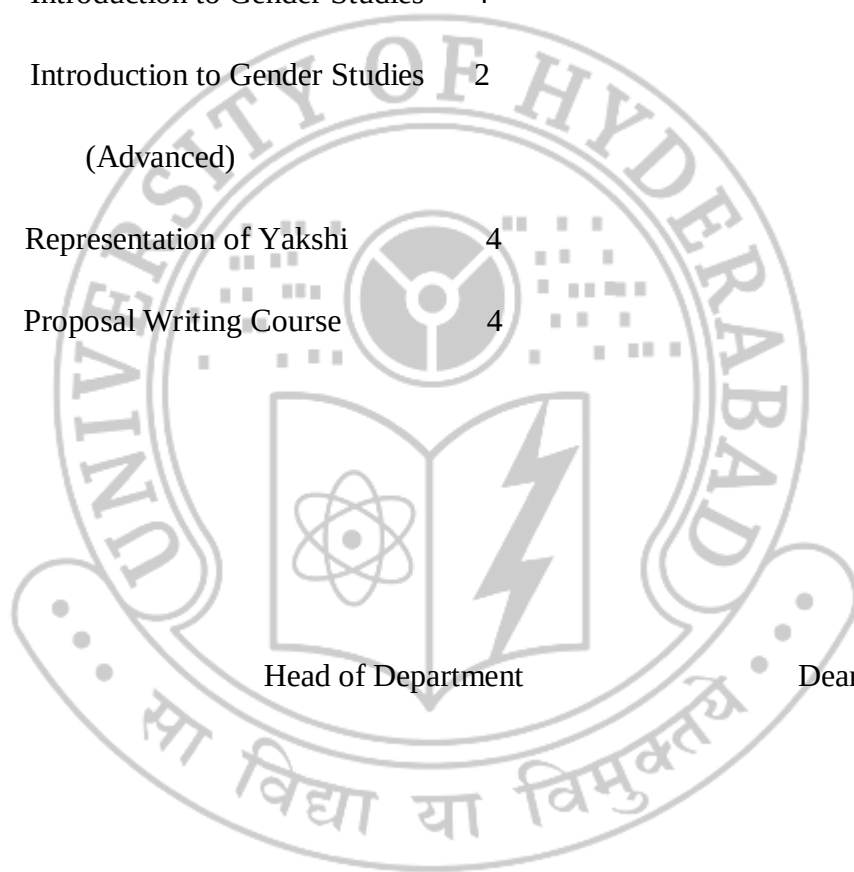
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Course Code	Name	Credits	Pass/Fail
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DECLARATION

I Meenu B (Regd. No. 11HEPH02) hereby declare that this thesis titled “The Woman who Walks the Night: Yakshi as Myth and Metaphor in Kerala’s Cultural Imaginary” submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Professor K. Suneetha Rani is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/ INFLIBNET.

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Acknowledgements

I have been a horror buff right from my childhood, so perhaps my working on the Yakshi for my Ph.D thesis is not that much of a coincidence. As a kid growing up in the 90s, fed on Malayalam ghost and Yakshi movies, horror serials as well as literature, the Yakshi did leave her mark on me though it remained in my subconscious for a long time. And then one day, while I was wondering what to do my Ph.D on, I heard my father humming a song from *Bhargavi Nilayam*. I then started wondering why I shouldn't work on the supernatural, a subject which had always interested me. That line of thinking led me to the Yakshi, who had always fascinated me – Who was she? Why was she such a stock feature of horror tales in Kerala?

I had been part of an academic environment where English Studies had started expanding its boundaries to include new fields such as Film Studies and Cultural Studies. As part of this, I had been exposed to interesting studies on the Vampire and his place in American popular culture. One part of me used to wonder as to why our local monsters always had to stand outside the doors of serious academic discussions. Did their not speaking 'English' doom their chances of being taken seriously? A thesis on Yakshi, for me, was thus the need of the hour where one moved beyond the confines of popular postcolonial topics to explore something which had been part of pre-colonial histories. Yet when I started out, I didn't quite know how to go about it. I knew there were a number of works which featured the Yakshi, yet didn't know which framework or discipline to place her in.

The poet Vailoppilli in one of his poems which discusses the after-effects of industrialisation on Kerala's countryside laments the destruction of its vegetation and the most powerful symbol of the changed landscape is the Yakshi whose palm tree has been

uprooted turning her into a refugee. My topic, like the refugee in Vailoppilli's poem, was looking for a field it could call home. I remember attending a Ph.D interview where one of the panel members wondered whether my research was going to involve archaeological work. Another panelist wondered whether I was going to do something called 'Yakshi Studies'. For many, it was a topic that was hard to place within an existing discipline. Those were challenging days since I didn't have a full idea of what I was going to do as part of my thesis – yes, it was going to be a study on the Yakshi, but what form was it going to take?

Thankfully, I got a research supervisor who did not even bat an eye lid when I approached her with my topic. Prof. K. Suneetha Rani has been a wonderful supervisor in more ways than one, yet my foremost gratitude to her would be for letting me work on this topic the way I wanted. There were no injunctions on what I should and shouldn't do. She let me go on my own 'research' journey and had faith that I would reach somewhere at the end of it. She continued to be extremely patient and encouraging even when I took a lot of time getting there. She helped me mould my raw ideas into definite shapes and her vast experience in a number of disciplines helped me find my foot in what at times was an abyss. I thank her for teaching me so much through the years – not just as a teacher and as a supervisor, but also as a human being. In the current scenario where universities haven't really come across as places where students are treated as human beings first and learners second, it has been my fortune to get a supervisor who genuinely cares for me.

I would also like to thank my Doctoral Committee members, Dr. Sindhu Menon and Prof. M. T. Ansari, for guiding me in the right direction by offering me valuable suggestions and insights at different stages of my work. It has been my fortune to get Doctoral Committee Members who have been genuinely invested in my work. I also thank Dr. Deepa Srinivas and Dr. Naveen Kumar for offering me fascinating courses in Gender Studies and Folklore Studies respectively. I have immense gratitude to Dr. Jolly Puthussery from Folklore Studies

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Such a work would not have been possible without the benevolence shown to me by some great scholars from different fields such as the film critic and script writer, Deedi Damodaran, historians such as M.G.S. Narayan, M.G. Shashibhooshan and M.R. Raghava Varier, translator Prema Jayakumar, art critic Vijayakumar Menon, scholars such as E.V. Ramakrishnan, J. Devika, Meena T. Pillai and N. Renuka. They offered me valuable suggestions, often went out of their way to introduce me to other scholars in the field and were extremely helpful and encouraging. Dr. Sudha Balachandran has also been of great help to me. I also thank the staff of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Library, Appan Thamburan Memorial Library, C.H. Mohammed Koya Library, Ernakulam Public Library, Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad Library, Mahatma Gandhi University Library, Kerala University Library, Indira Gandhi Memorial Library and Anweshi Library for giving me all the necessary assistance to locate my primary and secondary texts.

I have also benefitted immensely from discussions with fellow scholars and classmates. I thank Meera, Dini, Babu, Bagmi, Anne, Purbasha and Vishnu Priya. I have no words to thank Sharon K. Meeran, who has been for me the embodiment of a ‘good samaritan’ sending me articles on Yakshi wherever he found them. I also thank my hostel mates and friends especially Shyama, Rohini, Kalpana, Praveen, Bagmi, Suchismitha, Kabitha, Sasmita, and Ratna. I am in eternal gratitude to Suchi for being my go-to-person in case of doubts about anything related with the submission procedure. I also thank my karate classmates for being such great pals.

I thank my parents for giving me this opportunity to pursue my dream and for being my sources of strength during hard times. They have also shared my enthusiasm in my work though I have tested their patience many a time with trips back home that got infinitely postponed. I am especially thankful to my father for singing the right song at the right time. I also thank my uncle, B. Sreeraj, for keeping an eye out for any Yakshi-related stuff and promptly informing me whenever he found one.

This was a journey which tested the limits of my comfort zone many a time. At times, it was even hard to see where it was all going – during those times, my sister beloved, See, has been my source of limitless strength. It is her faith in me and my work that has helped me get out of many a seeming dead end and get back to work with renewed energy.

This work would not have been possible without something out there giving me strength to go on, especially during those days when I seriously doubted my own capabilities and felt that I had reached my limit. I would also like to believe that the woman who walks the night, the Yakshi, has been present in spirit throughout this journey.

Meenu B.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Introduction	1-108
Chapter 2	“You have some lime?” Yakshi as the Femme Fatale in Religious Histories	109-183
Chapter 3	The Golden Binds of Love Yakshi as the Other Woman	184-261
Chapter 4	“This Hideous Face, I Do Not Acknowledge Mine” Yakshi as the Monstrous Wife	262-346
Chapter 5	When Iron Locks Hold not, Nor Iron Nails Yakshi as the Avenger-Wife	347-413
Chapter 6	“What more do you want, Sakhi?” Yakshi as the Friend-Protector	414- 466
Chapter 7	Conclusion	467-493
Bibliography		494-508
Appendices		

Chapter 1

Introduction

My thesis is an attempt to open up a field for the study of India's horror-fantasy traditions through the study of its monsters. Having been part of an academic environment where vampires, witches, and zombies ruled the roost, I had always wondered why there was such a lack of interest in India's own monsters. It is not that India lacks in this department. We have epics, legends, folktales, novels and movies full of such diverse beings as *bhutas*, *chudels*, *dayins*, *djinns*, *bhatakti aatmas*, *naagins*, *yakshas/yakshis*, *rakshasas/rakshasis* etc. Yet there have not been many studies on these monsters – how they came into being, their specific characteristics, the tales told about them, what make them alluring/evil, the techniques of overcoming/destroying them and above all what they represent in their particular cultures. This is unfortunate since when we deal with monster tales, we are not looking at some tall tales of fantastical beings. Monster studies takes us to the underworld of a culture where in the guise of monsters, we confront its unconscious longings and fears. It can in fact even be considered as a descent into the foundations of meaning-making in a culture since monster-making inevitably involves *othering* as certain practices/qualities/individuals deemed undesirable by a culture are projected onto the body of the monster and categories of good and evil integral to a culture's self-definition get born. It is no wonder then that some argue that cultures can in fact be read through the monsters they bear (Cohen 4). Monster studies has to be then seen as part of the larger field of Cultural Studies.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has been one of the most influential scholars in this regard. In his introduction to *Monster Theory*, "Monster Culture: (Seven Theses)", he

argues that the monster is born as “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place” (Cohen 4). Among other things, he posits that “the monstrous body is pure culture” and that it “literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence” (Cohen 4). Hence he calls for monsters to be “examined within the intricate mix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them” (Cohen 5). In my thesis, my attempt is to read one such “monster”, the *Yakshi*ⁱ, as myth and metaphor in Kerala’s cultural imaginary through a variety of texts spanning diverse genres and time periods.

The Yakshi can be compared with some other “beings of the night” like the *churel* in North Indian folklore, the *Pontianak* in Malaysian Folklore and the *Sundelbolong* in Indonesian folklore – all of them female vampire-ghosts/spirits who take on a beautiful appearance to seduce men and who either drink their blood or eat them or leave them sexually impotent. In a typical folktale associated with the Yakshi, one sees her waylaying her male victims (usually Namboothiris or Kerala Brahmins) by taking on the appearance of a beautiful woman. There are local specificities to the myth as in the Yakshi asking her victim for some lime so that she can have a proper *murukku* (paan). The conversation usually results in her victim, fully anticipating a night of sexual pleasure, happily following her back to her home which is a palm tree that appears as a mansion to the traveller-victim, only for the Yakshi to then change into her true ‘monster-like’ form. The Yakshi does not just drink the blood of her victim a la the vampire; she eats him leaving only his teeth and hair to be found under her palm tree the next day.

The Yakshi in the folk tales is often contained by a *Mantravadi* (sorcerer) by nailing her to a *Kanjiram* tree (Snakewood tree/*Strychnos nuxvomica*). However, if,

by accident, someone removed the nail, the Yakshi could come out of her imprisonment and go back to her old ways. The Yakshi in many of these stories would request the exorcist that she be given a space in a nearby temple, a request which would be more often than not granted and she would thereafter be worshipped as a deity in the outer courtyard of the temple. Thus, we have a very interesting monstrous figure which has the potential to transform/be transformed from the *demonic* to the *divine* by the end of the story.

My thesis reads a variety of texts featuring this figure, trying to understand her significations within Kerala's cultural imaginary including her somewhat unique potential among *monsters* for such a curious transformation. As mentioned in passing, this thesis is also a conscious attempt to open up what I believe is still an underdeveloped field within the larger rubric of Postcolonial Studies – the serious study of India's horror and fantasy traditions. While there have been individual studies, such as that of horror films in general or particular genres of horror films, studies which feature “Indian” monsters have been relatively few. It doesn't need to be said that such an attempt is then also aimed at stretching the limits of western-oriented paradigms of classifying monsters and horror traditions.

This chapter which is an introduction to my thesis is divided into five sections which closely look at some of the issues and concepts discussed above. In the first section, I briefly explore the current scenario regarding the Western-centrism of Horror Studies and then argue for the need to have a field to study India's own horror traditions, especially the study of its monsters. In the second section, I try to place the variant of the Yakshi that appears in Kerala's folklore within a larger history. This section is devoted to the exploration of the figure of the Yakshi down the ages, from her origins to her transformations in different mainstream religions of India, as well as

within the universe of similar beings in Indian legends and tales. The third section is about defining the cultural context of the Yakshi tale – in this section, I give a brief history of Kerala, especially that period in Kerala’s history which has a major bearing on the Yakshi tale. I also briefly discuss women’s status in pre-colonial Kerala and the later debates about the woman question that comes up in Kerala’s society in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries. This is meant to start an enquiry into the meanings a ‘femme fatale’ like the Yakshi holds in a society like Kerala. In the fourth section, I study the variant of this figure that appears in Kerala’s folklore closely examining her within her particular socio-cultural-religious context. In the fifth section, I outline some of the theoretical assumptions that drive my study of this figure, elaborate on the possibilities and challenges of such a project as well as discuss the overall organisation of my thesis.

I

As stated before, an attempt like this, which looks at horror and fantasy traditions which are relatively unexplored, is aimed at opening up the field of monster studies in general, currently dominated by those of western popular culture. While there have been studies on non-western monsters, especially with the entry of other South Asian countries like Japan and Korea into the mainstream of Hollywood popular horror with their own brand of horror, serious studies on them have been relatively few. For instance, there have been studies of South Asian monstrous beings like the *Pontianak* (Malaysia), the *Sundelbolong* (Indonesia), the *Gumiho* (South Korea) etc. However, much of such work has to answer back to the mainstream horror traditions of the west, and this often involves resisting attempts at using western frameworks to interpret non-western horror traditions.

For instance, the film-critic Sophia Siddique points to how the “Indonesian female vampire ghost” *Sundelbolong* helps to re-read the figure of the “seductive, fanged, primarily male Western vampire” (Siddique 25). However, she argues that for this to happen, “[t]he Indonesian horror film must be wrenched away from its status as a cult fetish object and must be examined on its own terms, with its peculiar coterie of characters drawn largely from Indonesian folk legends” (Siddique 25). She adds, “Such a culturally specific inquiry can in turn help dislodge horror studies’ tendency of Western-centrism” (Siddique 25). Andrew Hock-soon Ng, known for his work on the ‘gothic’, while describing another femme fatale of Malaysian folklore, the *Pontianak*, has a similar confusion regarding the categorisation of such a figure using western labels. He writes,

For while the pontianak’s bloodsucking proclivity and her fear of sharp, pointed objects suggest characteristics of a vampire (at least, from a Western perspective), that she also has numinous qualities and could possess another person (not in the sense of hypnotizing) imply qualities of a malignant specter as well. Thus, to say that the pontianak is a vampire is only focusing on some of her characteristics. (Ng “Death” 168)

In fact, this is a serious problem that one faces when one approaches cultures that cannot often be understood using western paradigms. At the same time, one has to work through the bind of having to use one or another label for practical purposes to initiate an enquiry into something which is hard to define at the moment using the existing terminology. In fact, my usage of the term *monster* to define such varied beings like the Yakshi or the *churel* or *bhoot* is itself hard to sustain for the term *monster* has its own history of significationsⁱⁱ far removed from those of the former. Thus, my usage of the term *monster* comes with the realization that the term itself is

quite inadequate, yet necessary, that it is a term to be used *under erasure*ⁱⁱⁱ and that by using it, I am invoking the category and at the same time opening it up like the Derridean *double gesture*^{iv}. However, the reason why I use it is mainly because it gives me a general framework to place such beings. At the same time, studies such as that of Rosi Braidotti have uncovered other etymologies of the word *monster* which makes it a more suitable term to convey the central paradox of a term like the Yakshi. The philosopher and feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti traces the word ‘monster’ to its Greek root *teras* which means “both horrible and wonderful” making the monster “represent the in-between, the mixed, the ambivalent” standing as an “object of aberration and adoration” (Braidotti 216). The Yakshi is also marked by her in-betweenness where she is at once an object of fear as well as desire. Hence *monster* is in some ways an appropriate appellation to use for a being like the Yakshi. Also, at the moment, compared to using specific labels like vampires or witches or ghosts or spirits, I prefer the usage of the term *monster* because of what Cohen has done to the term, extending it to include a wide variety of beings considered strange and frightening in a culture, be it imaginary beings like vampires, witches, aliens or real beings whose sexuality, gender, ethnicity or nationality come into conflict with the *normative* in a culture making its owner the *social other*. Thus, my usage of the term *monster*, despite its inadequacies, is motivated by three factors – first, the need for a general term to define diverse supernatural beings which evoke fear and wonder, second, the fact that it is a term which succeeds in capturing the central paradox of a figure like the Yakshi marked by her in-betweenness and third, the belief that the term calls to attention the non-normative nature of its possessor. The third factor is particularly important for a figure like the Yakshi whose non-normative sexuality I consider to be the crux of her *monstrosity*. However, I will also be investigating this

term in detail, wondering whether such a term can encapsulate the complexity of the signifieds of the signifier 'Yakshi'.

Coming back to the central problem of "definition", the usage of inadequate western labels for such beings is not the only issue. There is the larger problem of using other Western paradigms to look at horror-fantasy traditions originating in the non-west. Thus Andrew Hock Soon Ng's attempt to use the Gothic as a "critical tool" to "interrogate Asian narratives" is fraught with "the concern that reading an Asian narrative through such a framework would result in a kind of 'colonial imposition'", a concern which Ng tries to allay by insisting that his approach is one where "the framework itself is open to recalibration and resistance by the text under investigation" (Ng "Introduction" 3).

The interesting paradox of the whole situation is that the subjects of a field of study like this, "Monster Studies" or "Horror-Fantasy Studies", more than anything, are marked by their very elusiveness, their "refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things'" (Cohen 6). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his introduction to *Monster Theory* calls them "disturbing hybrids whose externally coherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration ... a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (Cohen 6). At the same time, one cannot divorce the monster from the culture which produces it for as Cohen so eloquently puts it, "the monster is born ... as an embodiment of a particular cultural moment – of a time, a feeling and a place." (Cohen 4)

Sophia Siddique points to another facet of horror when she says that "horror draws upon universal myths yet is punctuated with cultural specificities" (Siddique 25). What are these universal myths she refers to and are they truly "universal"?

Sudhir Kakar in his study of the Hindu childhood in *The Inner World* tries to understand femme fatales as the collective fantasy about the “bad mother”. He says,

Certainly all societies call upon witches, vampires, ghosts and other spectres to symbolize the forbidding, negative aspect of a real mother; these phantoms, along with other mother surrogates such as a stepmother and evil goddesses, are infused with meanings derived from archaic early childhood fears of the mother’s emotional needs and fantasied threats. These are familiar figures in individual and collective fantasy across cultures, and the dayans, jinns, and bhoots who people Indian night and the Hindu imagination in such profusion are unexceptional. (“The Inner World” 96)

The archetypal figure for many of these ghosts, vampires and witches for Kakar is the “bad mother”, a figure who, according to him, in all societies “combines both the aggressively destroying and the sexually demanding themes” though which one of these two aspects comes to dominate depends upon the position and status of women within the society (“The Inner World” 90). Kakar does insist that “at this most fundamental level of the psyche, no one is entirely free from ambivalent feelings towards the mother” making a case for the “naturalness” of the image of the “bad mother” as one stemming from the very psyche of the individual, generally of the male child (“The Inner World” 89). However, it needs to be pondered as to how “natural” this ambivalence is since it definitely seems to be a “gendered” one based on the perspective of the male child alone. Thus one has to wonder whether the experience of fear and desire towards the mother needs to be ultimately traced to cultural notions of femininity and reproduction. For instance, in a community where child rearing is a collective activity and not the responsibility of the mother alone, would the mother-child bond generate so much emotional tension even for the male

child? This becomes especially interesting in the case of a figure like the Yakshi which cannot be easily fit into the divine-demonic binary, perhaps pointing to different significations of femininity in marginal cultures that were more egalitarian. Be that as it may, the point I want to make here is the role of culture in shaping what is monstrous at a particular juncture. For instance, even something which may have universal links, such as the fear of the “feminine” in most patriarchal cultures, is largely moulded by how a particular culture encounters and experiences it. What it calls for thus are culture-specific tools to understand the monsters of any one culture, especially when that culture is one on the margins. Hence the need for studies of non-western horror-fantasy studies that develop their own paradigms and tools.

Even when we say that monsters are generally “glocal” (in the sense that while they do resemble (in varying degrees) other monsters across the globe, they trace their origins to “local” anxieties and ideological systems), we have to admit that some monsters are more “global” than the others. As a result of globalization, many “local” monsters who took their origin in different parts of Europe such as vampires and witches have come to dominate our drawing rooms in an unprecedented way, not to mention their indubitable presence in the popular horror-fantasy literature today. At the same time, we see a transformation happening in the horror traditions in the non-west. Andrew Hock-soon Ng, discussing the Malaysian female vampire-ghost *Pontianak*’s changing representation in the Malay films from her folkloric avatar points to what he calls “cross-cultural fertilization” (Ng “Death” 167). What he points to is how “aspects of Western representations of the vampire have crept into the local context ... and have reconstituted her into a more hybrid entity that draws on both Eastern and Western vampiric attributes” (Ng 171). Glennis Byron turns her attention to another phenomenon, the rise of the “global gothic” as a result of globalization

(Byron 33). She says, “the effects of globalization upon cultural production have also led to the literature and film of different countries feeding off each other to produce new cross-cultural monstrosities” which is the “global gothic” (Byron 33). It can be argued that there are no “pure” monsters in the sense that even local monsters are either products of cross-cultural fertilization or they undergo transformations as a result of it over time. However, this term becomes significant especially in the postcolonial context as local monsters take on aspects of their more glamorous western cousins as in the case of the Malaysian *Pontianak*. The *Pontianak*, who, traditionally, if one can use that word, used to suck blood through a hole in the back of her neck has either been transformed into a fanged being in line with the vampires in its local cinematic representations or her penchant for blood has been done away with altogether (Ng “Death” 169). This is of course a part of the larger process of the reconstitution of folklore for mass consumption where some signifiers cease to exist and others multiply “to the point that it is no longer clear where popular culture ends and traditional belief begins” (Ng “Death” 167). It doesn’t need to be said that such a reconstitution, especially in today’s scenario, also has to cater to what the market considers “popular horror”.

Coming to the Indian scene, it is quite obvious that we live in an age where what we fear and desire are expanding under the influence of globalization. While the most celebrated of the Western monsters, i.e. vampires and witches, have now to a large extent established their presence in urban India, there is also a revival of interest in other Western imports. An example of this has been the recent interest in “Indian” zombie movies with two of them getting released in 2013. There is a meta moment in one of these movies *Go Goa Gone* when one of the main characters, once he realises that the underground rave party they are attending in Goa is populated by the living

dead, asks “We usually have ghosts and spirits in India. Where have these zombies come from?” (Aftab, “Bollywood’s new”).

Luke Kenny, who has starred in the other zombie movie of 2013 *Rise of the Zombie* and co-directed the film, argues that the advent of the Bollywood zombie movie is a way of getting 18- to 25-year-olds into the cinemas (Aftab, “Bollywood’s new”). He sees this as a shift in the Indian horror movie scene which has largely been dominated by local spirits. “There is a larger audience that has only been fed [sic] women in white saris, chudails (female ghouls) and bhatakti aatma (wandering spirit) movies, but we knew that there was an inbuilt audience familiar with the core genre” (Ramnath, “Dawn”).

My point of interest in this thesis is also the changing scenario of India’s horror-fantasy traditions where global icons of horror are making their presence felt more and more in the Indian market often as the glamorous replacements of local spirits who do not evoke the aura they had evoked for a previous generation. While this can be read as an inevitable consequence of globalization and the changes it has brought in the mental landscape of a generation, we have to take a moment to pause and consider the implications. It would be irrational to be parochial about one’s own horror traditions and this is not an attempt to lament the taking over of India’s horror traditions by the “dreaded West”. However, what it tries to say is that at such an important juncture, the time is ripe to study India’s own horror-fantasy traditions seriously for what a culture fears reveals as much about it as what it desires and India, obviously, is the microcosm of many such different cultures.

Going back to Cohen’s formulation of the monster’s body as “a cultural body”, one can say that an exploration of the monsters that different cultures have

produced is also finally an exploration of the cultures which produce and sustain them. Cohen calls every monster a “double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves” (Cohen 13). He also emphasizes how integral the monster is to the construction of a culture: “The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together the system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot – must not- be crossed” (Cohen 13).

Coming to a field like “Indian Horror-Fantasy Studies or Monster Studies”, it becomes pretty apparent that diversity is the name of the game. India is the microcosm of many different cultures with their own particular horror-fantasy traditions. Some of the fantastical beings that people the horror-fantasy universes of our disparate traditions can be clubbed under the general category of the “ghost”, but even here, depending on the region and the cultural scenario, there will be differences in representation. A project which tries to set up an “Indian Monster Studies” will then of course have to deal with the mind-boggling diversity in India’s horror-fantasy traditions though it would also not be correct to say that diversity is the only thing common to them for there might be cross-cuttings as well where a monster/spirit in one part of India may have linkages with monsters in other parts as well. However, where they are different and unique, they need to be studied in their own right though/and in the larger framework of comparable horror traditions. It goes without saying that the “Indian” in a nomenclature like “Indian horror-fantasy traditions” is hard to justify since monsters do not belong to any country and certainly the monsters found in parts of India may be found in places outside its geographical bounds as well. As I mentioned earlier, the word “monster” itself needs to be used under *erasure* while talking about such diverse beings like the Yakshi and the *bhoot*. Thus my usage

of both the terms is an attempt to mark a starting point to investigate non-western horror-fantasy traditions than any final word on it.

II

The specific variant of the Yakshi that I want to study in this thesis is her femme fatale version that pops up in the folklore and horror-fantasy genre of Kerala. And this is a study with its own challenges since the very process of defining the Yakshi in Kerala's folktales throws up questions like what Siddique and Hock-Soon Ng encountered while defining the *Sundelbolong* and the *Pontianak* respectively. Is she a spirit or a ghost, vampire or monster? Some of the earliest folktales and legends on the Yakshi present her as a female spirit; whether she is benevolent or malevolent in nature changes from story to story. But simultaneously, one also sees the term Yakshi being used for the ghosts of dead women who die an unnatural death. Whether she is presented as a spirit or as a ghost, the specificities of the Yakshi tale do not change. She is still the female monster who seduces travellers with her beauty and feeds on them. The term "vampire" is again a misnomer while talking about the Yakshi. The Yakshi does drink the blood of her victims and some of the tales about the Yakshi stress this as well. But she also feeds on them, which makes her more in league with the *rakshasi* in Hindu mythology. Thus she at times seems to be a combination of an ogress and a vampire. A figure like the Yakshi is thus hard to be categorised using specific labels.

However, among her different appellations, the one I find the most successful in capturing her complexity is Robert DeCaroli's term "spirit-deity" (DeCaroli 9). DeCaroli calls such varied beings as Yakshas/Yakshis and nagas as *spirit-deities* "because these deities hold a liminal position between the realms of ghosts (*preta*,

bhūta) and the gods (*deva*) and frequently seem to share the nature of both” (DeCaroli 89, note 17). The Yakshi occupying a liminal space between the category of the ghosts and other demons and that of the gods is an interesting site for further theoretical explorations. I will be dealing with this in detail in the last section of my introduction.

While the Yakshi, in general, can be called a “spirit-deity”, in the folktales, she usually takes the form of a monster. In these tales, the Yakshi can be said to resemble the *femme fatales* of other cultures. Sudhir Kakar’s definition of the *churel* can be applied to a large extent in the case of the Yakshi as well. Kakar defines a *churel* as “the feminine spirit who appears as a seductively beautiful woman, recognizable from the fact that her feet point backward, and who strikes impotent any man who has intercourse with her” (“Shamans, Mystics and Doctors” 28). In some folktales, the Yakshi’s feet are also said to turn backward. In the case of the Yakshi, intercourse with her generally results in death or paralysis of the man.

However, the Yakshi is also a locus of desire as much as fear. Though this can be said of many *femme fatales*, it is more marked in the case of the Yakshi since there has also been a tradition in the case of the folktales featuring her where she is treated as the almost divine but dangerous lover. She is also often regarded as the epitome of female beauty. This is one of the major differences I see in her with regard to the other *femme fatales* at least on the surface. There is another major difference which I have mentioned earlier. The ending of many a tale featuring the Yakshi sees her being installed in a temple nearby. One also sees the Yakshi being worshipped as a sub-deity in some temples and rarer still as an independent deity in other temples in Kerala.

The ending of many of the stories featuring the Yakshi indirectly suggests the “divine” origins of the Yakshi, a point which I will explore in detail later. The ending of these stories also reflects the change in the status of Yakshi – she is no longer the major deity (at least in the mainstream discourse of local Hinduism) and in many of the major Hindu temples can only be worshipped in the outer courtyard^v. It is suggested here that the Yakshi can be kept in check only by the major deity who is usually a goddess.

One can regard this as a major difference between the figure of the Yakshi and other “beings of the night” like vampires who are always positioned outside religion (generally Christianity) and whose vampirism is generally irreversible. In this regard, the Yakshis are more similar to the *Sundelbolongs* and the *Langsuyars* of Indonesian folklore who can be “re-incorporated into the community life of village society after the enactment of ritual mutilations^{vi}” (Siddique 169). However, what is unique to the Yakshi is that she is re-incorporated not just into the community life, but her status itself changes from the “demonic” to the “divine^{vii}”. This could be because while the *Sundelbolongs* and *Langsuyars* are “vampire-ghosts”, the Yakshi is a “spirit-deity” with vampiric attributes (that of drinking the blood of her victim, not that of changing her victim into a vampire) and carries traces of her initial “divine” origins.

However, there is much more to the multiplicity of significations that the term Yakshi evokes in Kerala’s Cultural Imaginary than these. In fact, to understand the plethora of signifieds that the term Yakshi has in Kerala’s folktales and stories, one needs to place her within a larger history and *read* her as a figure which has undergone fascinating transformations down the ages quite befitting the shape-shifter that she is. This is also important since it would help us understand the continuities and departures in her representations in Kerala’s folklore.

The texts that I am going to primarily rely on are Ananda K. Coomarswamy's *Yaksas: Parts 1 and II*, Gail Hinich Sutherland's *The Disguises of the Demon: The Development of the Yaksa in Hinduism and Buddhism* with its primary focus on the *Yaksa/Yaksha*, considered to be the male counterpart of the *Yaksi/Yakshi*^{viii} and Raghava Varier's essay "Yakshikal, Amma Daivangal^{ix}" [Yakshis, Mother Goddesses] from his book "Mythum Samoothavum" [Myth and Society].

The first thing to note about the variant of the *Yakshi* figure that appears in Kerala's folklore is that she has been the product of various religious histories and cultures. Different cultures have intersected to produce this figure, the ogress who haunts the desolate crossroads in many a folktale popular in Kerala. It is not possible to say conclusively how this figure has transformed into this particular variant found in Kerala's folklore. What one can put forward are some speculations backed by existing historical studies on this figure, some of which are themselves inconclusive. Yet, I believe that laying out a brief history(ies) of this figure is important since it will help us not only contextualise her, but also help us understand the fascinating processes through which such monsters come into being in India.

To summarize the *Yakshi*'s journey through the pathways of history would be first to record her origins as a fertility deity in a primitive society associated most significantly with the cult of tree worship and then her assimilation into different religions that held sway in India - the Vedic religion, Buddhism and Jainism. The transformations she underwent in these three different religions have been the major contributors to her current avatar in Kerala's folklore. The Buddhist Jataka tales where the *Yakshis* and *Yakshas* used to haunt the crossroads and often confronted the *Bodhisatta*^x seem to have been the greatest influence on the prototypical folktale in

Kerala. At the same time, the Yakshi's assimilation into Jainism as guardian deities (*raksha devatas*) of the *Tirthankaras* (the Jain saints) and their subsequent elevation as goddesses in their own right is a history worth remembering since it was the spread of Jainism to Kerala that is considered by historians as responsible for the popularity of this figure within Kerala, especially in her worship as a deity. Through the medieval contact zones that Vaishnavism and Shaivism had with Jainism, Yakshis, the Jain *shasana devatas* (attendant deities), entered into the local Hinduism of Kerala which was a synthesis of many religions such as Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, the mother-goddess based religion and the Vedic religion (Varier^{xi} 112; Nair 392-93). In local Hinduism, the Yakshi either transformed into the local Hindu *Bhagavati* or made her entry in the folklore as the *Bhagavati*'s opponent to be tamed at the end of the tale by the former^{xii} (Varier 113).

I will first discuss the origins of the Yakshi in detail before moving on to a discussion of her specific avatars in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

A number of historians have tried to trace the origins of the figure of the Yakshi. Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gail Sutherland, while they do explore the history of the Yakshi, chiefly focus on the history of her male counterpart, the *Yaksha* while Donna Jordan focuses on the history of mother goddesses in which the Yakshi also figures. I believe that the Yakshi needs to be studied simultaneously as part of a duo and as an independent deity. This is because there has been a tradition in Indian art and mythology where the *Yaksha* and the *Yakshi* have been part of the idea of the "productive pair, *mithuna*^{xiii}," where both have shared similar characteristics and at times similar histories. What I want to suggest here is that a study of the *Yakshas* does give us insights into the figure of the *Yakshi* too to a large extent since both were

originally fertility deities and associated with tree worship. On the other hand, I believe that a study of the Yakshi as an independent fertility deity is also necessary since her being a “female” does have major bearings on how she is represented later.

For Ananda Coomarswamy, the worship of Yakshas and Yakshis was part of an important phase of “non- and pre-Aryan Indian ‘animism’” where they were worshipped as “beneficent powers of wealth and fertility” (Coomarswamy I: 36). He states that before Buddhism and Jainism, they had been absorbed into Brahminism “with a corresponding cosmology of the Four or Eight Quarters of the Universe” and been accepted as orthodox in its theology (Coomarswamy I: 36). He also suggests that the term Yaksa was “practically synonymous with Deva or Devatā” where no essential distinction could be made out between the two (Coomarswamy I: 36). He sums up the term’s transformations thus:, “‘Yaksa’ may have been a non-Aryan, at any rate a popular designation equivalent to Deva, and only at a later date restricted to genii of lower rank than that of the greater gods” (Coomarswamy I: 36).

It has to be pointed out that the word ‘yaksa’ has many forms. In Sanskrit, the terms are ‘yaksa’ and ‘yaksī’/‘yaksinī’; in Pali, ‘yakkha’ and ‘yakkhī/yakkhinī’; in Prakrit, ‘Jakkha’ and ‘Jakkhinī’ and in Sinhalese, ‘yakā’ and ‘yakī’ (Coomarswamy I: 5, note 1). There has been no definite consensus on the etymological origin of the word though there have been many theories regarding this. For instance, Ram Nath Mishra has called attention to “an array of etymological attributions” (Sutherland 69). These include those encompassing such notions as “‘to honor’ (from pra-yaks); ‘to move quickly’, or ‘to reveal’ or ‘be revealed’ (Vedic yaks), a derivation of yak, ‘to sacrifice’ (put forward by the commentators Sayana and Madhava); or be connected with the Iranian word ‘yaxs’ with the sense of ‘appearing’” (Sutherland 69). More colourful explanations emerge in the later texts, such as in “the more popular and

mythic etymologies of the Epics and Puranas” (Sutherland 69). For instance, “ In the *Ramayana* (7.104, 12-13), the etymology of both yakshas and *raksasas* is given: ‘In Brahma’s creation of the waters and creatures to guard it, some cried out, *raksamah* (‘let us guard’) and so they became the *raksasas* and others cried out *yaksamah* [Misra says (‘let us gobble’) (?) probably ‘let us worship’] and they became the yakshas” (Sutherland 69).

While Sutherland translates “*yaksamah*” as “let us worship/let us sacrifice”, Coomarswamy agrees with Misra in translating it as ‘let us gobble’ and argues that “the idea is perhaps derived from the big belly which is the most constant feature in Yaksha iconography” (Coomarswamy I: 5, note 1). Perhaps, the very same idea of ‘gobbling’ is retained in the popular representation of the Yakshas and Yakshis as cannibalistic in Jataka tales, an idea which is carried over in the representation of the Yakshis in Kerala’s folklore.

According to Raghava Varier, the representation of the Yakshas and Yakshis in later literature and iconography points to their being fertility deities at one point of time (Varier 103). With fertility rites were often linked the practices of “ritual coitus” and “mother goddess” worship (Varier 103). As per the former concept, it was held that union between man and woman would increase the fertility of the land (Varier 103). There was also the practice of worshipping the earth as a mother (Varier 103). Varier opines that the origins of the Yaksha/Yakshi cult could be traced to the fertility concepts of a “primitive people” in the Gangetic basin who were later absorbed into the Vedic culture (Varier 103). Varier uses the example of the Jaina Yakshi “Ambika” to argue his point that the Yakshis were initially fertility deities and mother goddesses (Varier 111). He highlights the practice of worshipping Ambika to beget progeny as

well as her iconographic representation where she is depicted as holding a child as proof of her being a mother goddess in the beginning (Varier 111).

There have been studies which link the Yakshi with tree worship and others which see her being a vegetation deity as part of the larger network of water cosmology. The studies of the former kind see her as a tree goddess and part of a system of nature worship (Shashibhooshan “Yakshi” 24). Tree cult is one of the oldest and most universal cults among Earth-based peoples and studies have shown how open space shrines under trees in sacred groves were the earliest temples of goddess worship (Jordan 14). Similarly, the most archaic goddesses are said to be those originally identified with trees (Jordan 14). In ancient magico-religious systems, “trees, plants and animals were proto-fierce goddesses, perceived as powerful protectors and destroyers” (Jordan 14). The major religions which came one after the other are said to have incorporated the Yakshi, a sylvan goddess, into their own framework, moulding her according to their own ideologies and belief systems. Thus, Shashibhooshan opines that the diversity in the system of Yakshi worship in Kerala is a result of this process of assimilation whereby village goddesses who were associated with trees and were worshipped in different parts of India were assimilated into different religions that held sway in the region (Shashibhooshan “Yakshi” 24). Among these later religions which assimilated the deity Yakshi, Shashibhooshan includes *Shaktism* (Shakti/mother goddess based religion), the *Naga* cult (snake cult in Kerala which also had the *Nagayakshi* as part of the major deities) as well as Jainism and Tantric Buddhism. This was part of a larger process of assimilation whereby various folk and tribal goddesses, most of them “fierce goddesses”, entered into the Hindu pantheon under the larger rubric of the Mother Goddess, losing most of their fierceness in the process. This process of assimilation, especially with regard to

the assimilation of folk goddesses by India's organised religions, has been studied by scholars like Donna Jordan and Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta. Jordan, for instance, discusses how the female deities of organized religions subsumed the goddesses of folk religions (Jordan 191). Among the deities subsumed in this way, she includes "unmarried sylvan goddesses or sacred tree spirits such as *yaksinis* (*yaksis*) and *apsaras*, *matrkas*, fairies, genii, demonesses, goblins, *raksasas* (witches or 'night wanderers' to Aryans, but they in fact were the aboriginal tribal guerrillas who disturbed Vedic sacrifices), *naginis*, *bhutinis* (female ghosts)" as well as fierce tribal goddesses whom she argues were "demonized to serve as models for many of the female deities with malignant powers" (Jordan 191).

Dasgupta sheds more light on this process of assimilation where indigenous goddesses become part of the "one universal mother goddess" (Jordan 205). He refers to how roughly between the first and the tenth century AD, "many local and indigenous goddesses pushed themselves from the social sub-strata to find a place in the Hindu pantheon, and by a process of generalization, both religious and philosophical, were fused together and treated as aspects of the one universal mother goddess" (Jordan 205). Correcting the misconception that "many mother goddesses are later emanations from the one mother goddess", he states, "on the contrary, the one mother goddess of the Puranic Age seems to be a consolidation of the many mother goddesses" (Jordan 205).

As against such studies which see the Yakshi as a vegetal spirit, studies of historians like Coomarswamy's *Yaksas: Part 2* and Sutherland's *Disguises of the Demon* have focused on the importance of water cosmology in understanding the concept of the Yaksha/Yakshi cult. Coomarswamy in Part 2 of his *Yaksas* suggests

that a “Life Cult”, “with which is also connected the worship of the Great Mother”, may have been the primitive religion of India and that the Yaksha cult was an integral part of it (Coomarswamy I: 14). This “Life Cult” is actually connected with “water cosmology” or the belief in “the origin of life in the waters”, a belief “common to many ancient cultures” (Coomarswamy II: 14). Unlike the earlier theory of Yakshas/Yakshis primarily being vegetation deities, focus is now on their close connection with waters. Thus, the depiction of Yakshis as having a “*makara* or other fish-tailed animal as their vehicle” or the depiction of “the greater tutelary *Yakshas*” as controlling the rains essential to prosperity are taken as proof of their primary association with the water cosmology^{xiv} (Coomarswamy II 13). Hence, Coomarswamy considers Yakshis and Yakshas as primarily connected with waters and secondarily with vegetation. (Coomarswamy I: 55). In fact, Coomarswamy even links the iconography of the river goddesses of Northern India, the *nadī-devatās*, to that of the “Yakshi-dryad”. He says that “iconographically the differentiated forms of the river goddesses (in northern India only) is [sic] directly derived from that of the *Yaksī-dryad*” and takes it as further proof of the claim that the Yakshi, despite her vegetal and “apparently terrestrial habitat”, was “still primarily a spirit of the waters” (Coomarswamy I: 55).

I briefly mentioned the concept of water cosmology above since now historical studies seem to place the Yakshis within a larger cult called the “Life Cult” associated with this cosmology instead of seeing them primarily as tree deities. The concept of water cosmology is also interesting when we come to studies which point to how the close association of the Yakshas/Yakshis with water has an important bearing on their later representation as ambivalent moral beings.

Thus, the historical studies into the origins of this figure see her as part of an older system of worship connected with nature worship, in the form of trees or in the form of life-giving waters, as part of fertility cults and/or mother-goddess based religions. As mentioned earlier, she was then assimilated into the three different mainstream religions of India – Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism where she took on particular avatars. The Yakshi has rarely figured in the mythologies of other religions except these three. There is an exception though and my second chapter looks at the curious case of the Yakshi entering into the religious sphere of Christianity and reads it in the context of the larger historical process of evangelization within Kerala. At the moment, I will try to trace the concept of the Yakshi in those religions which I feel have had a bearing on the Yakshi's current avatar in Kerala's folklore.

Firstly, I would like to explore the Yakshi's avatar in Hinduism. Historians have pointed to the fact that modern Hinduism is itself an amalgamation of different religious systems, some of which include the Vedic religion, Shaivism (Shiva-based religion), Vaishnavism (Vishnu-based religion) and Shaktism (Shakti or mother goddess-based religion) (Nair 377). Again, the local Hinduism of Kerala has been influenced by other religions which held sway there like Tantric Buddhism, Jainism and the Naga cult (snake worship) (Shashibhooshan "Yakshi" 24). Thus, the diversity in the representations of the Yakshi in Hinduism and the local Hinduism of Kerala is to a large extent due to the variety of borrowings and subsequent syntheses the Vedic religion has undergone as part of such cross-religious exchanges.

The Yaksha (and not the Yakshi) has been the focus of the studies of Coomarswamy and Sutherland, scholars who have delved into this area. For instance, they have done a lot of work on the emergence of the figure of the Yaksha in the

Vedas and its transformation in various Hindu religious texts, like the later Vedas, Upanishads and the Epics. However, other than a few brief mentions here and there, the Yakshi does not get much attention. In the *Rg Veda*, for instance, there is no mention of the term Yakshi though David Kinsley considers the goddess Aranyani mentioned in one of the hymns to resemble the figure of the Yakshi^{xv}. As per this hymn of the *Rg-veda* (10.146), Aranyani is the mother of all things in the forest who is more often heard than seen, “an elusive figure who vanishes from sight and avoids villages”, who “speaks through the sounds of the forest” or through her tinkling bells (Kinsley 25). A goddess whose presence is felt especially at evening and whose screams are heard at night, who doesn’t kill unless provoked by a murderous enemy, Aranyani, to Kinsley, “sounds very much like the Yaksis of the later Indian tradition, those female beings who dwell in the forest, are worshiped away from the village, and who have, despite their generally benign qualities, certain uncanny characteristics” (Kinsley 25). The Yakshi’s link with Aranyani has not been explored in detail by other scholars.

Thus, in the absence of studies with a primary focus on the Yakshi in Hinduism, one has to look at the parallel history of the Yaksha to understand probable transformations in the figure of the Yakshi since she was considered to be his female counterpart. Caution needs to be exercised here as well since all that applies to the figure of the Yaksha need not apply in the case of the Yakshi. Conversely, the Yakshi’s femininity may have had significant bearings on the transformations in her representation that may not be applicable in the case of her male counterpart. All the same, I will attempt to delineate the major transformations the figure of the Yaksha undergoes within Hinduism, especially in the Vedic religion, which I believe have a bearing on the figure of the Yakshi. I follow the example of a historian like Raghava

Varier who looks at the figure of the Yaksha in the Vedas as part of his attempt to trace the history of the Yakshi in Kerala's folklore.

Coomarswamy in the *Addenda* to his first part on Yaksas discusses the different meanings the term Yaksha takes on in the different Vedas. It is a term which occurs several times in the *Rg Veda*, *Atharva Veda*, *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads* (Coomarswamy II: 1). He quotes Hillebrandt who argues that in its earliest reference, the term is supposed to mean “magician, uncouth being, unseen spiritual enemy, etc.,” (Coomarswamy II: 1). Later, it comes to simply mean “a supernatural being of exalted character” (Coomarswamy II: 1). Coomarswamy detects a dual attitude towards the term “Yaksha” in the earliest texts, “one of fear and dislike, the other of respect”, the first of which he links to “merely an Aryan dislike and distrust of aboriginal deities” (Coomarswamy II: 1). Thus, there are stanzas in the *Rg Veda* which beseech the gods asking them not to let their people encounter a Yaksha (Coomarswamy II: 2). Varier, like Coomarswamy, is of the opinion that this could be traced to the dislike of the Vedic society for a non-Vedic society and its gods.

However, this slowly changes and when we come to the *Atharva Veda*, the term assumes extremely positive connotations. Thus, the Absolute/the life force, which later gets the permanent name of the “Brahman” by the time of the *Upanishads* gets described in this text as “the Great Yaksha, steeped in concentration on the surface of the water in the middle of the world, on him the various gods are fixed like branches around the trunk of a tree” (Sutherland 21). According to Sutherland, “the use of the term ‘yaksha’ implied an intermediate stage in the process of metaphysical inquiry into the nature of absolute reality, a line of thinking that emerged in the *Rg Veda* but came into its own in the *Upanishadic* literature (700 B.C)” where “the

absolute came to be given the name that once and for all adhered brahman” (Sutherland 72). Thus the usage of the term “Yaksha” in the intermediate stage to refer to the Absolute ceases once the term “brahman” comes to replace it once and for all by the time of the Upanishads.

Varier argues that the transformation in the attitude towards the term Yaksha in the *Atharva Veda* is due to the assimilation of the non-Vedic deities such as the Yaksha into the Vedic religion^{xvi} by that period (Varier 103). According to him, this was necessitated by the advent of agriculture with the beginning of the iron age which coincided with the period of the composition of the *Yajur Veda* (Varier 103). According to Varier, farming, an activity that required large-scale human effort must have meant that non-Aryan sections of the society were also utilized as labour by the Aryans (Varier 103). He argues that the intrusion of various non-Vedic concepts into the Vedic culture needs to be traced to the subsequent hybridization and assimilation tactics of the Vedic culture (Varier 103).

While there is no reference to the figure of the Yakshi here, some speculations can be made. As mentioned earlier, the initial reference in the *Rg Veda* to the Yaksha is one that reflects an attitude of fear and dislike. Historians point out that this could be because the Yaksha was a non-Aryan deity and that this was reflective of the fear the Vedic society had towards aboriginal groups and their gods. One may speculate that the Vedic attitude towards female fertility deities of non-Vedic societies like the Yakshi could have been similar. Could the figure of the Yakshi have also risen in prominence by the time of *Atharva Veda* like it happened in the case of the Yaksha? In a cosmology that saw the Absolute in gendered terms (the Great Yaksha, considered as the prototype of the later *brahman*, though numinous, is still a ‘he’),

one wonders if the term Yakshi could have assumed the signification that the term Yaksha acquired. It seems quite unlikely. However, it can be postulated that with the assimilation of non-Vedic elements into the Vedic culture, especially their systems of worship, the Yakshis could also have transformed into sub-deities at this point.

The usage of the term “Yaksha” as a metaphor for the mystery of the universe/ as an “appositional concept describing (in its amorphousness) the ultimacy, pervasiveness, and hiddenness” of the absolute ceases when the absolute comes to be called once and for all as *brahman*^{xvii} in the Upanishads (Sutherland 72). The term Yaksha now takes on other significations. Thus, in the *Maitri Upanishad*, the Yaksha comes to be mentioned among the lower ranks of demonic creatures and “by implication, is grouped with all sorts of popular, cultic, and therefore antignostic religious proponents and practitioners” (Sutherland 75). In the *Grhya Sutras*, he is fully transformed into a demigod and clubbed and often equated with *asuras*, *gandharvas*, *pitrs* and *rakshasas* (Sutherland 75).

To Sutherland, it is the Yakshas’s “association with such elements as *maya* and the dark and creative primal cosmos of water” that leads to his “later evolution as a demon” (Sutherland 49). One wonders whether the Yakshi also underwent a similar demotion in status by the time of the *Grhya Sutras*. However, it seems more likely that it was the other way round where the Yaksha got demoted to the status of its female counterpart and reconfigured as a deity of a lower order with an ambiguous moral code.

Sutherland’s association of the Yaksha and the Yakshi with water are insightful since both of them share characteristics of this element. What she says about water as a medium is worth noting, “Water is a metamorphic medium that

quickens life into being from latency, or compels living beings towards their demise” (Sutherland 22). The Yakshi’s link with water is befitting since she also has the duality associated with water (what Sutherland calls its “fundamental ambiguity”) where in Kerala, on the one hand, she is worshipped as a fertility deity and on the other, seen as a blood-sucking ogress (Sutherland 49). Similarly, the Yakshi’s shape-shifting prowess can be traced to her being a spirit of the waters imbibing the quality of this element to change shape. The concept of *maya* or “shroudedness of form and personality”, which is linked with water, also survives in the figure of the Yakshi in the means of illusion she employs to transform herself and her palm tree into a beautiful woman and a mansion respectively (Sutherland 74).

As mentioned earlier, by the time of the *Grhya Sutras*, the Yaksha starts getting clubbed with *gandharvas*, *rakshasas* etc, beings of a lower order, some of them considered as demonic. Kubera gets described as the chief of the Yakshas by this period. In fact, in popular mythology, the Yakshas are known more as the followers of Kubera, the god of wealth and productivity and the half-brother of the chief of *rakshasas*, Ravana (Coomarswamy I: 6). Kubera’s followers, the Yakshas and Yakshinis were thought to have the power to assume any shape (Coomarswamy I: 7). The power of the Yakshini to assume the shape of a beautiful woman was known right from the time of the *Mahabharata* (Coomarswamy I: 7). Coomarswamy refers to a passage on the *Mahabharata* where “an unknown beauty is asked if she be the goddess of the district, or a Yaksi” (Coomarswamy I: 7).

In the *Mahabharata*, the Yakshas come to occupy a middle rung between the devatas and the goblins and ghosts: “Men of the Sāttvik (‘pure’) class worship the gods (Devas), those of the Rājasik (‘passionate’) class, Yaksas and Rāksasas, those of the Tāmasik (‘dark’) class, Pretas and Bhutas” (Coomaraswamy I: 6-7). I will come to

the similarities and differences between the Yakshas/Yakshsis and other beings like the Gandharvas and the Rakshasas later since some of these demonic beings are part of other religions too.

The “Yaksa Prasna” is another interesting episode in the *Mahabharata* where Yudhisthira, the eldest of the Pandavas, has to confront a Yaksha (who is later revealed to be Lord Yama), the guardian of a lake, and win back the lives of his brothers. Sutherland argues that the “encounter with and ultimate homage” to the Yaksha/Yakshi was often a metaphorical depiction of the Kshatriya hero’s encounter with wilderness and guardians of ancient grounds (Sutherland 121). This was an element of the heroic narrative in Hindu epics as well as the Buddhist Vijaya legends (Sutherland 121). Sutherland writes,

In these latter territorial myths, and in the Epic legends of the peripatetic heroes as well, yaksas are part of a forest sojourn that establishes and re-establishes the sovereignty of the *ksatriya* heroes and religious champions. They are, in fact, a vital element in the *bhakti* world that is portrayed in the Epics and Puranas. Yaksas, as *ksetrapalas* (“protectors of the field”) or *dvarapalas* (“door guardians” or “keepers of the way”), are signposts on the pilgrimage trail and guardians of ancient, sanctified pools”. (Sutherland 121)

The Yakshi is also part of this pilgrimage trail and seems to be worshipped mainly as a fertility goddess. The Pandavas, for instance, are “enjoined by the sage Pulastya to honor these *devatas* on their tour of the holy *tirthas* of northern India” (Sutherland 121). In the *Mahabharata*, the Yakshis at Munjavata and Rajagriha are mentioned (Debroy 40-41). In the *Mahabharata*, it is stated that the worship of the Yakshini at Rajagriha is supposed to free one from the sin of killing an embryo

(Debroy 40-41). This Yakshini at Rajagriha, in later tales, gets linked to the Yakshini Hariti of the *Jataka Tales*, where she is described in detail. Though the worship of Yakshis is mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, they get fewer mentions compared to the Yakshas. Compared to Hindu mythology, it is in Buddhist mythology that Yakshis get to play a more important role.

To conclude, in the absence of exclusive studies on the Yakshi in Vedic Hinduisim, it is hard to get a full picture of her avatars within it. However, based on the existing studies, what we get to see are specific vignettes – for instance, there are studies which postulate that *Aranyani* in *Rg Veda* could be a prototype of the Yakshi and other studies which see the Yakshi as having been a non-Aryan deity assimilated into the Vedic religion, described as demi-god by the time of the composition of the *Grhya Sutras*. In popular Hindu mythology, Yakshas and Yakshis are the attendants of Kubera, the God of Wealth and have the ability to shapeshift. In the *Mahabharata*, they come to occupy the middle rung between the *devas* (gods) and the *pretas* and *bhutas* (ghosts/goblins). The *Mahabharata* also has mentions of Yakshis as fertility deities worshipped for begetting progeny or for absolving one of the crime of killing an embryo.

The features of the Yakshi's differing avatars in Vedic Hinduism that need to be noted are – her presence in the night and association with the wilderness (as *Aranyani*), her demi-goddess avatar where she stands in between two categories, that of the goddess as well as the goblin which reminds one of DeCaroli's appellation for her, i.e 'spirit-deity' and her worship as a fertility deity.

I will now move on to her representation in Buddhism which is held to have had a significant influence on that of its variant in Kerala. As mentioned earlier, one

can locate the prototype of the typical folktale in Kerala concerning the Yakshi in the Jataka tales, popular Buddhist tales about the *Bodhisatta*. The sculptural representation of the Yakshi in reliefs on pillars of Buddhist gateways and railings has again influenced similar representation of the Yakshi on Kerala's temple walls. For instance, Coomarswamy describes how in early Buddhist sculptures, the Yakshi-dryad (aquatic nymph) is represented as adorning herself with jewels or using a mirror, something we can see in the mural paintings and pillar reliefs adorning Kerala's temples (Coomarswamy I: 32; Shashibhooshan "Yakshi" 122).

In fact, Sutherland argues that the use of nature deities such as Yakshas and Yakshis in Buddhist art needs to be seen in the context of the spread of the religion where it passes beyond the "circle of monasticism" and imbibes elements of pre-Buddhist religions and reconfigures them^{xviii} in the "re-drawn map of Buddhist mythology and narrative" (Sutherland 14). She writes, "These figures of fertility spirits are present here because the people are here. Women, accustomed to invoke the blessings of a tree spirit, would approach the railing pillar images with similar expectations" (Coomarswamy I: 33).

Raghava Varier links the worship of Yakshas and Yakshis as sub-deities in Buddhism to the close contact the Buddhist monasteries had with the merchant class (Varier 108). He points out that in the Mahabharata, the *Satavahanas*, caravan traders, are described as worshipping Yakshas as guardian deities to protect their trade. The Yakshas are also linked with wealth^{xix} (Sutherland 64). Buddhist monasteries used to lend money to the traders to use as capital for their endeavours and hence were in close contact with these groups (Varier 108). Hence, to Varier, it is no accident that the popular deities of the merchant class were absorbed into Buddhism.

Another thing to be noted about the representation of the Yakshas and Yakshis in Buddhism is that in contrast to their sculptural representation where they “display images of benign female sexuality and rampant fertility”, their literary representations are largely negative (Sutherland 137). One reason for this contrast could be that the *Jataka Tales* made up of “frightening demon stories and animal stories” partake of “the genre of ancient, mostly pre-Buddhist folk tales” (Sutherland 107). Therefore, “the demonic potential of these morally ambiguous deities is stressed in order to satisfy the constraints of the folk genre” (Sutherland 107).

Sutherland argues that the demonic representation of the Yakshas and Yakshis is also in line with the Buddhist cosmogonic myth which she terms as “fundamentally dualistic and antievolutionary” (Sutherland 107). The Buddhist cosmogonic myth^{xx} describes “a fall” from a state of luminosity “into embodiment” where original beings of pure radiance and consciousness become coarse and dark which then give rise to different kinds of inequalities and negative qualities (Sutherland 107-108). In the Buddhist mythology, the Yakshas and Yakshis come to stand as representatives of the beings after “the fall” in opposition to the *Bodhisatta* who stands for the once beings of pure consciousness. Sutherland states, “the precisely complementary images of light (in the form of beings of pure consciousness) and dark (in the form of the obscuring and heavy waters) seem to serve as loose metaphors for the classic encounter of *bodhisatta* and *yakkha* in the *Jataka* tales” (Sutherland 108). In this encounter, while the *bodhisatta* “embodies the principle of light, illuminated by the superiority of his enlightened consciousness and purified by the excellence of his moral conduct”, the *yakkha* “embodies the coarseness and impurity to which that watery fundament gave rise” (Sutherland 108). She throws further light on the “quality of cannibalism that is often attributed to the *yakkha* (as well as the *naga* and

rakkhasa)” seeing it “as a metaphor expressing the understanding that the inherent nature of the impermanent material world (*samsara*) is based on a process of consumption” (Sutherland 108).

Thus, cannibalism of the Yakshas and Yakshis takes on an additional meaning in the Buddhist cosmology where it stands as a metaphor for what happened during the origin of the impermanent material world where the thirst for consuming the earth led to “the fall”. The conversion of the Yakshas and Yakshis into the Buddhist dhamma is in fact integral to its world-view. Sutherland points out,

In Buddhist cosmology, creation is a negative phenomenon that is offset only by a second creation, that is, by a withdrawal of that basically pure and unfettered consciousness from the filth and bondage of material and social existence. In Buddhist mythological texts, the second creation or reversal of the *samsaric* trajectory is symbolized by the conversion of the demonic being to *Buddhism*. By implication, the self of the *yakkha* or demon is literally cast aside through his commitment to the moral ideology of Buddhism. (Sutherland 109)

Conversion of the “demonic” into the Buddhist ideology is effected by means of argumentation (what Sutherland calls “weapons of sophistry and righteousness”) than the use of any tools of physical destruction^{xxi}.

An enquiry into what the Yaksha/Yakshi could have initially been leads Sutherland to conclude that “the *yakkha* may be seen to represent a people who lie outside the Buddhist doctrinal system, as unbelievers of various kinds” (Sutherland 119). The word could stand for forest ascetics of other philosophical schools or simply brahmans whose practice of sacrifice is metaphorically rendered as

cannibalism or aboriginal opponents of the political invasion of Buddhism (Sutherland 119, 110). Sutherland gives the example of the *Mahavamsa* and *Dipavamsa* which has the Buddha “routing and converting entire troops of *nagas* and *yakkhas* who have overrun the island of Lanka, making it unfit for human habitation (i.e., for Buddhist practitioners)” (Sutherland 115-116). Throwing light on the power dynamics involved in these narratives built around conversion of hostile demons, Sutherland writes, “The narratives that pit the Buddha or the *bodhisatta* against hostile demons in his diverse births clearly afford him the opportunity to absorb and assimilate their powers and territories over which they rule” (Sutherland 116). What happens in the process is the “subordination of the lesser demons and deities of local cult to the dominating ideology and image of Buddhism” (Sutherland 115).

Thus, the Yakshas and Yakshis could stand for the deities of a local cult who were absorbed into Buddhism in the phase of its territorial expansion. This comes out especially in the *Devadhamma Jataka* where the *Bodhisatta* has to confront a Yaksha, the guardian of a pond and win back the lives of his brothers. The Yaksha (Yakkha in Pali) is converted to Buddhism on the spot. The Yaksha, originally an overlord of local vegetation, is tamed and brought back to civilization where he is then “installed in a symbolic wilderness of his own”, and offered flowers, garlands and food (Sutherland 102, 95).

The common ending of many of the Yakshi tales in Kerala where the Yakshi is tamed by the sorcerer and then installed in a nearby temple thus seems to hark back to such *Jataka Tales*. The installation of the Yakkha had a specific signification in Buddhism where it stood for “an active assimilation on the part of the figure of the Buddha (and the institution of Buddhism) of the indispensable dimension of the wilderness, the unexplored, the profusion of nature, and particularly, the bounty

associated with the waters in the form of plentiful rainfall” (Sutherland 95). The *caitya* or the throne that the king erected in these tales was a symbolic depiction of this process: “All of these factors and the powers that they confer upon the patron of the converted or tamed yakkha are symbolized by the *caitya* ...” (Sutherland 95).

The Yakshi in Buddhism (Yakkhi/Yakkhini in Pali) also has jurisdiction over the wild places and in the *Jataka Tales*, the encounter with the Yakshi usually occurs in the forest or at sea. However, unlike the Yaksha’s (Yakkha in Pali), the devouring tendencies of the Yakkhi are “strongly sexual as well as alimentary” (Sutherland 138). Thus, even when the Yaksha/Yakkha and the Yakshi/Yakkhi are treated as metaphors of the “savage/the uncultivated” in the *Jatakas*, the femaleness of the Yakshi plays a huge part in how she is viewed. Sutherland argues that the Yakshi and other such female figures serve “in many contexts as projections of violent, paranoiac fears of menace by the Indian male upon the Indian female” (Sutherland 137). She also points to how their shape-shifting capability (which is shared by their male counterparts) is often traced to be the root of their “evil” (Sutherland 137). Sutherland elaborates this further,

The yaksi (or yaksini) and the other female demigoddesses, such as *naginis*, *raksasis*, and *apsarases*, share with their male counterparts the quality of changing physical form and employment of illusion to effect their desires upon hapless humans. This characteristic of shifting, indefinite form cooperates well with the need or desire to project evil upon an amorphous female presence”. (Sutherland 137)

Sutherland locates these male fears in the Yakshi’s solitary wanderings, unattended by any man.

Especially in her wanderings in the forest, a human female may be compared to any one of a number of forest-dwelling females. The confusion about her identity stems in part from the strangeness of seeing an “undomesticated” woman, that is, as a woman apparently detached from a man. For it is the formal attendance upon husband and family that is the unmistakable sign of the “good” woman. Her solitary wanderings divorce her from a safe image of the bound and the maternal and immediately evoke for a chance male beholder the embodiment of sexual license. (Sutherland 138)

Sutherland’s observations are regarding the representation of the Yakshi in both religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. However, this holds special significance in Buddhism, where the “frequent use of this demonic feminine imagery” is in line with “the metaphoric structure that governs imaginative expressions of Buddhist ideals and thought” where asceticism is “male and must defend itself rigorously against the seductive demands of, and attachment to, the world of the senses, which is conceived of as female^{xxii}” (Sutherland 139).

The prototype of the Yakshi tale in Kerala’s folklore may be found in this passage from the *Talapatta Jataka* (no.96) which records the story of the *bodhisatta*’s journey from Benares to Takkasila that is through a forest of yakkhas and yakkhinis. I would like to quote the passage in detail since this can be considered as one of the earliest literary references to the Yakshi’s encounter with the traveller that becomes the stock feature of the Yakshi tale in Kerala’s folklore.

There in the precinct of the demons, yakkhinis make houses appear in the middle of the road and, having prepared a costly bed with canopy painted overhead with golden stars and enclosed with silk curtains in many colors,

they decorate themselves with celestial ornaments and go to sit down in the houses from which they ply men with sweet words, saying: “You seem tired; come here, sit down, and have a drink of water before going.” When they have summoned them they give those who come seats and seduce them with the charm of their wanton beauty. But having excited their lust, they have intercourse with them and then they kill them and eat them while the blood flows. They take hold of the men’s aesthetic sense with their beauty, the sense of sound with sweet words and songs, their sense of smell with divine odors, their taste with all kinds of delicious food, their sense of touch with red cushions of supernal softness. (Sutherland 138)

In the typical tale in Kerala’s folklore, unlike in this tale, the Yakshi does not sit in her home and call out to the visitor. The Yakshi waits on the wayside taking on the appearance of a beautiful young girl/woman. However, like in the Jataka tale, she also invites the man to her home which she says is nearby and which looks like a mansion to the traveller. The Yakshi’s origin as a deity of vegetation is more apparent in the case of the folktale in Kerala since she resides in a palm tree that appears as a mansion to the traveller because of her *maya* or powers of illusion. However, the ending of both the tales is the same. The folktale does not focus much on whether the Yakshi has intercourse with the man or not. It proceeds straight to the devouring of the victim by the Yakshi. Yet, the similarities between the folktale and the Jataka tale are apparent. The Yakshi is the ogress who uses her beauty to trap her victim and a traveller needs to take precautions against her.

What is striking in both the Jataka tales and the folktales featuring the Yakshi in Kerala is the association of travel with the encounter of dangerous beings like the Yakshis/Yakshas. To understand this aspect, one needs to go to D.D. Kosambi and

Donna Jordan who both have studied mother-goddess cults associated with the crossroads. Donna Jordan quotes Kosambi's study which argues that the crossroads were "the original Stone Age sites of the Mother-goddess cults of India, junctions of primitive nomad tracts where the Mothers were normally worshipped" (Jordan 202). In course of time, some of these tracts developed into trade routes, and traders, before starting a journey, made animal sacrifices to the deities at the crossroads promising more if their journey helped them in reaping profit (Jordan 202). It was the "travelling merchant's custom to salute, and if possible, sacrifice, to the Mother-goddess encountered during a voyage" (Jordan 202).

Kosambi argues that in order to preach their religion that insisted upon the cessation of blood-sacrifices, Buddhist monks must have frequented these mother goddess cult-spots where sacrifices were most made (Kosambi 95-96). These cult spots often used to be at the junctions of great trade routes (Kosambi 95-96). Hence, the Yakshas and Yakshis encountered on the crossways in the Jataka tales may be the deities of local cults, especially mother goddess cults, whose use of animal sacrifice (which was anathema to the Buddhist monks), must have resulted in their being cast as cannibalistic/demonic beings.

While in this Jataka tale, the man is safe as long as he does not pay attention to the Yakshi, in other tales, palmyra leaves and iron objects are described as feared by the Yakshas (Dempsey 116, note 5). This is common to Kerala's folktales featuring the Yakshi as well where iron objects and some religious text, usually made of Palmyra leaves, are feared by the Yakshis.

There are different types of tales in Buddhism featuring the Yakshi. One group of tales featuring the Yakshis use the motif of "the island of sirens" (Sutherland 139).

In these stories, Yakshis lure to their death merchants who end up on the shores inhabited by them (Sutherland 139). They bind these men with magic chain and force them to marry them before eating them (Sutherland 139). Sutherland opines that these stories have much in common with the Circe episode of *Odysseus* and argues that here as well, “sexuality is linked with alimentary consumption, and artifice and illusion are central to the female’s mesmerizing hold over the male” (Sutherland 139).

In other tales, through the figure of the Yakshi, we get to see the “thwarted effort of the nonhuman female to penetrate the human world and live with her beloved” where despite her best efforts to pass off as a human being, she is destined to be rejected (Sutherland 140). The tale in the *Mahavamsa* of the Yakkhini Kuvanna is a case in point. In this tale, Kuvanna, the Yakkhini, takes the form of a bitch and tries to devour the hero Vijaya and his followers (Sutherland 140). Kuvanna falls in love with Vijaya, takes the form of a beautiful girl, marries him and betrays her people, the Yakshas, for him (Sutherland 140). Once he becomes the king, he renounces her and marries a human and she is killed as a traitress once she goes back to her people (Sutherland 140). It can be compared with one of my primary texts, the tale of Venmoni and the Yakshi which deals with a similar theme. In both these texts, the Yakshi falls in love with a human which takes her far away from her own kin and ultimately leads to her death. The Buddhist tale though is much more tragic and to Sutherland, is an exposition of how the Yakshis/Yakkhins’ femaleness is “the source not only of their power but also of their undoing” since it is their sexual appetite that leads them to fall in love with their human captives (Sutherland 140).

The case of the Yakkhini Hariti can be taken as an interesting example of the make-overs that the figure of the Yakshi underwent as different religions took her into their fold. According to Coomarswamy, Hariti was originally a Magadhan tutelary

goddess and resided at Rajagriha (Coomarswamy I: 9). In *Mahabharata*, as mentioned earlier, we have a reference to the Yakshi at Rajagriha who is supposed to absolve her devotee of the crime of killing an embryo. Thus, one can speculate that she ought to have been an ancient mother goddess. Coomarswamy points out that originally, “she was not ill-disposed, for her name Nānda means Joy” and was worshipped as the Mother of Yakshas and prayed to for getting offspring (Coomarswamy I: 9). However, in Buddhist legends, she undergoes a transformation where from a protectress of the people, she transforms into a malevolent figure who starts “stealing and killing the children of the city for herself and for her five hundred children” as a result of a spiteful wish in her previous life (Sutherland 143). From “Nanda”, she becomes “Hariti” “the thief” (Sutherland 143). In Buddhist legends, the Buddha is supposed to have “brought her under control by hiding her youngest child, Pingala, in his alms-bowl” (Sutherland 143). Hariti is also placated in a similar fashion to that of the Yakkha mentioned earlier when the Buddha ordains that a share of food in every monastery be reserved for her and her children (Sutherland 143).

At the end of the tale, Hariti is restored to her earlier status and worshipped as a patroness of children and fertility. However, for Coomarswamy, “this reads more like an explanation or justification of a cult than a true account of its origin; probably this was the best way to provide an edifying sanction for an ancient animistic cult too strong to be subverted” (Coomarswamy I: 9-10). Thus in the Buddhist tale, while Hariti’s earlier divinity is alluded to, she is demonised and can remain divine only with the sanction of the Buddhist order. However, in the new order, though she is divine, there has been a demotion in her status.

In Kerala’s folktales concerning the Yakshi as well, the Yakshi ends up as a sub-deity after her domestication at the hands of the sorcerer/goddess. However,

unlike Hariti's tale, the folktale in Kerala does not generally explicitly note the Yakshi's earlier divine status.

Hariti, according to the Chinese *Tripitaka*, had been Abhirati, a herdsman's wife in her previous birth who had been forced to dance when she was pregnant (Sutherland 144). In this tale, her birth as a Yakshi who is a devourer of children is to avenge herself (Sutherland 144). Sutherland states,

The devouring of children seems to constitute a special, drastic punishment of women who through curses, misconduct of jealous resentment, may be reborn as, or take the form of, these grotesque harpies. The devouring of offspring is the formal and ethical opposite of the usual maternal function of discharging rather than physically withholding infants. (Sutherland 144)

Unlike some of the Buddhist yakkhis, who are mothers and often devouring mothers, the Yakshi in Kerala's folktales is generally unmarried (though when she is worshipped, she is worshipped as a mother goddess). However, sometimes, in popular lore, Yakshis are accused of eating human embryos. This could be an influence of the Buddhist tales or her devouring of human embryos, like Sutherland points out, could be there to present the Yakshi as the ethical opposite of the benevolent mother.

Once converted, the Yakshas and Yakshis, like in the case of Hariti, became part of the Buddhist monastery. They usually then performed the role of guardian deities of these monasteries, sometimes even protecting the monks and the nuns from the attack of malevolent Yakshas and Yakshis (DeCaroli 81, 124-25).

Regarding the general influence of the Yakshi cult in Buddhism, it is believed that the absorption of the Yakshi cult into Buddhism gave an impetus to goddess

worship within the religion (Subramanian, “Icons of Grace”). Vedachalam, a scholar who has worked on the Yakshi cult, especially within Tamil Nadu, opines that the widespread influence of Yakshis in Buddhism in Tamil Nadu can be gauged from “the mention of female deities such as Sambapathy, Manimekalai, Deevathilakai, Chintadevi, Chitradeivam and Kandirpavai in the Tamil Buddhist work *Manimekalai* composed by Sathanar” (Subramanian, “Icons of Grace”). Hence, in Buddhism, goddess worship, and the Yakshi cult often go together.

To summarize, unlike in Hinduism, in Buddhism, we see the Yakshis along with the Yakshas playing a much more central role. In Buddhist sculptures, the Yakshis were often depicted as fertility deities. They were also integral to the Buddhist world view expressed in its cosmogonic myth where the Yakshas and the Yakshis represented beings after the “fall” whose conversion to Buddhism was held as restoring them to their former status - as “beings” of pure consciousness. However, for all practical purposes, they played second fiddle to the bodhisatta in the popular Jataka tales where they were often cast as his antagonists. Historians opine that the Yakshas/Yakshis might have been originally deities of local cults which Buddhism encountered in its territorial expansion and sees in tales of their conversion and absorption, strategies of containment. In these tales, while the Yakshas and the Yakshis both stand as representatives of “the savage/uncultivated”, the Yakshi is considered as much more of a threat. This is because asceticism in Buddhism was generally conceived of as male and the world of the senses as female.

One can see the huge influence of these tales on the Yakshi tales in Kerala – not only in the structure of the prototypical Yakshi tale with the traveller, but also in motifs shared as in the story of the Yakshi trying to penetrate the human world. The ending of these tales where the Yaksha/Yakshi is installed in a symbolic wilderness

after his/her domestication at the hands of the bodhisatta also pre-empts the Yakshi tale in Kerala where the Yakshi gets installed in a temple after going through a similar process at the hands of the sorcerer/the goddess.

When we come to the Yaksha/Yakshi in Jainism, we find them mentioned in Jain texts in two ways: “as narrative devices and minor characters in the Jain legends about the development of the religion and the hagiography of the *sthaviras* (elders of the early Jain church)” as well as “in iconographical texts that discuss in detail the whole pantheon of yaksas who are attendants of the twenty-four Tirthankaras or saints of the Jain tradition” (Sutherland 128). What is striking though is that compared to the Buddhist or Hindu myths, the Jain tales seem to depict the Yakshas more positively (Sutherland 130). To Sutherland, this is partly because of the “Jain cosmological system^{xxiii} that subsumes the yaksa under the category of *Vyantara*, a kind of *deva*”, which also includes pisachas, bhutas, rakshasas, kinnaras and gandharvas (Sutherland 130). Another thing to note about the place of the Yakshas within the Jain cosmological system is that they occupy a precarious position even as gods, a status they share with others of their class, due to the comfortableness of their life style (Sutherland 131). This is because their lives are so pleasant that “they are in constant danger of moral and spiritual blindness, which may cause them to ‘fall’ from their high estate and be reborn as humans or something lower” (Sutherland 131).

Like Buddhism, in Jainism as well, the Yakshis/Yakshas perform the function of guardian deities. According to Vedachalam, the introduction of idol worship in Jainism led to the evolution of the concept of having attendant deities for the Tirthankaras or the Jain saints (“Icons of Grace” 8-9). In the myths, Indra was supposed to have appointed Yakshas and Yakshis as guardians of the Tirthankaras

(“Icons of Grace” 9). The concept of 24 Yakshis guarding the 24 Tirthankaras then got standardised between the 6th and the 10th centuries A.D (Subramanian, “Icons of Grace”).

The importance given to Yakshis in Jainism can be seen from the fact that there is a Yakshi for each of the 24 tirthankaras. They are the tirthankaras' guardian deities. Of these 24 Yakshis, only five are celebrated in sculptures, terracotta figurines and bronzes, the most popular of them being Ambika, the Yakshi of Neminatha, the 22nd tirthankara. The others are Padmavathy, Siddhakkiya, Jwalamalini and Chakreswari, the protecting goddesses respectively of Parsvanatha, Mahaveera, Chandraprabha and Adinatha, the 23rd, the 24th (and the last), the eighth and the first tirthankaras. (Subramanian, “Icons of Grace”)

What is striking in the case of the Yaksha/Yakshi cult in Jainism compared to that in both Hinduism and Buddhism is that the yakshas and yakshis initially introduced as attendants of the Jain saints, after a point, assume an independent status of their own (Varier 109). Thus, the Yakshis and the Yakshas who enter into Jainism during the early decades of the Christian era as the *Shasana devatas* (attendants) of the Tirthankaras lose their attendant character by the medieval period (Varier 109). Varier argues that this promotion in status is evident from their representation in the medieval Jain iconography (Varier 94). Instead of flanking the Tirthankara as in earlier iconography, in the medieval period, Yakshis like Ambika get depicted independently (Varier 95). The Tantric texts which deal with the worship of Yakshis that were written during this period also point to the elevation in their status (Varier 95). In these texts, Yakshis are said to bestow miraculous powers upon their devotees

which help them to “bring a person under control, win over the enemies on the battlefield and cause hostility between two persons” (Singh 56, Varier 95). Thus, in a tale about the battle between Jain and Buddhist monks, it is the benediction of the Jain Yakshi Ambika (Kushmandini) which is held as responsible for the latter’s defeat (Varier 95).

Varier argues that it was the Yaksha cult that gained prominence in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu during the medieval period that spread to Kerala (Varier 93). He points to a number of medieval Jain texts in Sanskrit and Kannada that describe rites and rituals connected with the worship of Yakshas and Yakshis (Varier 93). The Jain Tantric texts depicted Yakshis as benevolent goddesses of abundance and prosperity as well as destroyers of enemies (Varier 93-94). According to Varier, another significant feature of medieval Jain worship was that the Yakshis, at times, came to occupy a status higher than that of the Tirthankaras as well as the Yakshas (Varier 94).

Varier traces the emergence of the Yakshi/Yaksha cult in Jainism to the influence of the lower classes on the Jain sects (Varier 109). He especially focuses on the South Indian Jains and among them the particular groups who lived in what we call Karnataka today (Varier 109). Varier focuses on a specific stage in Jain religious history from the 5th century onwards when the wandering Jain monks started settling down in various parts of the country after receiving land grants from various royal patrons (Varier 110). The Jain monasteries then started giving their land on lease to the lower classes who acted as the agricultural labour (Varier 110). This led to the influx of the lower classes with their indigenous belief systems into the Jain monasteries (Varier 110). It was this influx which gave rise to the birth of a new order

within Janisim – that of the Yapaniyas, held by scholars like P.B. Desai as having introduced the Yakshi cult into Jainism (Varier 110-111). This order held beliefs and observed rituals contradictory to those of the orthodox Jains (Varier 110). They held notions that were radical and inconceivable for the orthodox Jains like the belief that women need not be born as men to get moksha and could get it in their current birth itself (Varier 110). They were the first Jain order to believe in the equality of the sexes and Varier posits that women got admission into the Jain sect with the entry of the Yapaniyas (Varier 110). Varier also wonders whether it was the entry of women into the sect that led to the subsequent popularity of mother goddesses in Jainism (Varier 110).

The incorporation of the Yakshi cult into Jainism, till then centred around meditative practices and philosophy, helped Jainism spread its roots among the populace (Varier 111). Varier feels that this was also one way for Jainism to combat the spread of the popular Bhakti movement during this period in South India among the Shaivites and the Vaishnavites (Varier 111). Rites centred around black magic and sorcery also became part of the Yakshi cult during this period and many Jain Tantric texts were written accordingly (Varier 111).

As mentioned earlier, the Yakshis entered into Jainism from the lower class labourers who worked on the lands of the Jain monasteries. They later became extremely popular as the guardian deities of the Jain Tirthankaras. However, according to Varier, even among the different Yakshis of the Tirthankaras, those Yakshis became popular who resembled the early mother goddesses and fertility goddesses (Varier 111). He mentions the case of the Yakshi Ambika/Kushmandini, a Yakshi whose name itself signified her mother goddess status (Varier 111). Her

sculptural depiction is a reflection of her being a mother goddess since she is depicted with her children in tow. It is no wonder then that she was worshipped to beget progeny (Varier 111). Ambika, as per the popular legend explaining her transformation into a goddess, was a housewife thrown out of the house for offering the food meant to be offered to the Brahmins attending her husband's ancestors' memorial services to a Jain mendicant (Orr 13-14). She, with her children and a female attendant, took refuge on a hill where her repentant husband who recognized her virtue came seeking her (Orr 13-14). Fearing that her husband had come to punish her, she leapt from the hill and killed herself and was transformed the next instant into the Yakshi Ambika (Orr 13-14). Her husband was at first scared seeing her Yakshi form, but once he realised that his wife was no more, he also killed himself by jumping off the cliff (Orr 13-14). He was then reborn as a lion which lay at the feet of the goddess Ambika (Orr 13-14).

In this story, the Yakshi is treated as a goddess which is in line with the general representation of Yakshis in Jainism. Ambika may have been an independent mother goddess or someone who resembled other mother goddesses who was incorporated into Jainism with the entry of mother-goddess worshipping groups into its fold.

Thus, compared to Buddhism and Hinduism, what we see in Jainism is worship of Yakshis as independent deities. Introduced into the religion as attendant deities of the Jain saints, they soon started gaining followers on their own and become powerful mother-goddesses in their own right. This was partly due to the entry into the Jain fold of groups from the lower classes with more egalitarian systems.

The Yakshi mainly has been a part of the mythologies of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism^{xxiv}. However, there has been an exception – the Yakshi does figure in the legends of some Christian Priests in Kerala though the Yakshi's avatar there hasn't differed in any significant way from her representation in the local Hindu tales. I will deal with this exception in the second chapter where one of my primary texts is about the confrontation between a Yakshi and a Christian Priest.

While the three religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, have influenced the evolution of the particular variant of the Yakshi in Kerala's folktales, the role of village lore about female spirits has also been a major influence. In Kerala's folktales, the tradition of linking the Yakshi cult with the spirit cult is very much there. My primary texts, especially those in the fifth and sixth chapters, explore this aspect of the Yakshi. Sutherland, for instance, suggests that this is one area where the Yakshi dominates over her male counterpart for more than the Yaksha mythology, it is the Yakshi mythology which gets "interwoven with village lore about female ghosts and spirits" (Sutherland 145). She writes,

Women, it is believed, are defined and compelled by overwhelming reproductive needs that, when denied or truncated, result in their actual transformation into a demonic form. Or ... when they allow their passions and jealousies to override their fixed social duties, their failure is often depicted metaphorically as a descent into the demonic. The necessity of palliating their unquiet spirits bespeaks the power inherent in their rebellion against the norms of society. (Sutherland 145)

Through this, Sutherland links the Yakshi with other local ghosts/spirits like *churail*, *alivantin*, *jakhin* etc. (Sutherland 145).

One of the most famous stories in Kerala's folklore involving a Yakshi who is the ghost of a dead woman is that of the Yakshi Kalliankattu/Panchavankattu Neeli. This story seems to be a version of the folkstory of Palayanur Neeli, celebrated in ballads and the folk theatre in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka respectively (Ramaswamy 137-38). In fact, the Yakshi Neeli is a part of the legends and lore of not just one religion - she features in Jain tales, Buddhist tales as well as Shaivite tales in Tamil Nadu (Ramaswamy 137-38). Her presence in the tales of three religions can be said to point to the adoptability and adaptability of the Yakshi as a figure where she either gets employed by different religious groups to establish the superiority of their religions or by local communities to chart their sthalapuranas (Ramaswamy 137-38). There seem to be many versions to the story of the Yakshi Kalliakattu Neeli even within Kerala. However, in the most popular versions of the tale recorded in one of Kerala's earliest historical novels, *Marthandavarma*, Neeli is a poor Nair girl married to a Tamil Brahmin man, a *Pattar*, who murders her when she is pregnant (Pillai 49-52). He hits her head with a stone as she sleeps and the dying woman beseeches the cactus plant nearby to be a witness to the crime (Pillai 49-52). The woman then becomes a Yakshi known as Kalliankattu Neeli (the Neeli of the forest of cacti) and appears as a beautiful young woman holding a baby in her hands to her husband who visits the place after a year (Pillai 49-52). Her husband follows the beautiful woman unaware of her real identity, and the Yakshi avenges her death by killing him and drinking his blood (Pillai 49-52). In the Tamil tale, the Yakshi undergoes a further transformation and gets identified with Kali whose love for destruction is then brought under control by Shiva or gets deified in another form as Isakki Amman (Ramaswamy 141). What Ramaswamy says in the context of Neeli and other such

spirit-deities in Tamil Nadu offers an interesting counterpoint to Sutherland's theory about the demonisation of deviant women.

The deification of deviant or dangerous women (including murderous women) who can be said to constitute the socially marginalized/ostracized "subaltern" women, is not a phenomenon that is uncommon to South Indian culture. The jilted virgin (exemplified in the Kanyakumari Amman), the murdered woman, and the murderous woman have all been regarded with fear and awe leading to their worship as local deities, or Ellai Devata. ... "Ellai" in the Tamil language literally means "border line" but can be interpreted to mean either village "limits" or liminalities of social, moral behavior and the transformation potential of these deviant women. Valorizing and worshipping deviant women can be one way of freezing them at the borders of an established culture threatened by potential change (Ramaswamy 141).

As far as the figure of the Yakshi in Kerala's cultural imaginary is concerned, one gets to see both the processes at play in cases where she is treated as the spirit of a murdered woman - demonisation as well as deification. Many of the folktales linked with sthalapuranas in Kerala usually describe Yakshis as spirits of local murdered women who appear as ogresses and are appeased by the sorcerers by installing them in nearby temples. In the movies that treat the Yakshi as the spirit of a murdered woman, there is no deification in the end. The Yakshi is allowed to avenge herself to some extent, but her "demonic" character is generally portrayed as one that finally needs to be brought under the control of a powerful sorcerer. The Yakshi's revenge in these texts usually happens through her possessing people.

This aspect of the Yakshi in Kerala's folklore also seems to have quite an ancient history. Possession, according to Robert DeCaroli, has been an integral part of what he calls spirit religions. He argues that "many forms of spirit religion practiced throughout the world (including parts of modern India and Sri Lanka) involve such ecstatic practices..." (DeCaroli 26). He points to the Yaksha King Kubera's title as the "rider of men" and his association with a human as a Vahana (vehicle) as stemming from the practice of spirit possession (DeCaroli 26). Spirit possession was often called "Yaksha-graha" and it also had positive connotations (DeCaroli 26). I will be discussing this in detail while dealing with Yakshis and Gandharvas later.

In this section, the attempt has been to situate the Yakshi diachronically in a larger history where her different avatars in specific religions as well as village lore have been explored to understand the influences that have shaped the specific variant of the Yakshi that pops up in Kerala's folklore. However, such a study of the Yakshi, while it is helpful, will not be complete without placing the Yakshi within a larger universe of similar beings. This is also important since some of these beings do appear in Kerala's folktales often alongside the Yakshi.

I will be discussing the Tantric influence on the Yakshi cult in detail in the third chapter. However, I would like to briefly mention Coomarswamy's studies which link the Yakshis and the Tantric group of Yoginis together.

Coomarswamy has linked the worship of yaksinis with the medieval cult of the Sixty-four Yoginis, a Tantric sect that encompassed a spectrum of loosely related aspects, ranging from local village goddesses, to the witch-like Dakinis, to the seven (or eight) *matrkas*, who were *saktis* of the Goddess. Both *yoginis* and *yaksinis* have fierce and benevolent aspects; both are connected

with trees and occasionally inhabit them. In medieval and Tantric texts, a yaksa or yaksini *sadhana* is known, in which the deities are invoked and persuaded to render service to the devotee (Sutherland 146).

In Kerala's folklore, the Yoginis generally do not appear. It is the figures of the Rakshasi and the Gandharva who appear most frequently in connection with the Yakshi. For instance, in the 14th century *sandeshakavyam*^{xxv} (message/messenger poem) in Malayalam, *Unnuneelisandesham*, the Yakshi is compared to the rakshasi *Soorpanakha*, the sister of Ravana (Varier 93). Unlike in the mainstream Hindu, Buddhist and Jain mythology where the Yakshi is the male counterpart of the Yakshi, in Kerala's folklore, this function is performed by the Gandharva. Hence, it is also important to read the figure of the Yakshi along with similar figures.

Many scholars like Sutherland and DeCaroli have discussed the difficulty involved in differentiating beings like the Yakshas, Rakshasas, Nagas and Pisachas since the differences specified in their cosmogonic legends are rarely followed in their individual tales (DeCaroli 11, Sutherland 50). This is but natural since "particular attention is given (naturally) to the ordering of the beings whose creation is being documented or rationalized" when it comes to cosmogonic legends (Sutherland 50). However, "in other, 'purer' narrative sections, where the tales of individual demons in their interactions with men are being enumerated and embroidered, generic categories are blurred or glossed in ways that suit the myth rather than the pre-existent hierarchies" (Sutherland 50). This could be one reason for the confusion. The cosmogonic legends regarding the birth of these different beings in the Puranas are as follows:

In the puranas we are told that after creating the gods, demons (asuras), ancestors (pitrs), and humans, Brahma became hungry, and from this hunger yaksas and rakshasas arose. They began to eat him, and in his displeasure, his hair fell out and became nagas. This, in turn, made him angry and this emotion gave rise to the fierce, man-eating pisacas. (DeCaroli 11)

To DeCaroli, these cosmogonic legends are attempts “to categorise and define pre-existent beings that have long thrived as part of the Indian religious landscape” and the difficulty the authors have in finding a consistent framework to locate the different spirit-deities is “a testament to the mercurial and often contradictory natures of these illusive beings” (DeCaroli 11).

Sutherland in fact sees the confusion of the classes of demons as the distinct facet of the phenomenology of demons^{xxvi} (Sutherland 51). Still, for practical purposes, a basic differentiation is attempted by many scholars. For instance, Sutherland argues that the asuras are “heavenly, or cosmic demons” whereas the raksasas and the yaksas are “the low, earthly, existential demons” (Sutherland 49). Ram Nath Misra has pointed out how the Yaksha is similar to other divinities, “both of the celestial half of the spectrum, which includes *gandharvas* and *apsarases*, and of the lower realm of *raksasas*, *pisacas*, and *guhnyakas*, the class of demigods, who like the yaksas, attend Kubera, especially in his guise of lord of concealment and treasure” (Sutherland 54).

Sutherland and Coomarswamy have compared the Yakshas and the Rakshasas. Sutherland points to the number of similarities between both, “There is strong familial connection, in that Kubera, the king of the yaksas, and Ravana, the great leader of the *raksasas*, are brothers, both sons of the ancient *rsi*, Pulastya; both races are known to

have monstrous and occasionally beastly forms, and both engage in many forms of demonic mischief, including murder, rape, theft and cannibalism” (Sutherland 54).

Coomarswamy, though, is of the opinion that despite their common origin and both sharing “good and evil qualities, benevolent and malevolent as the case may be”, Yakshas and rakshasas are not identical (Coomarswamy I: 7). He says, “Yaksas as a rule are kindly, Raksasas bloodthirsty” (Coomarswamy I: 8). To illustrate this, he gives the instance of *Tadaka* in Ramayana. “In the Ramayana, Tadaka, originally a Yaksini, becomes a Raksasi, and this is a great fall.” (Coomarswamy II: 5).

Another class of beings the Yakshis are often compared with is that of the nagas (serpents). The Nagas and the Yakshas are two classes of beings who appear frequently in the Buddhist Jatakas and are generally seen as symbols of fecundity. For instance, Sutherland discusses how “male and especially female demons of these two races are known to seduce and capture their unsuspecting human victims” in the Naga and Yaksha myths (Sutherland 38). However, it must be pointed out that in Kerala, Nagas generally do not have the negative connotations associated with Yakshis. (Sutherland 38) The Naga cult or worship of snakes has been an old tradition in Kerala and there have been different theories^{xxvii} regarding its entry into Kerala. The most interesting instance of the synthesis of the Yakshi cult and the Naga cult, as pointed out Shashibhooshan in his article on snake worship in Kerala, “Keralathile Nagaradhana”, is the Naga Yakshi, generally worshipped in Kerala’s Hindu temples as the Queen of the snakes. (“Kerala” 85). There have been attempts to re-invent the figure of the Naga Yakshi, tapping into the sources of both the traditions, that of the Yakshi as well as that of the Nagas, in Malayalam cinema. I will be dealing with one such text in my thesis.

The Yakshas/Yakshis share many similarities with the Gandharvas/Apsarases as well. Sutherland, quoting Ram Nath Misra, states that like the Gandharvas, the Yakshas “like fragrance, carry off people (especially women), are often found near or in connection with water, are receptacles of secrets, fond of music and possessed of beauty”(Sutherland 54). In the case of the Yakshis, they are also like the *Apsarases* in that they are “connected with water and trees; they like dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments; they are fond of dice games and ‘bestow luck at play’; they are (only sometimes in the case of yaksas) beautiful; and they have been known to enjoy sexual adventures with humans”. (Sutherland 54)

Coomarswamy sees little difference in the original conception of the Yakshis and Yakshas with that of the apsarases and gandharvas. “Gandharvas and Apsarases appear to have been at first genii of vegetation and fertility, connected with Varuna and Soma, and when later they are reduced to the status of attendants on Indra, they are replaced, functionally, by the Yaksas and Yaksis. Yaksas and Yaksis are identical with Gandharvas and Apsarases as originally conceived.” (Coomarswamy I: 34)

It seems to me though that one of the major differences between the Yakshi and the Apsaras is that the former is a shape-shifter while the latter is generally not. The Yakshi thus seems to be strangely positioned between the Apsara and the Rakshasi, not quite as benevolent as the Apsara and yet not quite as malevolent as the Rakshasi.

In the folktales of Kerala, strangely enough, it is the Gandharva who is considered as the male counterpart of the Yakshi. In my knowledge, there have not been any studies on why this happened. Based on the histories of the Yakshi that have been explored so far, the Yakshi’s entry into Kerala seems to have been mainly

through Jainism where in the medieval period, as part of a mother-goddess cult, her status had risen over that of her male counterpart, the Yaksha. Hence, one may speculate that either the Yakshi's link with the Yaksha was not carried over to the Malayalam country or that this link was forgotten in course of time. The histories of the origin and development of the figure of the Gandharva and his entry into Kerala's folklore need more investigation.

However, there have been studies which have tried to look at the Yakshi and the Gandharva as products of male and female fantasy and read them together. Such studies take us into the heart of theories regarding the development of the particular variant of the Yakshi that appears in Kerala's folktales. I will be discussing this in detail in my third chapter where I deal with the role of fantasy in constructing a figure like the Yakshi.

Through these different sections, I have been trying to map the figure of the Yakshi through centuries, in different religions and among similar figures. After having discussed the Yakshi as part of a family of demons and divinities, it is time to explore the particular variant of the Yakshi that appears in Kerala's folktale.

III

Before I go into a discussion of the different theories regarding how the Yakshi, who has had multiple avatars in religious histories, took on the role of the ogress in Kerala's folktales, it would be worthwhile to spend some time examining Kerala's own curious history. Any study on the Yakshi's significations in Kerala's Cultural Imaginary cannot be initiated without setting it in context of the land in question – Kerala. This land “comprises the narrow coastal strip bounded by the Western Ghats on the east and the Arabian Sea on the west in the southern part of the

Indian Peninsula” (Menon, *A Survey* 65). I would like to focus on that particular time period in Kerala which has a bearing on the Yakshi tale. In the first five centuries of the Christian Era referred to by historians as the Sangam Age, “Kerala formed part of the larger unit of Tamilakam [the Tamil country]” (Menon, *A Survey* 65). The period after the Sangam Age^{xxviii}, i.e. in the 6th, 7th and 8th centuries saw the greater Aryanisation of Kerala which brought about far reaching changes in society. While historians argue that “the first batch of Brahmin immigrants to Kerala came in the 3rd century B.C. immediately following the Jains and the Buddhists”, it was in the 8th century A.D. that “the Aryanisation of Kerala reached its climax with a major batch of Brahmin immigrants coming here and strengthening the already existing forces of Brahmanism” (Menon, *A Survey* 89). It is believed that it was during this period that the caste system was “foisted on a casteless society by the Aryan immigrants who worked with extraordinary missionary zeal in spreading the Aryan ideology based on the primacy of *Chaturvarnya* [the Hindu social system based on the four castes]” (Menon, *A Survey* 90). As a result, there was a decline in the status of the toiling classes and of women who had earlier higher social status (Menon, *A Survey* 91). The period was also marked by religious conflict as the “new Aryan missionaries” devoted themselves to propaganda against Buddhism and Jainism whose influence on the people was considered as “the main stumbling block to the success of their ideology” (Menon, *A Survey* 92). It was not long before these religions lost their following among the people (Menon, *A Survey* 92). Historians also point to the possibility of the Aryan missionaries resorting to a deliberate destroying of “Buddhist *Viharas* and images” while simultaneously working to establish Hindu temples on a large scale with the intention of popularising the Hindu religion (Menon, *A Survey* 92). There was also an attempt to accommodate non-Aryan deities and practices within the

Hindu fold (Menon, *A Survey* 92). For instance, “the Dravidian Goddess Kottavai was accepted in the form of Durga, Kali and Bhagavathi and absorbed into the Hindu pantheon” (Menon, *A Survey* 92).

The conflict between Brahminism-Jainism/Brahminism-Buddhism and the absorption of non-Aryan deities into Hinduism are two developments that have a major bearing on the evolution of the Yakshi in Kerala’s folklore. I will discuss this in detail later.

The 11th century of later Kulasekhara rule in Kerala’s history is supposed to have witnessed “the breakdown of central authority, cultural stagnation and economic decay in the wake of the prolonged Chera-Chola war” (Menon, *A Survey* 123). It was during the age of the Kulasekharas that Hinduism became the dominant religion of the region, a natural result of the process of Aryanisation of the land (Menon, *A Survey* 129). The Chera-Chola war in the 11th century is supposed to have resulted in “an enormous increase in the influence of the Namboothiri Brahmins in the economic and social life of the country” (Menon, *A Survey* 136). This was because as the caste at the top of the social hierarchy, they were the ones who mobilised the resources for the King in the war (Menon, *A Survey* 136). The Namboothiris became owners of huge tracts of land in the upheavals that came about because of the war and the Janmi system or landlordism came up as a result (Menon, *A Survey* 136). This period is also credited with the adoption/revival of the matrilineal system in Kerala^{xxix} in place of the patrilineal system (Menon, *A Survey* 137).

I am briefly mentioning these details since the Yakshi tale is often read in the backdrop of a society where Namboothiris entered into relationships with the matrilineal castes of Kerala.

The Kulasekhara period ended with the break-up of the political unity of Kerala (Menon, A Survey 147). In the aftermath, a number of independent *Swarupams* (States) rose in various parts of the land, the most prominent among them being the kingdoms of Venad in Southern Kerala, Kolathunad and Kozhikode in Northern Kerala^{xxx} (specifically in the North Malabar region) and Cochin in Central Kerala (Menon, A Survey 147).

Vasco da Gama's arrival in Calicut in 1498 started a new epoch in Kerala's (as well as India's) history of European colonisation (Menon, A Survey 176). The Portuguese were followed by the Dutch and later the British and the French (Menon, A Survey 176). Malabar passed into the British hands to become a part of the Madras Presidency in 1800 (Menon, A Survey 257, 259). The colonisation of Kerala by the English East India Company was complete when in separate treaties, the Princely states of Travancore (Venad) and Cochin both accepted British supremacy and became their allies (Menon, A Survey 258).

The movements to acquire political rights continued in the colonised territories and all the three - the Princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and Malabar directly ruled by the British - played their part in the National Movement (Menon, A Survey 281, 291, 295). There were also various social reform movements during this period especially against social evils like untouchability and female illiteracy (Menon, A Survey 311-312, 315). From the early decades of the 20th century, there had been a movement aimed at uniting the different Malayalam-speaking regions into a single political unit called the *Aikya Kerala* (United Kerala) Movement (Menon, A Survey 299). The obstacles to this unity were the division of Kerala into three administrative units under the British – Malabar, Travancore and Cochin as well the fact that some Malayalam speaking regions were part of the Presidency of South Canara (Menon, A

Survey 298). After India's Independence, based on the policy of merger and integration of native states into the political unit called India, the state of Travancore-Cochin came into being on July 1, 1949 (Menon, A Survey 299). Finally, "when the states of the Indian Union were reorganised on linguistic basis on November 1, 1956 the Malabar district, along with the Kasargod area of South Canara, was added on to Travancore-Cochin to form part of the new state of Kerala" (Menon, A Survey 287).

A history of Kerala, however brief, would not be complete without a discussion of the status and role of women within Kerala's society in that period since the Yakshi, though a fantastical creature, is rooted in a particular vision of femaleness. I would also like to touch upon the woman question in the social reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a follow up to the larger question of women's role and status within Kerala's society.

When one looks at the particular variant of the Yakshi tale in Kerala, what one sees is that the indices of gender and caste are its warp and woof. This is no accident for when we come to the pre-colonial society of Kerala, it becomes impossible to talk of gender in isolation from caste. In *Malayalam*^{xxx}, the erstwhile name used to refer to Kerala, the social order was one based on the "order of *janmabhedam* ('difference by birth')" where the social status of the individuals was tied up to where they were born in the social hierarchy and castes or *jatis* were "hierarchically arranged with little or no individual mobility between them" (Devika 1-2). Each group had "specific codes of conduct, systems of alliances and regulations for everyday life" and "eating, dressing, talking – just about everything signified one's position in the social hierarchy, and one's difference from others" (Devika 1-2). These applied for even the Christians and the Muslims (Devika 2). Devika states that it was an order in which

external signs of compliance from the “lower” jatis were relentlessly wrested by the *jati* higher up in the hierarchy (Devika 2).

The caste at the top of the hierarchy consisted of the Namboothiris or the Kerala Brahmins whose immigration to Kerala has been discussed earlier. They functioned both as “a landowning aristocracy and religious elite” and had observances different from brahmins elsewhere in the country (Devika 120). Devika refers to how over a millennium, there developed in Kerala an elaborate set of social arrangements that while they preserved the social exclusivity and authority of the Namboothiris, also allowed them to relate differently with different groups (Devika 121). Thus in the Namboothiri joint-family homestead, referred to as *illom* or *mana*^{xxxii}, “everyday life was inconceivable without the services of the Nair *adiyar* (the servant-class)” and yet strict rules regulated their interaction with the Nairs (Devika 121).

In order to understand this further, we need to look at the unique system of primogeniture in the Namboothiri family which allowed only the eldest son referred to as the *moos* to marry from his own caste (Devika 121). The women in the Namboothiri community called as Antarjanams (‘inner-people’) had to observe elaborate seclusion, and when outside their homes, had to be shielded by a cloak (*putappu*) and a large cadjan umbrella (*kuta*) (Devika 122). Polygamy was permitted to the eldest son who could marry from his own caste (Devika 122). Widow marriage was not allowed while the practice of marrying younger girls to much older men was quite common since the number of men who could marry in the community were less compared to that of the women (Devika 122).

In this system, the younger males in the Namboothiri family were expected to seek marital alliances called *sambandham* with women from the sudra castes like the

Nairs or the Ambalavasis as well as from the matrilineal kshatriyas (Devika 121). However, these alliances were considered by the Namboothiris as beyond the domain of kinship (Devika 121). The children borne out of these unions had no substantial claims upon the father's family and were considered as members of their mother's family (Devika 121). As for the castes lower down the hierarchy, "strict and complicated rules of untouchability and unapproachability" served to preserve the exclusivity of the Namboothiris (Devika 121).

The society at that time was to undergo far-reaching changes with British colonisation and the arrival of Christian Missionaries (Devika 3). With the missionaries came "modern" education which began to be much sought after since it helped one "gain proximity to the new types of political and administrative authority" (Devika 3). The entry of the missionaries led to a situation where "local society and its entrenched powers, hierarchies, sexual morality, patterns of resource use and distribution of products" were put under the scanner and these critical appraisals then began to gain considerable assent among the converts as well as those exposed to state-sponsored modern education (Devika 3). The early Malayalam novels published in the late nineteenth century are a reflection of the changed times. For instance, Potteri Kunhambu's *Saraswativijayam* (1892) is about a social order based on *jati* crumbling in modern times with the prospect of the establishment of a social order where one's birth, high or low, didn't matter and an individual was ultimately defined only by his/her internal qualities (Devika 40).

In the changed social and political climate, new non-political identities also came into being expressing shared community affiliations (Devika 4). In the twentieth century, community organisations like the Nair Service society, the Shree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam and others "pressurised the state in Kochi and

Tiruvitamkoor to substantially ‘modernise’ family and inheritance patterns” (Devika 5). Their major agenda was “to redo these institutions especially such ‘anomalies’ as matrilineal practices widespread among the Nairs, sections of the Ezhavas and many other groups, and the strict primogeniture prevalent among the Malayala brahmins, to conform to certain standards that appeared civilised, ‘natural’, and also truly ‘Indian’” (Devika 5).

‘Modernising’ family and inheritance patterns often involved breaking down the prevalent caste equations which were dubbed as sexually exploitative. For instance, the Malabar Marriage Bill introduced by C. Sankaran Nair in the Madras Legislative council in 1890 to legalise the Nair marriage claimed that the practice of sambandham was heavily biased in favour of the Namboothiris and sexually exploitative in nature (Devasia 231). The early Malayalam novels like *Indulekha* and *Meenakshi* also took part in the debate about Nair marriage reform. Chandumenon, for instance, used his female protagonist Indulekha to answer back to some of the criticisms levelled at the family and inheritance practices by the missionaries as well as some of the reformers. (Chandumenon 24-25).

In the 1920s, there was a reform movement among the Namboothiris centred around the right of younger men to marry within caste and have their own families. One of the central agendas of the reform organisation was the “emancipation” of the status of the Antarjanams or the Namboothiri women (Devika 126).

However, recent studies have critiqued the “liberatory claims” of community reforms in the twentieth century and point to how these movements were “more concerned with the setting down new regulations for ‘their’ women, even as older forms of control were being dismantled”^{xxxiii} (Devika 15).

While the reform movements do not have much to bear on the Yakshi tale *per se*, the role they played in re-defining the gender norms in Kerala cannot be overstated. Hence, an ultimate reading of the Yakshi's place in Kerala's Cultural Imaginary will not be complete without situating her in the changing gender norms of Kerala's society through the ages, especially those brought in by the reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I will be taking up some of these questions in the course of my thesis.

IV

After setting the context, i.e. Kerala's larger historical and socio-cultural landscape, I would now like to read the text which is the Yakshi tale along with this. As mentioned earlier, the presence of the Namboothiri protagonist in many of the Yakshi tales indicates a time period after the entry of the Namboothiris to Kerala, a period marked by inter-religious conflict between Brahminism and Jainism and Brahminism and Buddhism. Scholars who have studied the Yakshi tale thus read it as part of this particular cultural moment. They trace the Yakshi's presence as the ogress in these tales to the representation of the Yakshis as guardian deities in Jainism and Buddhism and the conflict these religions had with Brahminism in Kerala. This is because most of the tales featuring the Yakshi in Kerala's folklore often have a Namboothiri (Kerala Brahmin) protagonist who is cast as the traveller waylaid by the Yakshi.

Raghava Varier who has worked extensively on the spread of Jainism within Kerala believes that Jain Tantric texts and myths had a great role to play in the depiction of the Yakshis and Yakshas as cannibalistic malevolent beings (Varier 112). He argues that for the Jains who preached non-violence, it was imperative that their

guardian deities (the Yakshis and the Yakshas) be renowned for their powers of sorcery so as to protect their charges and followers from believers of other religions (Varier 112). Hence the Yakshas and the Yakshis, the guardian deities, came to be portrayed as supernatural beings with magical powers in the Jain Tantric texts and tales (Varier 112). According to him, it was based on these myths that the Yakshas and the Yakshis came to be portrayed by non-Jains as cruel cannibalistic beings (Varier 112).

Varier also tries to understand the worship of Yakshis in some temples of Kerala (112-113). According to him, the hybridisation that happened between the Shaiva-Vaishnavist groups and the Jains in the former's centres of influence during the medieval period led to the assimilation of the Jain Shasana Devatas (attendant deities), the Yakshas and Yakshis, into Hinduism, especially Kerala's local Hinduism (112). He argues that in the Hindu temples which were under Brahmin domination and their surrounding areas, the Yakshi became the local Hindu mother goddess "Bhagavati" while in those temples far from the influence of the former, though Brahmin rituals made their presence felt, the Yakshi retained her character and remained as "Yakshi Amma" (Mother Yakshi) (113).

Haridas who tries to read the history of Jainism in Kerala through the figure of the Yakshi tries to locate the disappearance of Jainism there in the context of the coming of Brahminism into the land as mentioned earlier (39-44). In the changed social set up, he argues that many of the Jain temples were converted into Hindu temples through a process that he imagines was often coercive (44). For instance, he mentions the temple Tirukkunavai/Trikkanamathilakam described in the 15th century Malayala sandeshakavyam (message poem) *Kokasandesham* (44). In *Kokasandesham*, this is described as a temple where Brahmins are forbidden entry

(44). Historians have opined that the temple which is today a Shiva temple and firmly inscribed within the Hindu pilgrimage network must have been a Jain temple at that point of time and hence Brahmins were forbidden entry there (44). Haridas is of the opinion that one needs to read the legends where Yakshis attack and kill Namboothiris along with this (44). Haridas points out that it is only in tales set in Kerala that the Yakshi seems to go after the Namboothiris or the brahmins (44). According to Haridas, the Buddhist Jataka tales often describe the Yakshis and Yakshas as guardians of specific forest regions (44). It is the people who enter these lands who become the victims of the Yakshis (44). Haridas' implication here is that Yakshis seem to go after those Brahmins who enter Jain or Buddhist centres of worship (44). In Jainism, the Yakshis and Yakshas were the guardian deities of the Tirthankaras (44). He wonders if this is the reason behind the origin of such tales, the implication being that the Yakshis in these tales went after those Namboothiris who were the enemies of the Jain saints (44). Haridas wonders whether the Brahmins were more scared of the guardian deities of the Tirthankaras than the latter whom they converted (44).

Haridas also wonders whether the portrayal of the Yakshis as malevolent beings can be traced to the sexual licentiousness practised by the Namboothiris in medieval Kerala (44). Haridas seems to be referring to the frequent sexual unions that the Namboothiri men got into with women from castes lower to theirs, unions that have often been considered as extremely exploitative. Haridas' inconclusive query is as to whether the Namboothiris saw in women who did not give in and rebelled against them the faces of the guardian deities of a group they had helped decimate (44).

Haridas also tries to link the figures of the Yakshi and the post-conversion figure (Yakshi after her conversion into Brahminism) of the Bhagavati (44). He wonders if it was the Bhagavati's origins as a Yakshi that was the rationale behind her being sought to vanquish her (44). There have been tales which pit the Bhagavati, the local Mother goddess, against the Yakshi. I will be dealing with one such text in my thesis which raises interesting questions about how and where both the figures differ.

Haridas' article on Jainism and Yakshis is more of a starting point into an investigation that at times is pure speculation than any final word on it. Yet it does raise interesting questions about the link between the Namboothris and the Yakshis and tries to locate it in the fight between Jainism and Brahminism in Kerala, a fight that according to him was often between the Kerala Brahmins and the guardian deities of the Jain leaders who were imagined as possessing supernatural powers.

As far as I know, there have not been similar studies linking the depiction of Yakshis as ogresses in folktales with the encounter between Buddhism and Brahminism in Kerala. Yet it is interesting that a number of folktales record such an encounter. In his collection of folktales called "Cheerankavil Yakshiyum Mattu Kathakalum" [The Yakshi of Cheeran Kavu and other stories], P. Sethunathan records some such tales. These tales are not as popular as some of the others and are basically sthalapuranas. In some of these tales which are usually in the form of an encounter between a sorcerer/priest and a Yakshi with the latter then telling her story which ends with a request to be installed as a deity somewhere nearby, the Yakshi often confesses that she is the ghost of a Buddhist nun who was killed in the encounter between the Aryan Brahmins and the Buddhists in Kerala. The background of such stories is the presumed Brahmin-Buddhist conflict in Kerala. In one of these stories, Sethunathan refers to a study by the scholar Tiruvangadu Krishnakurup as per which what are

called “Bharani Kaavu” in Kerala today, sacred groves dedicated to the Mother goddess, were at first places the local chieftains had set aside for Buddhist monks and nuns to practise their meditation (Sethunadhan 19-20). Krishnakurup is of the opinion that these groves were later used for the worship of Nagas or snakes after they were destroyed in the conflict between Buddhist monks and Brahmins, violent episodes where the Buddhists were often massacred by the Brahmins (Sethunadhan 20). While the jury seems to be still out on the link between the entry of Brahminism into Kerala and the disappearance of Sramanic religions like Buddhism and Jainism from its land with some historians claiming there is not enough evidence to back up stories of violent conflict, these stories do give us possible theories about why Namboothiri protagonists are so often featured in the typical Yakshi tales (Haridas 42). Yakshis assuming the function of guardian deities of Buddhist and Jain monks and the possible conflict between Brahminism in Kerala and the Sramanic religions could perhaps account for the vilification of the Yakshi in these tales.

Renuka’s article “Nishachari” (One who moves in the night) also argues that it is the entry of Brahminism into Kerala that is responsible for what she regards as the transformation of the Yakshi from a benevolent deity into a malevolent figure in the folktales. She, in fact, reads the figures of the Yakshi and the Gandharva as embodiments of female and male fantasy respectively and argues that the arrival of the Vedic religion into Kerala is responsible for transforming the Yakshi and the Gandharva, once an identical pair, into beings with different cultural meanings from each other (36).

Coming to the central question as to how one looks at the historical context behind the general representation of the Yakshis as ogresses in Kerala’s folktales, the answer is two-fold. From a history of the Yakshi’s representations in different

religious literatures, it is quite clear that the Yakshi of the Jataka tales has been a major influence on the folktales featuring the Yakshi. As discussed earlier, the crossroads were often centres of mother goddess cults where animals were sacrificed to the tree goddesses such as Yakshis. This could have been the factual component about the tales featuring cannibalistic Yakshis who frequented crossroads and trapped unsuspecting travellers. However, how did the prototypical Jataka tale take on its specific markers in Kerala's folktale? What was the historical context that gave rise to these folktales which often featured a Namboothiri or a Brahmin man cast as the protagonist who either escaped the clutches of the Yakshi or became her victim? Varier's and Haridas' theories of Brahminism's conflict in Kerala with the Sramanic religions Buddhism and Jainism which had Yakshis as guardian deities of the Buddhist monks and Jain saints could offer an explanation.

The Jataka tale though seems to have been superimposed on a particular cultural moment in medieval history, relating to a time when the Namboothiris used to travel through the desolated pathways in Kerala at night. Haridas pointed out earlier as to how one needs to read the Yakshi tale along with the social context of medieval Kerala.

Historians like Sivasankaran Nair have noted the conditions that made travel such a desirable option for the Namboothiris in medieval Kerala. In the context of examining another medieval genre, that of the *sandeshakavyam* in Kerala, he opines that only Namboothiris, fond of travel, could have written the majority of these *kavyams* which were of anonymous authorship (Nair 435). The *Sandeshakavyam* belonged to the larger genre called Manipravala kavyas.

Manipravalam works which experimented with a mix of Sanskrit and Malayalam as the language of composition were essentially love lyrics with a strong emphasis on the erotic. The period of the Manipravalam works coincide with what the historian Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai calls as the orgiastic season of the Namboodiris who were the superior most caste in Keralam at that time. (Sheeba 11)

The medieval sandeshakavyams which were message poems addressed by the poet to a beloved woman residing in a faraway place were also part travelogues. They often featured the famous temples on the way and the famous ganikas/devadasis associated with these temples. What were these social conditions that made travel so desirable and necessary for the Kerala Brahmins? Some of the reasons Nair lists out also can be applied in the case of the folktales of the Yakshis which had Namboothiris as protagonists. “That apart from the eldest son, the rest had no rights over the property, that Kerala Brahmins got free food from all the temples, that women from non-brahmin families were ready to enter into relationships with them all made Malayali Brahmins fond of travel” (Nair 435).

I have already discussed *Sambandham*^{xxxiv} which denoted “hypergamy between Nair women and Nambudiri men as well as reciprocal marriage among Nairs” (Kodoth 352). The women in the matrilineal communities generally stayed on in their taravad or home even after the sambandham and the husband used to visit them from time to time (Gough 359). The children borne out of the union belonged to the mother’s taravad and the sambandham could be dissolved easily at the will of either party (Kodoth 366; Gough 362).

Thus, travel was a desirable option for the Namboothiris to enter into *sambandhams* with Nair or Ambalavasi or Kshatriya women who were often matrilineal and matrilocal (staying in their own house even after the *sambandham*) (Gough 359).

In the Yakshi tale, the beautiful woman (the Yakshi in disguise) invites the Namboothiri to spend the night at her home. The woman usually belonged to the Nair or Ambalavasi (temple services) castes. For instance, in one of the famous Yakshi tales where the Yakshi is pitted against the Goddess, the Yakshi assumes the appearance of a Varier woman (Ambalavasi). Similarly, at the beginning of the meeting, the woman asks for some lime to spread on the betel leaf to have her *murukku* or paan. In *sambandham*, the husband who visited the wife's home often gave her gifts of betel leaves and areca nuts for chewing (Gough 359). Gough writes that "the giving of chewing materials between a man and a woman is everywhere in South India associated with courtship or with the first night of marriage" (Gough 359).

The scholar K. S. Prakash mentions how the Yakshis used to trap those Namboothiris who would be hurriedly leaving to meet the women whom they were in a *sambandham* with (63). Hence one may speculate that the Yakshi tales were perhaps rooted in the social structure of the time when the Namboothiris entered into *sambandham* with women from the matrilineal castes whose sexuality was then demonised in these tales. It must be remembered that women belonging to the Namboothiri caste, the *Antharjanams* were forbidden from showing their face in public. Thus, there were all kinds of control on the sexuality of the women belonging to the Namboothiri caste which point to fears about female sexuality and its uncontrollability within the Namboothiri caste. Was this the reason for the

demonisation of the sexuality of the women of the matrilineal castes with whom on the one hand the Namboothiris had contractual relationships called *sambandham* but on the other hand whom they perhaps regarded as bearers of a devouring female sexuality? While the system of *sambandham* was considered by many reformers as exploitative since it granted Namboothiris sexual access to the Nair women with no obligations of fatherhood, it has also been pointed out that the Nair women had greater access to the public sphere compared to the Antarjanams, could at times practise polyandry^{xxxv}, could dissolve the *sambandham* easily and take on another partner (Kodoth 351; Gough 320; Menon *A Survey* 219; Kodoth 384)). Hence, perhaps it was the non-normative practices of marriage within the matrilineal communities like the Nairs which led to the demonisation of the sexuality of these women. Or as Haridas wonders, were those women demonised/turned into Yakshis who did not give in and rebelled against the Namboothiri's lust and on whom were then superimposed the figure of the Yakshi, the guardian deity of old antagonists?

Medieval Kerala was also famous for its devadasi culture reflected in the literature of the time. Manipravalam literature, which was in vogue at that time, had a particular genre called *Champus* which were named after the celebrated devadasis of the day and described in colourful style their "feminine charms as well as towns or marketplaces visited by them" (Menon *Cultural Heritage* 193). Among the devadasis (which is often the general term used by historians for women associated with the temple in various professions), there were groups who were performers of Sanskrit dramas called *Koothachis* (*Koothu* or telling a story through a performance), *Tevidichis* (who were considered as wives of the Lords of different temples) and *ganikas/devadasis* (who were considered as the servants of the Lords of different temples) (Nair 359-361). The *champus* were written about the *Koothachis* who were

born in noble families and were well-versed in music, literature and acting (Nair 359). Each of the major temples had Koothachis connected with it (Nair 359). The Koothachis also frequently entered into *sambandhams* with Namboothiris and the medieval Champus which describe the beauty of these women also mention the Namboothiris as their admirers (Nair 360). Were the Yakshis of tales modelled on these women and other devadasis of medieval Kerala whose houses were frequented by the Namboothiris? They are another group whose sexuality could have been demonised as much as it might have been considered desirable. Shashibhooshan in his article on Yakshi also speculates whether the Yakshi tales were far-fetched lies spread about the devadasis regarded by the poets in the manipravala period as epitomes of seductiveness (Shashibhooshan “Yakshi” 22).

I will end this section with a few remarks on the other elements of the Yakshi tale. Corinne Dempsey traces the Yakshi’s fear of iron and Palmyra leaves (the holy texts that the Namboothiris hold which save them from the Yakshi’s clutches are usually made of these leaves) that emerges in Kerala’s folklore to a similar fear exhibited by the Yakkhas towards iron objects and Palmyra leaves in Buddhist tales (Dempsey 116, note 5). The iron nail again is a phallic symbol and the nail driven into the head of the Yakshi is meant to domesticate her.

One is reminded of the Indonesian femme fatale Sundelbolong, who also feeds on travellers and undergoes a similar process. A large nail hammered into the head of the Sundelbolong is supposed to immediately transform her into a beautiful woman who is believed to bring luck and wealth, either to the man who performs the deed or to one who marries her (Siddique 168). The Langsuyar, the Malaysian vampire, on the other hand, “can rejoin the living community if her nails and hairs are cut off and placed within the hole in her neck” (Siddique 168). The Yakshi can be then placed

alongside other femme fatales like the Sundelbolongs and the Langsuyars who were “re-incorporated into the community life of village society after the enactment of ritual mutilations” (Siddique 169). However, what is different in the Yakshi’s case is that she does not stay in this state for long. Unless she is settled somewhere permanently and worshipped as a deity, there is always the chance of her breaking loose.

The other major feature of the Yakshi tale is the conversation about betel leaves and lime that happens between the Yakshi and the Namboothiri. I have already mentioned that the husband of a Nair woman often provided her with betel leaves pointing to how the Yakshi tale could have been modelled on actual relationships between Namboothiris and the matrilineal women of the time. However, Prakash mentions how receiving tambulam (a mixture of betel nut and betel leaves) was part of ancient foreplay rituals and was included in Vatsyayana’s erotic science (Prakash 63). He argues that the Yakshi asking for some lime to have her paan does have sexual connotations (Prakash 63).

Another aspect of the Yakshi myth that needs to be noted is the variety of trees that figure in the tale. The Yakshi is supposed to reside either in a palm tree or a pala tree (Indian devil wood tree). The palm tree is usually found in desolate areas and its branches are often said to resemble a woman’s hair in Malayalam sayings. Scholars who study folklore opine that the reason why the *pala* tree is worshipped is due to its white sap which reminds one of a breast-feeding woman (Kumari 58). The Yakshi’s association with a mother goddess cult can be seen in her association with the *pala* tree. Similarly, the taming of the Yakshi is often done by nailing her to a *Kanjiram* or snakewood tree. I believe that the large number of associations with vegetation,

especially trees, needs to be seen in the context of the Yakshi's origins as a tree goddess.

V

What I have attempted to do through the previous sections is to situate the Yakshi within a complex set of historical, cultural, social and literary relations. I have tried to give a detailed history of the possible origins of the figure of the Yakshi and her assimilation into and appropriation by the different religions that held sway in India in order to make sense of the processes that have contributed to the evolution of her particular variant in Kerala's folklore. Cohen in *Monster Theory* calls monsters as the "harbingers of category crisis" since they resist all forms of classification (Cohen 6). He calls them "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (Cohen 6). While this may be so, I believe that this process of resisting classifications is also partly induced by the different historical processes that a monster undergoes. For instance, the different avatars the Yakshi has taken in Kerala make it hard at times to even define her using specific labels. The typical Yakshi tale starts with a desolated pathway and the Yakshi waiting on the wayside. The Yakshi has no previous history in the tale. She is *just there* to be found by the traveller. Her sexuality in these tales is just a ruse to trap the victim and she stands closer to the shape-shifting ("kamarupa") rakshasi of Hindu mythology. In other tales, it is the Yakshi's sexuality that makes her the danger she is. Thus in one of the tales in *Aithihamala*, it is the Yakshi's overpowering sexual drive that cannot be satisfied by any man which makes her the femme fatale. In this tale, the Yakshi is more of the *apsara* than the *rakshasi* since her overpowering but desirable sexuality also holds the possibility of being transformed into a controllable one for the male subject of the tale. These tales also carry echoes of Tantric texts in which the

Yakshi's "undomesticated sexuality is brought to heel and transmuted into familial goodwill, serving simultaneously and conversely as metaphor for her actual sexual enslavement by the practitioner" (Sutherland 147). In other tales like that of the famous Yakshi *Kalliankattu Neeli*, the Yakshi is the ghost of a woman wrongfully murdered. There are other tales which present the Yakshi as the guardian deity of cities and countries where the fall of a land is traced to the defeat of its guardian, the Yakshi. As mentioned above, many of the Yakshi tales end with her deification pointing to the Yakshi's earlier divine origins. What I am suggesting here is that the Yakshi's bewildering number of signifieds in Kerala can be traced to the different avatars that she took on at different historical junctures down the ages. All of them have left their traces on this figure. One can see this as part and parcel of a monster's genealogy where they take on new characteristics or shed old ones that are no longer relevant. Thus, along with cross-cultural fertilization where a monster of one culture changes in appearance as its parent culture mixes with new cultures, one also needs to take into account cross-temporal fertilization.

Cohen sees the monster as being the embodiment of "a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling and a place" (Cohen 4). When we come to the origins of the Yakshi, what emerges is this picture. In the pathways of history, perhaps, she stands as the representative of primitive mother goddess cultures and fertility cults whom different established religions in India tried to control and assimilate, the outsider who even when she was assimilated and transformed still carried traces of that past. Her "wild" sexuality in different established religions was often re-inscribed as part of a benevolent fertility cult, yet the anxiety about the limits of domestication remained in stories where she emerged as the ogress haunting the crossroads.

However, while the monster may be the embodiment of a particular cultural moment, it also has the tendency to return “in slightly different clothing, each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event”, “each reappearance and its analysis” still “bound in a double act of construction and reconstitution” (Cohen 5). Thus, the Yakshi reappears in slightly different clothing at a particular historical moment in Kerala – during the medieval period in Kerala when Namboothiris are part of a cultural set up where they have the right to engage into sexual liaisons with women from certain matrilineal communities or from the community of the devadasis. The stories in the Jataka about Yakshis as the ogresses that plagued travellers take on their specific versions in Kerala’s folklore where the Namboothiri traveller replaces the Buddhist traveller of the former. What is interesting about the Yakshi story is the simultaneous process of demonisation and deification that happens within it which takes us back to questions of nomenclature concerning the Yakshi. It is quite apparent that through the Yakshi, a non-normative female sexuality is getting demonised. The Yakshi tale is also a warning tale in that it warns the traveller that a woman standing alone on the wayside, unaccompanied by any man, could only be a Yakshi. Thus, the Yakshi tale can be read as a tale of demonising/monsterising the sexualities of deviant women, women whose solitary wanderings divorce them from what Sutherland calls “a safe image of the bound and the maternal” (138). What makes the Yakshi more *deviant* is her solitary wanderings in the night. In patriarchal cultures, the respectability of a woman is contingent upon her not being seen outside her home during this time period. Thus, a woman wandering around at night all on her own is seen as further proof of her non-normative sexuality. The title of my thesis ‘The Woman who Walks the Night’ highlights this aspect of the myth where it is her wandering around alone in the night

that is the source of her mystique – she is one woman who transgresses the temporal constraints imposed on ordinary women.

However, the title of my thesis in its linking the Yakshi with the night also draws on conceptions of the night which see it as a time period in which human beings' repressed desires get out of the bounds set by "culture". Renuka, for instance, in her article *Nishachari* (One who moves in the night), considers fantasy as something born in the tug of war between nature and culture, nature's instinct for freedom and culture's method of binding humans by means of rigorous social structures (Renuka 37). Yakshis and their male counterparts Gandharvas, for her, are characters born out of the thirst in the human heart for freedom. Therefore, it is no wonder that the Yakshis are creatures of the night, a time period Renuka describes as the "other world", one in which men and women seek an escape from their unfulfilled and complicated desires by indulging in/creating fantastical worlds. In fact, the hour of the night when Yakshis and Gandharvas roam the world is marked by the maddening fragrance of the night flowers. Perhaps the Yakshi embodies this fragrant darkness of the night. The title of my thesis in its reference to the Yakshi as the "Woman who Walks the Night" connects this particular time period and the world of fantasy seeing the Yakshi as one who embodies the possibilities of the latter.

At this point, I would like to take up Barbara Creed's exploration of the concept of *monstrous-feminine* in her work *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* to further understand what it is about the Yakshi that makes her the monster she is perceived to be. The reason Creed chooses the phrase 'monstrous-feminine' over that of 'female monster' is to emphasize "the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" as she argues that "the reasons why

the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies the audience” (Creed 3).

Is it the Yakshi’s femaleness that makes her the monster she is? How much of a role does her gender play in the construction of her monstrosity? This is a question that requires careful investigation since the Yakshi has often been conceptualised as part of a *mithuna* (a double) – the Yakshi/Yaksha. The Yakshas have also been represented in different mythologies as monsters who devour their victims. However, like Sutherland points out, in the Jataka tales, the devouring tendencies of the Yakkhi/Yakkhini, unlike that of the Yakkha, are “strongly sexual as well as alimentary” (Sutherland 138) Hence, a study of Creed’s concept of the monstrous-feminine would perhaps help us understand the Yakshi’s own ‘monstrosity’ better.

Barbara Creed extends Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject to specifically understand the myth of the monstrous feminine. To Kristeva,

The abject threatens life; it must be ‘radically excluded’ (Kristeva, 1982, 2) from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. Although the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic. (Creed 9)

Creed gives a list of things which are considered abject –bodily wastes, the corpse and its extensions - ancient figures like the vampire (‘bodies without souls’), the zombie (‘the living corpse’), the ghoul (corpse-eater), the robot or android and the

witch. She also points out as to how central the concept of the border is to the construction of the abject since it is crossing the border that brings about what she calls “an encounter between the symbolic order [the law of the Father] and that which threatens its stability” so that whatever crosses or threatens to cross the border automatically becomes the ‘abject’ (Creed 11). While one of these borders involves “the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not”, it is important to note that the female body is itself considered as abject in patriarchal discourses (Creed 11).

Belinda Morrissey’s summarizing of Kristeva’s arguments as to why the feminine is considered the abject in male dominated societies is a good entry point into the figure of the *monstrous-feminine* since she links up the concept of the feminine as the abject with that of the woman who kills. Morrissey points to how women’s power to generate life and take it away make them objects of fear in male dominated societies and quotes Kristeva who points to how the “feminine” in patriarchal cultures is often aligned with the abject and the criminal and as to how the potential for feminine evil is considered as ever present in such cultures (Morrissey 2). She then tries to understand what it is about the female body that makes it the ‘abject’ in male-dominated societies.

Female abjection relates largely to the very permeability of female bodies; through reproductive and sexual processes, female anatomy blurs the line between self and other, clean and unclean. The woman’s vagina is penetrable and engulfing, her menstrual blood is a primary abject pollutant, while her capacity to give birth raises the subject’s terror of encompassment and subsequent loss of self. Finally, the baby’s early dependence on the mother gives her enormous power and the fear this evokes, combined with the abject

nature of the female body, has been narrated repeatedly in myths and legends of evil and dangerous women throughout history. Women who kill confirm this archetypal feminine power, reinforcing the terrible antithesis to the myth of the good mother, reminding us that where creativity is located so too is destructiveness. (Morrissey 2)

With regard to the figure of the Yakshi, it is Kristeva's concept of the archaic mother extended and elaborated by Creed that I find fascinating. The archaic mother is an interesting concept for Creed since it helps her understand the figure of the *monstrous-feminine* without being limited by Freud's notion of the Pre-Oedipal mother. Creed argues that both Freud and Lacan in their discussions of the archaic mother tend to conflate her with that of the "protective/suffocating mother of the pre-Oedipal mother, or the mother as the object of sexual jealousy and desire as she is represented in the Oedipal configuration" (Creed 25). Part of the reason Creed is interested in exploring this figure further is because it helps one get out of what she calls "the patriarchal family constellation" (Creed 26)

Creed's attempt is to get out of the vicious circle of the Freudian discourse by focusing on the womb which she says may signify 'fullness' or 'emptiness' but is always its *own point of reference* unlike the female genitalia which is constructed in such discourse as a 'lack' in relation to the penis (Creed 27). She argues that the *mother* in such writings needs to be signified by her lack for "without her 'lack', he [the father] cannot signify its opposite – lack of a 'lack' or presence" (Creed 26). Pointing to the difference between the concepts of the archaic mother and the pre-Oedipal mother, Creed writes, "For the concept of the archaic mother allows for a notion of the feminine which does not depend for its definition on a concept of the masculine. In contrast, the maternal figure of the pre-Oedipal is almost always

represented in relation to the penis – the phallic mother who later becomes the castrated mother” (Creed 27-8).

Before discussing why I consider the notion of the archaic mother important to understand the monstrosity of the Yakshi, I would like to take up the concept of the “vagina dentata” that Creed puts forth which she links at places with that of the archaic mother. I believe that one has to read the figure of the Yakshi as monstrous-feminine by reading these two related concepts together.

One of the central arguments of Creed’s work is that the reason why the woman is constructed as monstrous in patriarchal discourses is not always because of her sexual difference which is rooted in her “lack” of the male sexual organ which according to Freud induces castration anxieties in the male child. On the other hand, it is because of her vagina which is seen in patriarchal cultures as capable of castrating the man. Pointing to how “fear of the castrating female genitals pervades the myths and legends of many cultures”, Creed foregrounds the myth of the “vagina dentata” or the “toothed vagina” (Creed 1). Further elaborating on this myth, Creed writes, “Despite local variations, the myth generally states that women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that the women must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened – usually by a hero figure – before intercourse can safely take place” (Creed 2).

To illustrate her point, Creed brings in a monster from Greek mythology, *the Medusa*, who has been the subject of one of Sigmund Freud’s essays. She writes,

It is not by accident that Freud linked the sight of the Medusa to the equally horrifying sight of the mother’s genitals, for the concept of the monstrous feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogentric ideology is

related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration ... [T]he Medusean myth is mediated by a narrative about the *difference* of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrosity and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator. (Creed 2)

Like her foregrounding of the concept of the archaic mother over that of the pre-Oedipal mother, Creed's discussion of the vagina dentata and by extension that of the woman as castrator is political. Creed is of the opinion that accepting Freud's position that woman terrifies because she is castrated is one that already "constitutes her as a victim" since it is a position that "only serves to reinforce patriarchal definitions of women which represent and reinforce the essentialist view that woman, *by nature*, is a victim" (Creed 7). While she does not believe that a theory which focuses on woman as the castrator, i.e. "as an active rather than passive figure", is by itself "feminist" or "liberated" since "the presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity", Creed argues that it "does challenge the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position and the female spectator in a passive, masochistic one" (Creed 7). By focusing on what she feels Freud has left out or refused to confront which is that man's fear of sexual intercourse with woman has more to do with "irrational fears about the deadly powers of the vagina, especially the bleeding vagina" than any fear of being castrated like her, Creed tries to challenge the discrepancies and biases in Freud's own theories (Creed 121). She argues, "Perhaps one should conclude that acceptance of the notion of 'woman the castrator' rather than 'woman the castrated' is not only threatening to Freud as a man but also damaging to his theories of penis envy in women, the

castration crisis and the role he assigns to the father in the transmission of culture” (Creed 121).

At this point, I would like to take up both the concepts, the archaic mother and the vagina dentata individually and see whether they have a bearing on the “monstrosity” of the Yakshi.

To Creed, mother goddess narratives can be seen as exploring the archaic mother in that they “can be read as primal scene narratives in which the mother is the sole parent” where she emerges as the “the subject, not the object, of narrativity”. (Creed 26) In her discussion of the archaic mother, Creed takes up a number of mother-goddess narratives such as that of the Spider Woman myth of the North American Indians and that of the Sphinx of the Oedipal narrative. According to her, “the central characteristic of the archaic mother is her total dedication to the generative, procreative principle” (Creed 27). She calls her as “the mother who conceives all by herself, the original parent, the godhead of all fertility and the origin of procreation” (Creed 27). However, in the patriarchal signifying practices, Creed argues, she is constructed as a negative force where “she is reconstructed and represented as a *negative* figure, one associated with the dread of the generative mother seen only as the abyss, the all-incorporating black hole which threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed” (Creed 27).

As we have seen, the Yakshi was once a mother goddess and that too an extremely ancient mother goddess. For instance, Donna Jordan finds the extreme antiquity of the *yaksinis* mirrored in their originally having neither a male consort nor images in iconic form (Jordan 205). The Yakshi’s folklore version still carries traces of her earlier divine avatar. In fact, her re-configuration as a mother goddess at the

end of the tale can be read as an acknowledgement of her origins. In one of my primary texts, the tale of the Yakshi confronting the Goddess of Chottanikkara to save the life of a male devotee, one can see the confrontation between the two aspects of the mother or what Kristeva calls the two signifying functions of the term – as the source of life as well as the abyss.

However, in order to understand the negative representation of the Yakshi, one perhaps needs to go beyond seeing her as the archaic mother represented as the ‘all-incorporating black hole’. Perhaps, the Yakshi’s negative representation has also to do with her having been a fierce mother goddess who needed to be propitiated with blood sacrifices at one point of time and yet someone who could not be domesticated like other mother goddesses into a more benevolent, domestic mother figure. Hence psychoanalytic explanations about the monstrous-feminine which take into account only general concepts such as that of the archaic mother, especially of her negative version as the “all-incorporating black hole”, cannot by themselves help us make sense of the monstrosity of the Yakshi unless we also take into account her particular socio-cultural context.

Next I would like to explore the concept of the *vagina dentata* as it relates to the figure of the Yakshi. Creed links the concept of the *vagina dentata* with that of the castrating woman. She writes, “The myth about woman as castrator clearly points to male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces ... The *vagina dentata* also points to the duplicitous nature of woman, who promises paradise in order to ensnare her victims” (Creed 106).

Creed refers to a number of primitive myths which are about toothed vaginas and male heroes taming them (Creed 106). She points to how these myths generally call for the women to be tamed or for the teeth to be somehow removed or softened usually by the hero “before intercourse can safely take place” (Creed 2). The typical Yakshi tale where the sorcerer or the goddess intervenes to tame the Yakshi by either driving an iron nail into her head or by piercing her body with the trident (both can be read as phallic symbols) can be then read as finally attempts to bring her undomesticated sexuality to heel. In these stories, she is mutilated in some way in order to domesticate her. Figures like the Yakshi, the Sundelbolong and the Langsuyar that I mentioned earlier are all female monsters who have to be mutilated in some way either by driving an iron nail into their heads or cutting off their hair or nails in order to tame them.

Creed also discusses male fears about menstruation and the concept of oral sadism in relation with that of the vagina dentata. She quotes C. D. Daly’s exploration of the menstruation taboo and his explanation that “the sight of woman’s blood confirmed man’s fear of being eaten and castrated by the female genitals” (Creed 112). In her analysis of the concept of oral sadism, Creed draws on the man’s fear of incorporation that she discussed in her examination of the concept of the archaic mother, “The threat of incorporation issuing from the maternal body is most likely to be concentrated on the two areas associated with incorporation: the mother’s facial mouth and her genital mouth” (Creed 113). She especially discusses the male child’s fears that arise out of projecting a mouth onto the labia and genital area of the mother (Creed 113). While discussing the female vampire, Creed foregrounds her open mouth, sharp pointed teeth and blood-covered lips and points to how they stand for her vagina dentata (Creed 72). The Yakshi is also known for her fangs which she uses

to suck the blood out of her victim. Her blood-covered lips and her fangs can then be read as the representatives of her vagina dentata. The Yakshi's desire to have paan and thus redden her lips before reddening them with the blood of her victim can also be read in conjunction with this.

Sarah Caldwell's remarks on the Yakshi can be read as an extension of this discourse where the Yakshi's blood lust is seen as sexual in its nature. Caldwell researching on the deity Bhadrakali in Kerala has a few remarks to offer on the Yakshi as well, comparing her with the goddess Bhadrakali who is another blood-thirsty goddess (though in the case of the Yakshi, her divine origins are not apparent on the surface). Caldwell sees the Yakshi's act of drinking the blood of her male victim as a sexual act:

It is semen that the virgin demoness wants from her victim. This essential fluid fertilizes and cools the hot female womb but weakens and drains the man who gives it – is clearly a symbolic displacement of the intaking of semen by the vagina, and in some stories and medical pronouncements the two fluids are interchangeable. (Caldwell, "Bhagavati" 211)

Along with Caldwell's insights, one can read Ernest Jones's attempts to explain the pathology of the nightmare in his work *On the Nightmare*. In this work, he tries to give a psychological explanation for fantasies all over the world involving vampires and other similar beings (including gandharvas) which visit men and women in night and kill/weaken them after sexual intercourse.

The explanation of these phantasies is surely not hard. A nightly visit from a beautiful or frightful being, who first exhausts the sleeper with passionate embraces and then withdraws from him a vital fluid: all this can point only to

a natural and common process, namely to nocturnal emissions accompanied with dreams of a more or less erotic nature. In the unconscious mind blood is commonly an equivalent for semen. (Jones 119)

Thus, in the Yakshi tale, the blood that is sucked out of the male victim can very well stand for the semen. It is the woman's sexuality, especially her sexual powers that are demonised through the figure of the Yakshi where her vagina is presented as capable of weakening or draining or at its most potent, maiming the man.

The female body may be abject in patriarchal discourses, but the intriguing aspect about abjection is that "the subject is constantly beset by abjection *which fascinates desire* but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation" (Creed 10). Even in the case of the archaic mother, the threat of incorporation is one simultaneously tinged with "the desire to return to the original oneness of things, to the mother/womb" where the fear of self-annihilation is beset by the "desire for non-differentiation" (Creed 28). Karen Horney links up this desire for non-differentiation with male castration anxiety as she wonders "whether or not the male dread of women might be understood for men in terms of love and death" (Creed 130).

Is any light shed upon it by the state of lethargy – even the death – after mating, which occurs frequently in male animals? Are love and death more closely bound up with one another for the male than the female, in whom sexual union potentially produces a new life? Does man feel, side by side with his desire to conquer, a secret longing for extinction in the act of reunion with the woman (mother)? Is it perhaps this longing that underlies the 'death-instinct'? (Creed 130)

The “simultaneity of anxiety and desire” is something Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has also focused on in his *Monster Theory* (Cohen 19). Linking the monstrous with Kristeva’s theory of the abject, Cohen writes, “The monstrous lurks somewhere in that ambiguous, primal space between fear and attraction, close to the heart of what Kristeva calls abjection” (Cohen 19).

Cohen, however, also focuses on the aspect of fantasy that is part and parcel of the construction of monsters. For instance, he writes, “The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint” (Cohen 16-17). He elaborates further,

Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. Escapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to destroy or deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture. When contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization, the monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self. (Creed 20)

It is important to understand how the monsters serve as “vehicles of causative fantasies” or “as secondary bodies through which the possibilities of other genders, other sexual practices, and other social customs can be explored” since the destruction of the monster’s body at the end of a monster tale can be then read as part of a social process of throwing out the abject, that which fascinates desire but which must be expelled to preserve the integrity of the larger social self. Cohen writes,

What Bakhtin calls “official culture” can transfer all that is viewed as undesirable in itself into the body of a monster, performing a wish-fulfillment [sic] drama of its own; the scapegoated monster is perhaps ritually destroyed in the course of some official narrative, purging the community by eliminating its sins. The monster’s eradication functions as an exorcism and, when retold and promulgated, as a catechism. (Cohen 18)

The Yakshi tale can be read in this way where through the body of the Yakshi, the male desire for a non-normative female sexuality is allowed to be played out before its ritual destruction at the hands of the sorcerer/the goddess. However, where the Yakshi tale differs from other such monster tales such as that of the vampire or the witch is in the ending where an iron nail pierced into her head is rarely the permanent solution to the problem. Domestication here involves deification of the Yakshi where her malevolent energies are channelized into a benevolent motherhood as she is transformed into a mother goddess. However, even when she is deified, the Yakshi needs regular offerings and worship by the devotees to keep her malevolence at bay. This aspect of the Yakshi tale seems to be a continuation of the resolution of certain Buddhist tales involving ferocious yakkhas and yakkhis who needed monasteries to be built in their honour and then placated through food offerings (Dempsey 120). Perhaps, this aspect of the Yakshi tales in the local Hinduism of Kerala and Buddhism needs to be located in the way the problem of evil gets resolved in the mythologies of these religions. We have already seen how Ramaswamy considers the valourizing and worshipping of deviant women as “one way of freezing them at the borders of an established culture threatened by potential change” (Ramaswamy 141). However, studies such as Robert DeCaroli’s which look into Buddhism’s commerce with the local spirit religions and their deities (which includes yakkhas and yakkhis) in the

samgha (the Buddhist monastic community) point to how contrary to the usual perception of all powerful monks, the Buddhist tales actually reveal monks and nuns as respectful and wary of these deities who acted as guardian deities of the monasteries (DeCaroli 132-33). Hence, deification need not completely freeze such women at the borders of an established culture since borders by nature are permeable. In my second chapter which looks at the Yakshi-religious agent dynamic in detail, I will be exploring this aspect further.

However, to focus on the Yakshi as just a monster would also be doing her a disservice since there have also been attempts in popular culture to present her as an embodiment of fantasy. In tales like that of Brahmin Venmani and the Yakshi, which I deal with in my third chapter, the Yakshi can be seen as a fantastical figure who is desired by the man for challenging traditional notions of femininity. In M.T. Vasudevan Nair's short story 'Cheriyā Cheriyā Bhookambangal' ('Little Earthquakes'), the attempt is to locate the Yakshi as part of female fantasy where it is the Yakshi's power and contempt for hetero-normative sexuality that the female protagonist finds desirable.

Thus, this thesis tries to simultaneously look at the Yakshi as a monster embodying the latent fears and fantasies of a culture as well as a figure of fantasy which holds possibilities for different configurations of femininities.

One of the greatest challenges I faced while studying the figure of the Yakshi was in finding a comprehensive history of the figure of the Yakshi. As I mentioned earlier, works like Coomarswamy's and Sutherland's have been studies which have focused mainly on the Yaksha. Studies which focus on the histories and development of the Yakshi have been very few like that of Raghava Varier's short study on

Yakshis as mother goddesses. However, even Varier's study doesn't offer any theories to explain the origin of the Yakshi tale specific to Kerala with its Namboothiri protagonist. Hence, in the absence of a comprehensive study on the Yakshi which looks into her origins and transformations in various religions before exploring her particular variant in Kerala's folklore, I have had to use my own sense of judgement to create a history of sorts for the Yakshi by drawing on a disparate set of historical and literary records. This has often meant going beyond the confines of my discipline and attempting at times to fill in the gaps in the Yakshi's genealogy with theories based on existing evidences. However, I believe that with all its limitations, such an attempt had to be made since studying the Yakshi as a mythical figure without knowing her historical contexts would have been ultimately a self-defeating enterprise since even a purely textual study would have been then forced to confront the mindboggling diversity in her representations without the required historical knowledge to make sense of them.

However, this thesis is not just about the study of the Yakshi per se as a monster. This is because sometimes the Yakshi tales are not just about the Yakshi. The Yakshi in fact often becomes the ground to explore other ideas. That is why the subtitle of this thesis reads as 'Yakshi as *myth* and *metaphor* in Kerala's cultural imaginary' where I see the figure of the Yakshi as often standing in for other concepts and ideas. To take a basic example, in the religious tales, the figure of the Yakshi is often used to highlight the significance/greatness of a religious place/figure. Corinne Dempsey, for instance, argues as to how "viewed from within the religiously plural, South Asian context, yaksi stories can provide common ground from which to compare religious strategies for managing dangerous, lurking outsiders and, as such, provide a means for religious systems explicitly and implicitly to claim superiority

over one another” (Dempsey 112). In other texts, the Yakshi often acts as the double of the protagonists filling in for those parts of their selves they want to reject, such as in Malayattoor Ramakrishnan’s novel *Yakshi*. Thus, this thesis while looking at the figure of the Yakshi is also interested to find out what the Yakshi comes to represent in different texts and contexts. Does she often become a peg to hang other ideas? Does she become at times what Lata Mani has termed the ground of the debate, i.e. where her role cannot be described in terms of any binaries such as that of the subject (where the discourse is initiated by her) and object (where the discourse is about her), but needs to be seen as a battleground for opposing factions to stake their claims of superiority? (Mani 152)

The question about an overarching methodology may arise in the case of a study like this. However, I believe that to study a figure like the Yakshi, which challenges all notions of classifications, be it that of nomenclature or of specific characteristics, one needs an approach that is multi-disciplinary and multi-theoretical. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has discussed how the body of the monster “resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding a ‘system’ allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction) and resistance to integration” (Cohen 7). Elaborating on the peculiar problem that the monster presents, Cohen writes,

Q The monstrous is a genus too large to be encapsulated in any conceptual system; the monster’s very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure ...

The monster is in this way the living embodiment of the phenomenon Derrida has famously labelled the ‘supplement’ (*ce dangereux supplement*): it breaks apart bifurcating, ‘either/or’ syllogistic logic with a kind of reasoning closer to

‘and/or’, introducing what Barbara Johnson called ‘a revolution in the very logic of meaning. (Cohen 7)

In the case of the Yakshi, the problem is more complicated since she is not just a monster. She is in an ironic sense the living embodiment of the supplement in that while she is a monster, she is not just that. She is also a figure of fantasy. In fact, she is an amalgam of many things – part monster, part goddess, part spirit, part ghost, part a figure of fantasy. One may call her a spirit-deity for practical purposes like Robert DeCaroli does, however, even that at times cannot do justice to the variety of her signifieds. The Yakshi’s history is itself proof of her frequent boundary crossings. This is seen not only in the debates about her origins (as to whether she is a tree goddess or a water deity), but also in her frequent transformations as she entered different mainstream religions of India, sometimes in the role of a monster and at other times in the role of a guardian deity. The Yakshi, in fact, can be said to represent the uneasy mingling of two poles – divinity and monstrosity. She is divine and yet monstrous. She is monstrous and yet divine. She lies somewhere between the apsara and the rakshasi, imbibing aspects of both and yet not being completely either.

To study a figure that respects no borders or boundaries, it is important that the approach selected is also one that draws on the theoretical insights of different schools and disciplines. Hence, my thesis tries to explore the meanings generated through the figure of the Yakshi by using a multiplicity of theoretical tools – those of feminism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, film studies, folklore studies, new historicism, monster studies and studies on fantasy.

Multiplicity and boundary crossings do not characterise just my theoretical approach. Even the texts I have chosen cross the boundaries of set genres and

encompass a wide range of responses. Thus my primary texts include folktales, movies, a novel, a play and a short story. This lack of respect for the boundaries of genres is partly induced by the need to study the figure of the Yakshi in all her heterogeneity and complexity. To understand the Yakshi as myth and metaphor in Kerala's cultural imaginary is definitely a tall task. Yet to do justice to at least some of the complexities involved, I believe that genre-crossing is a must. However, the genre-crossing I do is many a time mediated through an important aspect one cannot ignore in the case of monsters in general – their propensity to reappear each time in slightly different clothing. What I point to is the act of retelling. Many of the texts I have selected for my thesis are retellings and hence sites of intertextuality. Hence, one sees folktales giving rise to retellings as movies and plays, short stories and novels giving rise to movie retellings and even movie retellings giving rise to other movie retellings. Perhaps, this preponderance of retellings of the Yakshi tale in Kerala's cultural imaginary points to the open-endedness of the Yakshi tale itself and by association the *ontological liminality* of the figure of the Yakshi herself who cannot be circumscribed in any set configurations. My thesis can also be said to then share the characteristic of the Yakshi, shapeshifter that she is – the same tale takes on different appearances as the contexts and the genres change. To put it in a nutshell, my thesis is all about using shifting theoretical approaches to decipher texts that shapeshift.

In choosing my primary texts, I have had to make a selection. While at times, I have chosen texts like certain movies which have not been dubbed into English, most of the time, the texts I have chosen have been those whose translations are available in English or in the case of movies, those which have English subtitles. Since the Yakshi has not been studied like this before, I have tried to look at some of the most popular

narratives in Kerala featuring the Yakshi since I feel that without them, one cannot get a sense of the Yakshi's significations within Kerala's Cultural Imaginary. I have also chosen those texts which while dealing with diverse themes seem to be directly or indirectly engaged in dialogue with one another.

If the introduction has been about reading the Yakshi in a larger history, the chapters that follow are no different. They are also about reading the monster, the Yakshi, but within the specific socio-literary-cultural contexts of my primary texts. There will also be a simultaneous reverse reading where through the Yakshi, I also attempt to read the culture(s) which sustain her.

The texts I have chosen to explore in my thesis are as follows. In my second chapter, I look at two folktales 'The Yakshi and the Goddess of Chottanikkara' and the 'The Yakshi and the Priest of Kadamattom', both of which pit the Yakshi against religious agents and are part of traditional folktales revolving around the Yakshi. One of the reasons for choosing two folktales to be the subject of this chapter has been because they act as a follow up to the discussion of the typical folktale concerning the Yakshi in the introduction. However, the addition of the index of religion to the mix by focusing on the protagonists of the two tales as representatives of their respective religions does help me focus on a particular aspect of the typical Yakshi tale. Since these two are among the most popular Yakshi tales in Kerala and have been part of popular Malayalam movies, their role in shaping the figure of the Yakshi in Malayali imagination cannot be overstated. In my third chapter, I look at the tale of Venmoni and the Yakshi and its re-tellings. The tale of Venmoni and the Yakshi is also a popular tale and hence can be read as continuation of the second chapter which looks at two folktales. However, this folktale is quite different in tone from those I deal with in the second chapter and looks at the Yakshi more as the divine lover. The popularity

of this tale can be gauged from the fact that it has been adapted thrice in different genres. I have chosen this tale since it is one Yakshi tale that has given rise to a number of re-tellings and hence allows me to understand how the same Yakshi tale takes on different shapes in different time periods. In this chapter, I look at the folktale of Venmoni and the Yakshi and its play adaptation called *Sauparnika* written by the noted ideologue of the Modernist movement in Kerala, Narendra Prasad, as well as its movie adaptation titled *Yakshi - Faithfully Yours* (2012) directed by Abhiram Suresh Unnithan. In the fourth chapter, I deal with Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's novel *Yakshi* (1967) and its movie adaptations *Yakshi* (1968) directed by Sethumadhavan and *Akam* (2012) directed by Shalini Usha Nair. Ramakrishnan's *Yakshi* has been one of the most popular psychological thrillers in Malayalam and the questions it raises through the figure of the Yakshi about the anxieties of Malayali masculinity make it a unique text among the narratives centering around the Yakshi. In my fifth chapter, I look at Vinayan's horror-comedy film *Aakashaganga* (1999) and Fazil's psychological thriller *Manichitrathazhu* (1993). Vinayan's *Aakashaganga* has a prime place among the genre of Yakshi movies since it was one of the movies that popularised the figure of the Yakshi for the lay audience and I believe that a study like this hence needs to take this movie into account. Fazil's *Manichitrathazhu* is considered a classic in Malayalam cinema for popularising the genre of the psychological thriller, yet there have not been many studies which have looked at how the motif of the avenging Yakshi has been employed in the film. These two chapters have some of the most popular Yakshi narratives and coincidentally, they all seem to be about women whose husbands or in-laws suspect them to be Yakshis. In the sixth chapter, I look at M.T. Vasudevan Nair's short story "Cheriyā Cheriyā Bhookambangal" ["Little Earthquakes"] (1990) and its movie adaptation *Ennu*

Swantham Janakikutty [“Yours truly, Janakikutty”] (1998). This short story has been a favourite with the Malayali readers for its novel depiction of the figure of the Yakshi seen through the eyes of a young girl. This is another text that has played a significant part in re-inventing the figure of the Yakshi in Kerala’s imaginary. One of the major reasons for choosing this text and its movie adaptation are that they are the rarer texts that explore what the Yakshi represents to the female sex. While many of these texts seem to be quite different from each other, there are certain common patterns that make it possible to group them together.

The basic organisation of my chapters^{xxxvi} is one that focuses on spaces that the Yakshi occupies in popular imagination. In my five chapters, I intend to explore the figure of the Yakshi in detail in a variety of contexts through select texts spanning different genres and time periods. The second, third, fourth and fifth chapters taken together can be said to form a narrative of the Yakshi’s journey from the outside to the inside, i.e from outside the family unit to its inside where the main protagonist is generally male. Thus, the first chapter traces the Yakshi as she stands “enticingly” on the deserted pathways of forests, as a “danger” to the male traveller (usually the Brahmin man or the Namboothiri) whose journey away from the familiar unit of the family into the unfamiliar is presented as one riddled with encountering possibly dangerous “other women”. It is a danger that requires the intervention of a religious figure whose confrontation with the Yakshi forms the core of the narrative. The second chapter traces the encroachment/relocation of the Yakshi as she encroaches into the ‘sacred’ space of the family where she undergoes a process of domestication as the lover of the male protagonist and emerges ironically as a rival to the “family woman”. In the fourth and fifth chapters, the danger now erupts from within for the

male protagonists as the “family woman” starts turning “unfamiliar” as the boundaries separating the wife and her dreaded other, “the Yakshi”, start disappearing.

While this is a narrative I have employed to organise my texts better and focus on the common points they generate, it doesn’t need to be said that it is also a reflection of the different spaces the Yakshi has occupied in popular imagination in Kerala’s culture. The second chapter which deals with Yakshi as the femme fatale in religious tales and the third chapter that deals with the Yakshi as the divine lover in the Venmani tale and its retellings are both finally about attempts to domesticate the Yakshi. They can also be read as narrative attempts to resolve the *uneasy* duality that the Yakshi represents where she is at once a symbol of male fear as well as desire. The resolution in both cases calls for the Yakshi to be stripped of her powers so that her desirability is one sans the danger. They are thus about relocating the Yakshi since as long as the Yakshi stands on the wayside, she remains outside both norms of desirable femininity (as a wife) as well as divine femininity (as a goddess). However, the fourth and fifth chapters by looking at texts located in the sacrosanct space of the family where the family woman could very well be a Yakshi raises questions about the latent “dangers” lurking in the “domestic space”. However, the focus of the two chapters is different since though both deal with the figure of the Yakshi-wife, the concerns are different. For instance, in the fourth chapter, if the “danger” of the Yakshi-wife is traced to a process of monster-making, in the sixth chapter the Yakshi-wife is the avenger come to break open hierarchical systems. In contrast to these five chapters, the sixth chapter looks at those texts where the Yakshi enters into the lives of female protagonists, mostly in the role of a friend-protector. The sixth chapter is thus about the space that the Yakshi occupies in female imagination and is an attempt

to see whether and how these texts try to resolve the uneasy duality that the Yakshi represents.

Notes:

ⁱ Hereafter, the term ‘Yakshi’ will not be italicised.

ⁱⁱ According to Oxford Dictionary, the Latin root got monster is ‘monstrum’ meaning ‘portent or monster’ which again from the word *monere* which means “to warn”. (“monster”, oxforddictionaries.com).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Under erasure* or *sous rature* is a “strategic philosophical device originally defined and developed by Martin Heidegger and later elaborated by Jacques Derrida ... it involves the crossing out of a word within a text, but allowing it to remain legible and in place. Particularly in *De la grammatologie* (1967), Jacques Derrida uses the process of placing a word *sous rature* in order to signify that the word is ‘inadequate yet necessary,’ that is, a particular signifier that is not wholly suitable for the concept it represents, but nevertheless must be used to represent it, since the constraints of our language offer nothing better” (Saldivar 527).

^{iv} Derridean ‘double gesture’ has been further theorized by Judith Butler while discussing the difficulties one has to face while using universalizing terms. She writes, “it is necessary to use a double movement: to invoke the category, and hence, provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of permanent political contest. That the term is questionable does not mean that we ought not to use it, but neither does the necessity to use it mean that we ought not perpetually to interrogate the exclusions by which it proceeds” (qtd. in Morrissey 6).

^v There are still a few “kaavu” (groves generally dedicated to local goddesses/ snake kings and queens) where the Yakshi is the primary deity,

^{vi} “A large nail hammered into the head of the Sundelbolong instantly transforms her into a beautiful woman who will bring much luck and riches, either to the man who performs the deed or to one who marries her. The *Langsuyar*, on the other hand, can rejoin the living community if her nails and hairs are cut off and placed within the hole in her neck” (Siddique 168).

^{vii} It also needs to be stressed that after her divine make-over, the Yakshi takes on maternal functions like the other goddesses.

^{viii} I will be using the spelling *Yakshi* throughout my thesis except in cases where the author has used the spelling *Yaksi*.

^{ix} This text is available only in Malayalam. Whenever I make use of it, I will be translating from the source text into English.

^x “Bodhisattva, (Sanskrit), Pali bodhisatta (“one whose goal is awakening”), in Buddhism, one who seeks awakening (bodhi)—hence, an individual on the path to becoming a buddha. In early Indian Buddhism and in some later traditions—including Theravada, at present the major form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and other parts of Southeast Asia—the term bodhisattva was used primarily to refer to the Buddha Shakyamuni (as Gautama Siddhartha is known) in his former lives. The stories of his lives, the Jatakas, portray the efforts of the bodhisattva to cultivate the qualities, including morality, self-sacrifice, and wisdom, which will define him as a buddha.” (“Bodhisattva”)

^{xi} Translation mine.

^{xii} In some of the texts that I analyse in my thesis, the Yakshi stands as the double of the Bhagavati.

^{xiii} “The word *mithuna* is constantly used in connection with ritual coitus” and birth was supposed to originate from a “mithuna” (Coomarswamy II: 23). One sees a number of productive pairs in Indian art, the earliest of which were the *Yaksha* and the *Yakshi*.

^{xiv} In this scheme of things, the “plant style” or vegetation-related cosmology then becomes “the iconography of water cosmology” (Coomarswamy I: 14). Thus Coomarswamy points to how in the “decorative art”, vegetation is always represented as springing from something related with water, whether it be “the mouth or navel of *Yaksha*” or from the open jaws of a fish-tailed animal or a “brimming vessel” or from a conch, but “never directly from any symbol representing the earth” (Coomarswamy II: 13).

^{xv} Kinsley considers the “late hymn of the *Rg-veda*” as either “an early literary reference to a *Yaksi* or to a goddess modeled on those indigenous creatures of the Indian forests” (Kinsley 25).

^{xvi} Varier sees the use of incantations related with black magic and sorcery in the *Atharva Veda* as further proof of the assimilation of non-vedic elements into the Vedic culture by then (Varier 104). He also points out that the *Atharva Veda* being regarded as inferior in status to the other Vedas could also be because of its non-vedic character. (Varier 104)

^{xvii} “The full emergence of the concept *brahman* represented a philosophical certainty about something, that in its nascent conceptualization, could only be discussed as a great presence or spirit of being, and it is in this context that once again the term “*yaksam*” (the abstract, neuter form) was employed. (Sutherland 72)

^{xviii} For instance, Sutherland argues that the yakshas serve as “prototypes for the first iconic representations of the Buddha”, (Sutherland 9)

^{xix} Kubera, the lord of the Yakshas, is generally linked with wealth. (Sutherland 64)

^{xx} The primal waters and pure, luminous beings used to exist separated from each other until a “fall” occurs when “an inexplicable coagulation of the waters occurs for the “enjoyment” of those beings, producing a solid earth of delightful consistency, odor and taste” (Sutherland 107). One of the beings then becomes restless and starts consuming the earth and develops a taste for it and is followed by others (Sutherland 107). They all lose their luminosity in the process and this leads to the emergence of heavenly bodies (Sutherland 107). This leads to the further emergence of seasons, time and “all manner of separations and distinctions, both physical and psychological” (Sutherland 108). It is the growing coarseness of the bodies of the once pure beings that gives rise to concepts of physical difference among human bodies and the emergence of sexuality, food covetousness, theft, clan, government, social classes, and brahmanical privilege. (Sutherland 108)

^{xxi} Sutherland contrasts the function of the Yakshas (and Yakshis) in Hinduism and Buddhism. She posits that (1) in opposition to the brahmanical literature where demons are left intact to rise up and re-challenge the gods in what she calls “the eternal, ritualized conflict between the ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’”, in Buddhist literature, the notion of conversion of the “bad guys” is introduced which is supposed to permanently alter the behaviour and at times even the nature of the yaksha (Sutherland 110). It is also supposed to testify to the “wisdom and compassion of the Buddhist dhamma” (Sutherland 110). (2) As against the tools of physical destruction in brahmanical literature, in Buddhist tales, the bodhisatta employs the “weapons of sophistry and righteousness” (Sutherland 110).

^{xxii} In Hindu mythology, perhaps this function is performed by the apsara as in the story of Menaka and Vishwamitra.

^{xxiii} As per this system, there are four kinds of gods: “1. Bhaumeyikas (including asuras, nagas, suvarnas, vidyuts, agni beings, dvipa-beings, udadhi beings, vata-beings, and ghanika-beings or ‘kumaras’) (2) Vyantaras (consisting of yakshas, pisacas, bhutas, raksasas, kinnaras, kimpurusas, mahoragas, and gandharvas); (3) Jyotiskas (consisting of the moons, the stars, the suns, the nakshatras [‘lunar mansions’], and the planets); and (4) the Vaimanika gods” (Sutherland 131) .

^{xxiv} I could not find any studies on Yakshi in Islam.

^{xxv} In A Dictionary of Indian Literature, *sandesha kavya* is defined thus: “A literary form established by the celebrated *Meghadutam* of Kalidasa. In it, a lover separated from his beloved woman finds some way of sending a message of love to her” (Mukherjee 346). In Malayalam as well, especially in the medieval period, there were a number of such messenger poems.

^{xxvi} To her, “the interchangeability of the demon races contributes to the ambiguity of ethical distinctions that proceeds from these mythologies, and the interbreeding of the races may be counted among the causal explanations for the irrationality and inconsistency of functional evil” (Sutherland 51).

^{xxvii} Some argue that it is the tribe called the Nagas, whose descendants are the Nairs in present day Kerala who brought it to the Malayalam country. Others argue that it was the spread of Jainism which had Tirthankaras flanked by serpents, which was responsible for its spread to Kerala. Shashibhooshan is of the opinion that it must have been a popular system of worship that was assimilated into Jainism (Shashibhooshan “Keralathile Nagaradhana” (Snake worship in Kerala) 85). Translation mine.

^{xxviii} Menon states that “the Sangam Age was followed by ‘a long historical night’” since the only information we have of the 6th, 7th and 8th centuries is from “the records of the South Indian powers like the Chalukyas, the Pallavas, the Pandyas and the Rashtrakutas in which they claim to have overrun Kerala” (Menon, A Survey 81).

^{xxix} Menon opines that “the political ascendancy of the Namboothiri Brahmins during the Chola-Chera war, their rise to economic ascendancy as the Janmis of Kerala, the introduction of compulsory military training and the formation of the Chaver army [suicide squads] to meet the threat of invasion were some of the compelling circumstances which brought about the adoption of the Marumakkathayam system [Matrilineal system of inheritance] by the people of Kerala in the 11th century A.D” (Menon, A Survey 137). While some historians consider Marumakkathayam system to have been introduced as a result of the socio-economic changes brought about by the war with men in the army staying away from their homes for a long period of time, others opine that the system which had been in existence in ancient Kerala was revived during this period (Menon, A Survey 137).

^{xxx} The kingdom of Calicut had territories in Central Kerala as well (Menon A Survey 152-156).

^{xxxi} To Devika, *Malayalam* used to refer to “not just a region or a language [Malayalam being the widely spoken language there] but also to distinct sets of social arrangements, hierarchies, observances and practices quite distinct from other regions” (Devika 1)

^{xxxii} The terms *illom* and *mana* refer to “the Malayala Brahmin joint-family homestead and also the lineage that was normally coterminous with it” (Devika 121).

^{xxxiii} For instance, Praveena Kodoth argues that “the specific resolution of the question of sambandham by Nair reformers in the realm of the ‘Paternal family’” was one which “went beyond ‘liberating’ women from the exploitative ‘land for sexual relations’ network” (Kodoth 358). Instead, to her it was about seeking “to establish a form of access to and control over women that was hitherto unavailable to Nair men” (Kodoth 358). Devika, pointing out how the active agent of change, the reformer, in the Namboothiri reform movement was always male, points out that in the reformist discourse, Antarjanams were always conceived as “objects of re-forming”, not as its agents (Devika 161).

^{xxxiv} Sambandham in Sanskrit meant ‘joining together’ (Gough 359).

^{xxxv} “The Nair women used to dress themselves in the best of clothes and adorn the most attractive ornaments and throng public places in the company of their men. They also followed the practice of polyandry without any social stigma being attached to their conduct” (Menon A Survey 219).

^{xxxvi} I have followed the seventh edition of the MLA Handbook while documenting my sources in the thesis.

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Chapter 2

“You have some lime?”

Yakshi as the Femme Fatale in Religious Histories

In the introduction, the attempt was to understand the possible origins of the figure of the Yakshi and to place her in the larger socio-cultural context. This chapter deals with texts where the Yakshi is presented as the female monster waiting on the wayside. While the first chapter dealt with the texts and myths of the distant past from different parts of India to understand the transformations this figure has undergone over the ages as part of different religious and cultural milieus, this chapter looks at more recent religious myths concerning the Yakshi in a specific region – Kerala.

While there are differences in how the Yakshi is conceptualised in the myths and legends of this period as well, the character and behaviour of the Yakshi in the more well-known Yakshi tales of this period is fairly standardised – she is presented as the female monster on the wayside who needs to be tamed for the well-being of the land and its people. These tales are all variations of the basic traveller’s tale detailed in the first chapter where a man, usually a Namboothiri, meets a Yakshi on the way who transforms into a beautiful woman and lures him into her den, which is a palm tree, on top of which she feeds on him and drinks his blood. The tales I am dealing with in this chapter are legends about a particular religious centre or religious figure and the tale of the Yakshi is interwoven within these tales to establish the greatness of this place/figure. These tales thus go about establishing the power of a religion either directly (where the divine is directly involved) or indirectly (through a believer in the said religion). They position the Yakshi and the religious agent in diametric opposition to each other and the vanquishing of the Yakshi by the religious agent is

the central part of the narrative. The two stories I deal with in this chapter are among the most popular Yakshi tales in Kerala.

Since the major texts dealt with here are religious tales, it doesn't need to be emphasized that this chapter is also an exploration of the role of religion in the Yakshi tales. These Yakshi tales, in one way, can be read as a continuation of similar tales discussed in the first chapter where bodhisattvas spar with Yakshis/Yakshinis. This is what Corinne Dempsey does in her article "Nailing Heads and Splitting Hairs: Conflict, Conversion, and the Bloodthirsty Yakṣi in South India". She argues that these stories which present the Yakshi as the dangerous antagonist against whom representatives of different religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism test their mettle can be studied to understand "religious strategies for managing dangerous, lurking outsiders" (112). These stories also "provide a means for religious systems explicitly and implicitly to claim superiority over one another" (112).

In this chapter, I look at two texts, one in which the Goddess of Chottanikkara is pitted against the Yakshi and the other in which the Christian Priest of Kadamattom takes on the Yakshi. Both are extremely popular tales as both the Goddess and the Priest are iconic figures in the mythologies of local Hinduism and Christianity in Kerala respectively. Both these figures have been the subjects of movies and an integral part of these movies has been the said episode of their contest with and vanquishing of the Yakshi.

I have already discussed the Yakshi tale as a genre, the markers that frame it as well as its religio-historical context in the introduction. In this chapter, my attempt is something different – I am trying to read these stories along with their contexts to varying extents, trying to understand these stories as records of particular historical

processes and events. In both cases, thus the *context* often becomes a *co-text*. Thus the tale of the Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi is read as a tale about the transformation of the Goddess from a more pagan goddess, much like the Yakshi, into a more domesticated figure whose divinity is then read as contingent on her domesticity. In the second tale, that of the Yakshi and the Priest of Kadamattom, my attempt is to read it as part of a particular cultural moment where a particular sect of Christianity and its rituals, nativised to a large extent, become heretic with the coming of the European colonisers to the shores of Kerala. The Yakshi's confrontation of the Christian Priest is interesting firstly because it reveals the strategies whereby Christianity tried to spread its roots in the local Hindu society by taking on its monsters. Secondly, a close reading of the text also reveals that there is not much separating the Christian Priest from the Yakshi.

I will first take up the story of the Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi since unlike in the case of local Christianity, the Yakshi has been part of the local Hindu mythologies. Studying this story first will help us see how the Yakshi is generally portrayed in the local Hindu tales and help in providing a contrast to the more exceptional case of a Christian Priest taking on a Yakshi.

In one way though, it must be said that the tale of the Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi is also an exception among the local Hindu tales featuring the Yakshi in that the protagonists of the majority of these are usually Hindu tantriks/sorcerers. A woman, that too a goddess, taking on a Yakshi is comparatively rare.

The Goddess of Chottanikkara

In this particular tale, the Yakshi is pitted against a Goddess worshipped in the local Hinduism of Kerala – the Bhagavati of Chottanikkara. As I have discussed in the introduction, the Yakshi is considered by historians to have been a goddess in the beginning, though in the folktales, she has been transformed into a monster. Hence, it would be interesting to contrast both these figures – the Yakshi and the Goddess. Before going into the tale that pits them both against each other, I would like to discuss the origins of this particular goddess since it would give us clues into the historical processes that gave rise to her current avatar.

Chottanikkara is a temple in Central Kerala (Ernakulam district) where the main deity, the Goddess, is worshipped as Rajarajeswariⁱ (Vaidyanathan 100). As per the *sthala purana*, the place where the temple stands today was once a dense forest inhabited by tribals among whom there was a notorious dacoit called Kannappan (Vaidyanathan 102). The story goes that Kannappan once brought home a cow he intended to slaughter (Vaidyanathan 103). However, the cow escaped into the jungle and could not be found (Vaidyanathan 103). When Kannappan returned home, he found his daughter taking care of the missing cow, but she refused to let it be slaughtered (Vaidyanathan 103). His daughter died soon after because of some disease and Kannappan left his former life to focus on the divine (Vaidyanathan 103). He then had a dream in which Goddess Sakti appeared and revealed to him that the cow had been herself (Vaidyanathan 103). She also promised him that his cowshed would be soon sanctified by her and Lord Vishnu's presence (Vaidyanathan 103). The next day Kannappan found the idols in the shed and constructed a temple there where he continued to worship the Devi and Vishnu (Vaidyanathan 103). After his death, the temple gradually fell into ruin and everybody forgot about the idols (Vaidyanathan

103). One day a *Pulaya*ⁱⁱ woman, while she was sharpening the scythe she used to cut grass with against a stone, found it oozing blood (Vaidyanathan 103). She shrieked in fear which drew the attention of the other Pulayas working with her and they informed *Edathu* Namboothiri (Vaidyanathan 103). When the latter found the presence of *Parasakti* (the paramount goddess) there, other Namboothiris also gathered and they decided to worship the stone and the one adjoining it as Devi and Vishnu respectively and both together as “Lakshmi Narayana” (Vaidyanathan 103). Though Vishnu is also worshipped here, the temple is renowned for being the abode of the Goddess or the Devi.

Compared to the number of studies on the Priest of Kadamattom, studies on the temple of Chottanikkara and the Goddess have been quite fewⁱⁱⁱ. However, in V.V.K. Valath’s study of the district of Ernakulam in Kerala as part of his larger project of studying the histories of different localities within Kerala (*sthalacharitras*), there is a portion devoted to Chottanikkara and the temple there. Valath writes, “The miraculous tale of blood oozing from the scythe in this story is not something specific to Chottanikkara. The Pulaya woman and the Namboothiri of the legend point to the secret that the centres of worship previously belonging to the Dravidians were Hinduised with the coming of the Aryans^{iv}” (Valath, *Ernakulam Jilla* 106).

From the above account, one can clearly say that the Goddess here was once worshipped by tribals and later came into the possession of the Namboothiris or the Brahmins. In Valath’s version of the temple’s origins, he identifies Kannappan, the dacoit, as one belonging to a hill tribe (Valath, *Ernakulam Jilla* 106). Some versions of Kannappan’s story depict him sacrificing the calf daily to a goddess who is identified as Kali as well as *Mala devata* or a Hill deity (in the movie based on the Goddess of Chottanikkara). Thus, it seems very likely that a tribal goddess who

required blood sacrifices may have been the source of the later conception of Chottanikkara Bhagavati. The discovery of the idol by a woman of an “untouchable” community also points to her origins as a deity worshipped by the non-brahminical sections of the society.

Valath talks about how the earliest centres of worship in today’s Kerala were sacred groves known as *kaavu* (Valath *Thrissur Jilla* 36). A *kaavu* originally meant a place where a sacrifice or *kaavu* was made (Valath *Thrissur Jilla* 35). Valath quotes a Sangam text of Akam poetry which describes a group sacrificing a cow to a goddess under a neem tree and making a meat stew (*puzhukku*) out of its flesh (Valath, *Thrissur Jilla* 35). Thus, Kannappan sacrificing the cow to the goddess could have been an early ritual of propitiating a tribal/Dravidian goddess. The popular religious narrative about the Goddess of Chottanikkara thus could be very well about the Hinduisation of a goddess who was originally a village/tribal goddess and needed to be propitiated with blood sacrifices. This phase in Kerala’s history where Dravidian goddesses were co-opted into Brahminical Hinduism has already been mentioned in the introduction.

If we look at the Chottanikkara temple as it exists today, we find that it is actually a temple complex. It consists of two temples - one called *Melkkavu* (the upper grove) where Bhagavati as Rajarajeshwari is worshipped and the *keezhkaavu*^v (the lower grove) where Bhadrakali is worshipped. Keezhkaavu is famous for its rituals of exorcism^{vi}.

The main temple today is that of Chottanikkara Bhagavati who is worshipped in the upper grove. In Kerala, Bhagavati is the predominant mother goddess and scholars like Sarah Caldwell see her cult as one combining indigenous local beliefs as well as later Sanskritic beliefs and practices (Caldwell, “Bhagavati Ritual” 56). She

encompasses a number of goddesses within her fold. For instance, Caldwell points to her manifestation in the temples of Kerala as “Kali, Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi, and Sarasvati and sometimes all in one day”, and her also encompassing “local village goddesses associated with fever diseases” (Caldwell, “Bhagavati Ritual” 56). Conceived “as benevolent and powerful, simultaneously a chaste virgin and a caregiving mother”, in mythology and iconography, she is “seldom portrayed as the consort of any male deity, but stands on her own” (Caldwell, “Bhagavati Ritual” 56). To Caldwell, the diverse ritual traditions associated with her worship are in fact a reflection of Kerala’s “eclectic historical and social development” (Caldwell, “Bhagavati Ritual” 56). She traces the origin of Bhagavati to *Korravai*, the ancient Tamil war goddess as well as to fierce goddesses worshipped by mountain dwelling aboriginal people who later get incorporated into the figure of the pan-indian goddess Kali (Caldwell “Waves” 94).

Shashibhooshan, while looking at the development of the mother goddesses in Kerala, opines that many of the early goddesses were village goddesses and clan goddesses. He points to the existence of strong tradition of Saktism^{vii} in Kerala before the coming of Vedic Brahminism to Kerala wherein fierce goddesses were worshipped (Shashibhooshan 64). He refers to the process of synthesis that happened as a result of inter-religious fertilization with the coming in of Vedic Brahminism and points to how Kali is the product of the synthesis of Shaktism and Shaivism while Durga is the product of the synthesis of Shaktism and Vaishnavism (Shashibhooshan 64). This is the same process that the scholar Shashibhooshan Dasgupta refers to where he talks about how between the first and the tenth century A.D., many local goddesses were pushed into the Hindu pantheon and as a result of religious and

philosophical generalization, came to be treated as aspects of the one universal mother goddess (Jordan 205).

While it may be hard to trace out a history of the goddess worshipped in Chottanikkara, based on the existing historical studies, it seems very likely that the existing concept of the goddess as Bhagavati seems to be an amalgamation of various religious traditions – a mother-goddess based religion such as that of Shaktism, Brahminical religion with its own set of goddesses as well as disparate traditions based on village and aboriginal goddesses^{viii}. It is important to keep in mind the disparate religious traditions that have fed into the figure of the Bhagavati since it would help us understand where and to what degree the Bhagavati differs from the Yakshi.

The Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi: the Tale

This story is part of the legends of the Goddess of Chottanikkara. The tale itself is modelled on the popular Yakshi tale. Its protagonist is Guptan Namboothiri who while going to watch a Kathakali performance (usually held at night in the temples in Kerala) meets a beautiful woman on the way. The woman tells him that she is Ittuthu Varasyar who is also on her way to the same performance and that she is happy to meet someone who would keep her company on the way. The Varasyars belonged to the Ambalavasi caste, a caste lower to that of the Namboothiris and one which was often matrilineal and matrilocal. Though their caste status was lower to that of the Namboothiris, they were also *savarna* and as mentioned in the introduction, the Namboothiris often had *sambandham* with women from this caste.

Since this Yakshi tale is about the Namboothiri escaping the clutches of the Yakshi, the Namboothiri is armed with something the Yakshi fears - a holy book on the Goddess called *Devi Mahatmyam* (The Greatness of the Goddess). However, the

Namboothiri's situation is a bit precarious (which he is unaware of since he doesn't realize that the woman is a Yakshi) in that the book is meant to be given to his guru whose house is on the way. The Varasyar (who is the Yakshi in disguise) asks Guptan to give the book quickly to the guru while she waits outside the guru's house. The guru, Kosappalli Achan Namboothiri, gets suspicious on seeing his disciple's hurry to leave and when he takes a look outside, spots his companion. It is implied that the guru, who is well-versed in magic and is also a devotee of the Goddess, can see the real form of the Yakshi which his naïve disciple cannot. The guru then asks Guptan to take a look at his companion waiting on the way while touching his hand. Guptan then sees the true form of the Varasyar. She is a Yakshi and appears as a fiendish woman with fierce and protruding eyes. Since this is a particularly fierce Yakshi, even the guru, who is skilled in sorcery, cannot save Guptan.

The guru informs him that only the Goddess of Chottanikkara can rescue him from the Yakshi's clutches and gives him his wet cloth after chanting some mantras over it. The cloth is supposed to guard Guptan till he reaches the temple, but he is supposed to throw it away once he reaches it. As Guptan runs to the temple, the Yakshi follows him though she cannot touch him. Once he reaches the temple, he throws the cloth away (since it is a used cloth that cannot be taken into the temple precincts where purity taboos operate) and makes a lunge into the temple precincts, but in his hurry, he falls down as a result of which one of his feet sticks out. The Yakshi catches him by that foot which is still outside the temple and tries to drag him back. As Guptan entreats the goddess to help him, the story goes that the Goddess rushes to the spot where she beheads the Yakshi and throws her remains into the temple pond which gets renamed thereafter as *Yakshi kulam* (the pond of the Yakshi)

or rakta kulam (blood red pond). The Yakshi is then installed in the outer compound of the temple where she is worshipped even today (Vaidyanathan 97-08).

This tale is among the rare Yakshi tales which pits a Goddess against a Yakshi and one of those rarer Yakshi tales which talks about her destruction (though surprisingly enough, the Yakshi does not get destroyed even after the beheading). The story of the Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi pits two forms of the female against each other, both supernatural beings. On the surface, the Yakshi may appear to be the polar opposite of the Goddess, both occupying two ends of the demonic and divine spectrum. However, when we go back to the Yakshi's origins, the tale appears to be about the confrontation of two goddesses - the Yakshi, an old tree goddess who retains some of her residual markers of divinity even in her malevolent avatar as the femme fatale of the folklore against the Bhagavati, the mother goddess. This tale may be even said to link the Yakshi with a specific temple pointing to the possibility that the later Yakshi tales of namboothiris may have got linked with existing centres of worship where the Yakshi had once been a major deity.

Yet in the present tale, the Yakshi's divinity is ambiguously located in contrast to the Goddess. The Goddess while she shares the wildness and ferocity of the Yakshi is still located in a different sphere. Even when she takes on her terrible form, the Bhagavati still remains a mother goddess. As Bhagavati, she is charged with safeguarding men like Guptan Namboothiri (and his family, especially the family woman) against the threat of the uncontrollable lust of the Yakshi (for the body of the man). One can argue that by installing the Yakshi in the temple and worshipping her as a deity at the end, she is also brought into the controllable sphere of female divinity which is where the Goddess is located. She is also now under the immediate control and surveillance of the Goddess and cannot stray beyond the space allocated to her.

However, is the concept of Bhagavati that different from the Yakshi's? Sarah Caldwell's interesting study on Bhagavati which traces the Bhagavati's similarities with the concept of the Yakshi could provide some answers.

Sarah Caldwell sees a number of parallels between the concepts of the Yakshi and a powerful mother goddess figure like the Bhagavati (a term which stands for both the benevolent mother goddess as well as the goddess in her violent form as Kali). Writing in the context of the *Mudiyettu* performance which is a ritualistic possession performance held in the Bhadrakali temples of Kerala where Kali's slaying of Darika is enacted and celebrated, she points to how Bhadrakali and the Yakshi appear to be symbols of the potentially dangerous sexuality of women in a patriarchal society.

The deity Bhadrakālī is conceived of in Kerala as an unmarried, virgin girl – beautiful, hot and dangerous – and is also clearly associated with *yaksis*. Like “hot” women, she, too, receives cooling offerings of bananas, coconut and rice. These please and placate her. Her heat is directly associated with her virgin state, and, like the *yaksis* and virgins of dreams, her desire and anger make her thirsty for male life fluids. In folktales and legends, the *yaksi* is a vampire, drinking the blood of her victims while seducing them; but George's statement^{ix} makes the symbolism more explicit: it is *semen* that the virgin demoness wants from her victim. This essential fluid fertilizes and cools the hot female womb but weakens and drains the man who gives it – is clearly a symbolic displacement of the intaking of semen by the vagina, and in some stories and medical pronouncements the two fluids are interchangeable. (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 211)

Caldwell takes up the story of Darika and points out that he is also called “*raktabījāsura*” since as per some versions of *Dārikavadham*, Darika had received a boon that every drop of his blood falling on the ground would give rise to a thousand more of him (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 211). *Bija* also means semen (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 211). Caldwell links it up with folk conceptions of reproductive physiology. According to these,

It is by heating the body and arousing sexual desire that both males and females produce ... their sexual fluids ... the heat of the female’s desire is requisite to conception, but this process inevitably requires a ‘sacrifice’ of the male to the female, an offering of his life fluids that is tantamount to blood sacrifice and leaves him somewhat less vital, closer to death. (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 211-12)

Caldwell sees Kali’s slaying of Darika which involves her attendant female forest ghost, the bloodthirsty Vetalam, lapping up the blood that drops from Darika’s body so as to prevent it from touching the ground as the enactment of “this sacrifice of essential male fluids” (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 212). She continues, “Dārika is thus destroyed by the direct controversion of his infinite autofertility: his *yaksi*/demon/vampire/virgin opponents ‘drain and drink’ his precious life fluids ... thereby destroying his vitality and killing him” (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 212).

To Caldwell, the worship of Bhagavati in Kerala through rituals that focus on keeping the Goddess’ blood thirst and sexual desires under control links her with the Yakshi whom I regard as the more uncontrollable version of the former.

Caldwell talks about another Bhagavati temple in Kerala, the Kodungallur Bhagavati temple^x, as one that reinforces “the association of the fierce goddess with the image of the sexually aggressive and insatiable virgin woman” (Caldwell,

“Bhagavati” 212). For instance, in the Kodungallur Bhagavati temple, where the festival participants largely belong to the lower castes (pointing probably to the Goddess’ own origin as a lower caste Goddess), the Goddess is propitiated through the singing of obscene songs which are supposed to satisfy her sexual desires since she is imagined as an unmarried goddess (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 213). Caldwell writes,

[T]he public worship of the virgin Kali in Kerala reveals in part an attempt to resolve concerns about female sexuality. Bhadrakālī is modeled on a virgin female, whose sign is menses, who is perceived as suffering from an unfulfilled desire for sex and procreation, whose lack of fulfilment is one source of her anger, and who requires the blood sacrifice of a male to cool and satisfy her ‘thirst’. (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 213)

When we look at the common links between these two figures, the Yakshi and the Bhagavati as Kali, we find that both are characterised by their blood lust and overpowering sexuality. In this, they remind us of the Neolithic Great Goddess about whom Donna Jordan has talked in detail. Discussing the “Great Goddess and her cyclical sacrificial consort”, Jordan writes, “The personification of the processes of nature, the Neolithic planter goddesses ruled the cycles of birth, death, and resurrection of the agricultural seasons, and their sons, kings, and consorts were cyclically sacrificed to ensure the productivity of the fields” (Jordan 30). She links blood sacrifices and fertility thus,

The goddess is not only divinely sexual, but she is also bloodthirsty, since blood was regarded as the fertilizer *par excellence* for the agricultural fields. In terms at once violent and romantic, Sumerian, Assyrian, Ugaritic, and Tamil myths all describe the insatiable lust of their respective war goddesses

for blood and killing. Fierce goddesses routinely demanded blood sacrifices, preferably human heads and buffalo, as their payment for abundant crops and prosperity. (Jordan 31)

Thus, both the overpowering sexuality and blood lust of Bhagavati as Kali seem to have been aspects of her probable earlier origins as a goddess of fertility. The Yakshi is also considered by historians as originally being a fertility goddess. Thus, both the Yakshi and the Goddess could have originally been both mother goddesses embodying more or less similar qualities.

However, when we come to the myth of Chottanikkara Amma and the Yakshi, a distinction has to be made. While the movie and some versions of the story project the Goddess of Chottanikkara as taking on her terrible form as Kali to slay the Yakshi, Kali is not her only form unlike in the temple of Kodungalloor where the major deity is Bhadrakali. Chottanikkara Bhagavati is considered the supreme mother goddess or *Adiparashakti* containing within her different forms of the Goddess such as Saraswati, Lakshmi, Parvati, Kali and Durga. The temple has an idol of Vishnu along with the Goddess' idol and hence the Goddess here is also worshipped as "Lakshmi Narayana", i.e as the Goddess Lakshmi along with her consort. While the term "Bhagavati" is applied to the mother goddess in general, in some temples, Bhagavati may be worshipped mainly as Kali in her terrible form and in others as the supreme mother goddess. In Chottanikkara, hence, we cannot apply the concept of a virgin goddess (as Caldwell does in the case of Kodungalloor) in toto to describe the goddess. I am investigating this a bit more closely since unlike Kodungalloor Bhagavathi whose mother goddess image is superimposed on her image as Bhadrakali, Kali here is just one of the forms of the supreme mother goddess whose other forms are more benevolent and even include one where the goddess is

worshipped as a consort (in her form as Lakshmi). It can be argued that these point to a greater Hinduisation of the mother goddess in Chottanikkara (at least in the *Melkkavu* or upper grove) when compared with the mother goddess in a temple like Kodungalloor^{xi} (the larger presence of the lower castes in the festival here is also an indication of it still retaining many features of its non-Hinduised past). In the case of the Goddess of Chottanikkara, Kali is just the fierce and terrible avatar she takes in the story. Otherwise, she is largely a benevolent mother goddess whose worship does not involve many of the rituals that the worship of Bhadrakali requires in temples of Kerala. Hence, the blood lust and overpowering sexuality that Caldwell generally associates with Bhadrakali is not as apparent in the case of the Chottanikkara Bhagavati even when she takes on the terrible form of Kali to save Guptan.

However, another question needs to be posed. If the goddess was primarily Bhadrakali, would she have beheaded the Yakshi? For instance, can the Bhagavati of Kodungallur be imagined as confronting a Yakshi if both of them share more or less similar qualities? The fact though is that there are lesser known tales which describe the goddess Kali taking on a Yakshi and defeating her. William Dalrymple in his article “The strange sisters of Mannarkkad^{xii}” discusses the myths regarding the Bhagavati of the Manarcad temple (who is considered to be the Goddess of Kodungallur herself). He writes,

The story the villagers told me was that long ago, when their ancestors first arrived in Mannarkad and cleared a place for themselves in the forest, they angered an evil yakshi, or tree spirit, who had lived there. Furious at being disturbed, the yakshi struck down the settlers with smallpox. Only when the villagers brought an idol of Goddess Bhagavati from her temple in

Kodungallur, and the goddess fought seven pitched battles with the yakshi, was the epidemic brought to an end. (Dalrymple. “The strange sisters”)

Thus, one has to say that even when sharing similar qualities and possibly origins as well, the Yakshi as a figure has been used as an antagonist to the mainstream goddesses in the local Hindu myths. The Yakshi is presented as a powerful being who shares features of the goddess. Thus, in the movie version of the Goddess of Chottanikkara, Guptan’s guru refuses to come to his rescue beyond a point since he is afraid of the Yakshi’s curse which can affect the progeny of his *illom* (house). In the above story, the Yakshi curses the settlers with small pox, a disease usually associated with Bhadrakali. The similarities between both figures thus peek through in several places, most notably in the Yakshi’s installation as a sub-deity in the Chottanikkara temple even after being beheaded by the Goddess there. Thus traces of the Yakshi’s history remain even in the current tales where she is cast as the antagonist. However, it must be said that the Yakshi’s powers are also useful to amplify the Goddess’ own power in the tale and thus cement the latter’s status as the supreme one.

The Yakshi and the Goddess thus share a complex relationship. In this tale, one can perhaps see the confrontation between the two aspects of the mother or what Kristeva calls the two signifying functions of the term – as the source of life as well as the abyss (Creed 27). However, perhaps, the equation is more complicated than this for the Goddess as the Bhagavati has destructive powers just like the Yakshi. The Mother Goddess, in Hindu mythology, while being the source of life, can also be the abyss as we see in the case of the most terrible form of the Goddess, Kali. As the wielder of the trident, the Bhagavati here is a powerful mother goddess who can kill just like the Yakshi. The Yakshi’s instrument of violence is her fangs, a symbol of her

vagina dentata, while the Goddess' instrument is her trident. Though the trident can also be read as a symbol of the Goddess' vagina dentata, in the tale, for all practical purposes, it resembles the iron nail of the sorcerers. The Goddess has also moved away from the realm of nature that the Yakshi occupies since her instrument of violence is a weapon (unlike the fangs of the Yakshi) and that too a phallic weapon.

The greater difference between both, however, lies in that the Bhagavati has been domesticated and even her powers of violence have been channelized to fulfil a "benevolent" purpose – to preserve the moral law and order of the world of her devotees. The order of this world lies in punishing errant female figures like the Yakshi whose overt sexuality and violence unmediated by any "dharmic" *raison d'être* (like that of the Goddess) make them the embodiment of intransigent female autonomy that is inimical to its values. Renuka, in her article "Yakshi" where she tries to understand the cultural history of the Yakshi, points to how the subtext of *Aitihayamala*, the collection of legends about Kerala which includes Yakshi tales, suggests that the Yakshis used to seduce those Brahmins who could find self-control and a means of escape only through the *Devi Mahatmyam* granthas they held (37). However, the character of her male devotees is not a concern of the Goddess. It is the "temptress" who gets punished and not the man whose morality does not get any scrutiny in the Yakshi tale. This is partly because the Yakshi in the tale, despite her origins as a Mother Goddess, is not a motherly figure like that of the Goddess. She is an unmarried woman, marked by her overt sexuality (more covert in the case of the Goddess) and not bound by any patriarchal structures whether it be that of a patriarchal family unit ("the family woman") or that of a patriarchal religion ("the Goddess"). At the end of the tale, the Yakshi's deification involves the imposition of

motherhood on this errant figure, where the mother now stands more for the “source of life” than the abyss.

However, the ending of this tale is also interesting since even after the Yakshi is beheaded by the Great Goddess, she is not destroyed. Is there an acknowledgement on the part of the tale that the Goddess cannot completely destroy the Yakshi since the Yakshi is also strangely her double? In fact, another folktale, which is that of the famous exorcist Sooryakaladi, is a fascinating exploration into the ontological liminality of the Yakshi, her in-betweenness that makes it hard to categorise her into the binaries of the divine and the demonic. More than that, the tale is also a warning tale which implicitly points to the dangers of not recognising the latent divinity of the Yakshi.

The tale of Sooryakaladi and the Yakshi is a tale of revenge gone wrong, where the avenger is punished by the Gods for his act of revenge against a Yakshi. In this story, Sooryakaladi avenges the death of his father at the hands of a Yakshi by doing fierce penance which gets him a book of mantras from God Surya. With this book, he becomes a powerful sorcerer who is able to call forth the Yakshi who had killed his father. The Yakshi pleads with him not to destroy her and avers that the only way he can save himself after destroying her would be to visit the Siva temple at Thiruvallur on the 41st day. Sooryakaladi Bhattathiri still destroys her by sacrificing her in the homagni or the sacrificial fire. After some days, Sooryakaladi exorcises a Gandharva out of the Queen of the land as well. The Gandharva had been the consort of the Yakshi and curses Sooryakaladi with certain death for depriving him twice of female company (gandharvas are supposed to possess women they fall in love with). The only way to avoid the curse is to visit the above temple on the 12th day (which coincides with the day of the yakshi's curse as well) (Sankunni 124-131). Though

Sooryakaladi does reach the temple on time, he gets a sudden urge to pass urine which disappears as soon as he enters the toilet nearby. This continues for hours until Sooryakaladi lies there writhing in pain and realises that the curse has come true. He groans in pain saying that he only followed what was in the Grantha to which an incorporeal voice replies, “But the Grantha never asked *you* to follow it”. Sooryakaladi struggles for five hours before succumbing to a painful death (Sankunni 124-131). The tale based on Sooryakaladi in *Aithihyamala* ends with the statement that the descendants of Sooryakaladi considered his death as a lesson as to the evil consequences of mean acts of exorcism (Sankunni 131).

In this tale, Sooryakaladi has a valid reason to destroy the Yakshi since she has been responsible for his father’s murder. Again, the book of mantras which equips him to become a sorcerer is granted to him by a God. Yet, finally, his act of killing the Yakshi (and exorcising the *gandharva*) is seen by the Gods as a violation of divine laws to be punishable by death. This tale thus points to the strange liminality that the Yakshi occupies in the religious discourse of local Hinduism in Kerala. The Yakshi can be bound by a sorcerer, but she should not be destroyed for that power lies only with the Gods. However, even this power which lies in the hands of the Gods is limited in degree. Thus, the Yakshi, who gets beheaded in the Tale of the Goddess of Chottanikkara, gets a space within the temple to be thereafter worshipped as a sub-deity, under the control and surveillance of the Mother Goddess. The curious ending of this tale perhaps suggests that the Yakshi is too like the Goddess to be destroyed completely and thus a compromise has to be reached. I will be exploring this aspect in detail later in conjunction with the function of the Yakshi in the tale of the Priest of Kadamattom. However, before I go into that tale, I would like to take up the movie

version of this particular tale since it does offer interesting insights into the cultural purposes the same tale serves at another point of time.

Two movies were produced based on the legends of the goddess, one in 1976 (*Chottanikkara Amma*) and the other in 1984 (*Amme Narayana*) both of which featured the popular tale of the Yakshi and the goddess. I was unable to access the second movie and hence my analysis will be of the 1976 movie.

The Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi: the movie

Although in Malayalam film history, the 1970s is noted for the emergence of the new wave cinema under the aegis of directors like Aravindan and Adoor Gopalakrishnan, this decade, like many others, also saw a plethora of commercial movies being released, among which were mythologicals and devotional movies (“History of Malayalam Cinema” ; “List of Malayalam films of 1976”). The 1976 movie on the Goddess of Chottanikkara titled *Chottanikkara Amma* [The mother goddess of Chottanikkara] was set in the form of a narrative where a Hindu sanyasi (monk) tells the story of the Goddess to some devotees visiting the temple. In the movie, there is a clear attempt to link the local story of the Goddess with the larger narrative of mainstream Hindu myths. Thus, the Goddess’ presence in the temple in the movie has a backstory where sages and devas are seen as beseeching the goddess *Adiparashakti* (the supreme mother goddess) to save human kind from the demons of Kali Yuga, a request she accedes to. One of the other major differences in the movie is its linking Kannappan, the first worshipper, with the Hindu monk Vilwamangalam.

In the movie, Kannappan is a *Mala arayan* (the member of a hill tribe) who sacrifices cows to his (“pagan”) goddess. Unlike in the tale where Kanappan’s decision to lead a spiritual life after his daughter’s untimely death is his own, in the movie, Kanappan’s spirituality is the result of Hindu Sanyasi’s (monk’s)

intervention. After his daughter's death, Kannappan, grieving over the loss of his daughter, is visited by a sanyasi (monk) who informs him that his daughter died because he had sinned by slaughtering cows. The monk then shows him that the calf his daughter had cherished and tried to protect has turned into a stone idol of Lakshmi and Vishnu. He also informs Kannappan that he will become a great sage called Vilwamangalam Swamiyar in his next birth^{xiii} for which he has to worship the idol diligently.

In this, the movie's story can be said to follow later versions of the temple's origins. In the initial versions of the tale of the temple's origin, Vilwamangalam doesn't have anything to do with Kannappan or the Goddess in the Upper Grove or Melkkavu. Rather, he is associated with the Goddess Bhadrakali in the lower grove or Keezhkkavu whose idol he is supposed to have discovered in the temple pond. Thus, the movie links up Kannappan, the Mala arayan, who is outside the local brahminical Hinduism with the later Hindu saint Vilwamangalam, both of whom are connected with the tale of the origin of the temple in different capacities.

The process of Brahminisation of the temple in the movie version is similar to that of the tale. In the movie, once the Pulaya woman (who is presented as worshipping hill deities) discovers the stone which oozes blood, Edath Namboothiri is called in and it is he who proclaims in what form the idol is going to be worshipped. The temple thereafter is shown as being managed by the families of nine Namboothiris.

What we thus get to see in the movie is the creation of a narrative that places a local goddess within the larger framework of stories about the one mother goddess or Parashakti. The reference to the Goddess' presence as an answer to the demons that besiege humankind with the advent of Kali yuga links her with the mainstream Hindu

temporal narrative of yugas while it also highlights the Goddess' fame as a destroyer of 'bhoota-preta-pisacha' (monsters, ghosts and ghouls). The movie even shows Indra and the other Devas joining in with Hindu sages to beseech the Goddess, thus further linking mainstream Hindu myths with the local myth. At the same time, one can see that the Goddess' fight with the Yakshi which is part of the local folklore of the temple is pre-empted in the projection of the goddess as specifically arriving in Kerala to defeat the forces of "evil" of Kali yuga. When Vilwamangalam is shown as later installing the deity of Bhadrakali in *Keezhkkavu* or the lower grove, he also beseeches the goddess to protect the devotees from being possessed by spirits.

The Yakshi as a figure is present in the movie at two levels, one in the frame narrative where a Sanyasi tells a group of devotees, among whom is a *possessed* young wife visiting the temple to get rid of her illness^{xiv}, tales connected with the temple and the Goddess, and the other, in the story of the Yakshi that forms part of his narratives describing the greatness of the Goddess. In this chapter, my focus is going to be on the much celebrated story of the Goddess of Chottanikkara defeating the Yakshi that forms a part of his narrative.

The episode involving the Goddess' victory over the Yakshi is presented in the overall narrative of the movie as an example of the Goddess' love for her devotees. When the sanyasi explains to the devotees that the Goddess is worshipped as Saraswati in the morning, Bhagavati/Kali at noon and as Durga in the evening, the father of the possessed young woman asks him about the roofless floor where a Yakshi is worshipped in the temple compound. The sanyasi replies that there is an interesting story behind it and that is how we get to see the story of Guptan and the Yakshi.

Guptan Namboothiri in the movie was played by the comedian Adoor Bhasi who while he was presented as stupid and lustful also had an air of naivet  about him. Thus while the audience is encouraged to laugh at Guptan, the projection of his foibles is such that despite his lascivious nature, he appears as a fool rather than as a villain. The Yakshi who appears in the traditional dress of mundu and neriathu^{xv} introduces herself as *Kamakshi Varasyar* (the name is different from that of the tale though the caste is the same).



One of the conventions of the Yakshi movies of this genre is a scene where the Yakshi and the Namboothiri engage in role play that is at odds with the reality. In this movie as well, the contrast between Guptan's image of the Yakshi as a helpless young woman and her real self is played out for comic effect. Guptan, a Kathakali fanatic, has a daydream (played out as a song) where he imagines himself and Kamakshi Varasyar as playing roles in a Kathakali performance. The song lyrics describe her as Rati, the goddess of sensual pleasure and the wife of Kama, a far cry from her real identity. Later, when Guptan asks the Yakshi to open his paan box and take out the knife he uses to spread the paan on the betel leaves, she shudders in fear. Guptan laughs at the Yakshi's response believing it to be a "delicate" woman's reaction to an

instrument of violence. However, it is clear to the audience that the Yakshi is afraid of the knife^{xvi} for other reasons. The audience who knows the Yakshi tale realises that it is the iron in the knife that the Yakshi fears and not the knife per se.

The scene which perfectly brings out the contrast between Guptan's perception of the Yakshi and the reality is the one where his guru spots the Yakshi standing outside his gate and recognises her true form. As he looks on, the Yakshi's form changes from the mundu-neriyathu clad *beautiful* Kamakshi Varasyar to that of someone resembling a *rakshasi*. In the movie, the Yakshi's *rakshasi* form is presented as large-bodied and dark-skinned. She wears a necklace of multi-coloured beads and has her wild frizzly hair left open. Her face appears to be painted in green in places and her fangs are visible. It is no accident that the Yakshi's *dangerous* self resembles that of a *rakshasi* since the *rakshasi* in the epics is also a shape-shifter and is marked by her aggressive sexuality just like the Yakshi.



It would be insightful to contrast the Yakshi's two forms, her outer appearance and her inner self as represented in this movie to further understand how femininity is constructed as *desirable* and *undesirable/monstrous* in the cinematic medium. The Yakshi in her "Varasyar" outer form is fair-skinned and wears the *mundu-neriyathu* which shows her upper caste status. Much of her hair is tied in a bun decorated with

jasmine flowers and she wears a pearl chain around her neck. In contrast, the Yakshi's real form is dark in colour and big-bodied. She wears colourful beads around her neck (it is the tribal and lower-caste women who wear beads in the movie) and her wild hair is left open. Perhaps the wearing of beads by both the Yakshi in her real avatar and the lower caste/tribal characters is an unconscious sartorial choice; however it does point to the kind of female jewellery considered as *ungenteel* in the diegetic space of the movie.



The movie combines two different versions of the tale, one in which the guru gives Guptan a wet cloth to guard himself against the Yakshi until he reaches the temple and another one in which the guru gives him 10 magical stones which he is asked to drop between himself and the Yakshi until he reaches his destination. In this movie, while Guptan's guru gives him the magical stones, it is another Namboothiri who gives him the wet cloth when Guptan takes refuge in his house for some time.

The movie is faithful to the tale as far as the climax is concerned. It presents the Goddess as all-powerful in that the very moment she appears, the Yakshi loses her ferocity and is reduced to a pathetic figure. As the Yakshi cowers behind some bushes, the Devi is seen dancing with her trident, her eyes constantly searching for the

Yakshi. Once she spots the Yakshi, she pursues her and finally kills her with her trident. She then stands with the bloodied trident in her hand in a blessing pose. The episode regarding the Yakshi and the goddess ends here with the sanyasi telling the listeners that the Yakshi thereafter has been installed in the temple compound.



The Goddess was played by the actress Srividya who coincidentally played the Yakshi in *Kadamattathu Kathanar*. In fact, the choice of the same actress to play the Yakshi's outer form and the Goddess in two different movies can be read as a telling instance of the latent similarity in both the figures. The Goddess in this movie appears in the form of Goddess Kali, her face green in colour and wielding a trident.

It would be worthwhile to reflect upon the role that the Yakshi plays in the tale and the movie. Corinne Dempsey calls her a “heuristic device” since the red colour of the bathing tank in Chottanikka is explained using a story featuring her (Dempsey “Nailing Heads” 114). In general though, besides celebrating the superior power of the goddess in comparison with that of a Yakshi, the tale is also meant to celebrate the benevolence of the goddess and emphasize her approachableness as a deity. The film sets up the background story of *Parasakti*’s ascent into Kerala to rid the human world of demons during kali yuga to coincide with the well-known legend of the Goddess’ slaying of the Yakshi. The Yakshi is thus presented as the *raison d’être* of the Goddess’ own emergence in Kerala which begs the question: Does the Goddess require the Yakshi as her “other” to define her own “self”?

I will be taking up this complicated “self/other” equation further in my discussion of the legend of the Christian Priest Kadamattathu Kathanar and the Yakshi. His legend is especially interesting since the Yakshi had never been a part of Christian folklore till then and had usually been the staple diet of stories of Hindu tantriks/magicians.

However, in this particular tale, not only does the Kathanar take on a Yakshi and bind her, but he lets her be worshipped in a Hindu temple at the end of the tale. This tale and its movie retelling is then an exploration of the role that the Yakshi plays in medieval Kerala in the contest between two religions to establish their moral superiority, local Brahminical Hinduism and Christianity.

Nevertheless, things are much more complicated than they seem. The Yakshi may be an outsider to Christianity, but as a sorcerer charged with dabbling in “unchristian magic”, the Syrian Christian Priest Kadamattathu Kathanar (The Priest of

Kadmattom) is no less an outsider. The Yakshi may be a magical monster, but the sorcery of the Priest of Kadamattom is no less “monstrous” requiring legitimising devices that transform him and his magic in later re-tellings so as to make them fall in line with the official version of the Church. In fact, Kathanar’s tale of defeating the Yakshi can also be read in the context of the Syrian Christian – Roman Catholic interface in Kerala’s history where certain Syrian Christian practices were deemed as pagan and were consequently banned with the coming of the European missionaries to the shores of Kerala with a more centralised system of Christianity.

What one may thus consider as a supernatural tale, of a battle between a spirit and an exorcist-priest, is thus part of a rich history of religious conflicts within Kerala. It is also an exploration of what becomes monstrous at a particular period of time through the figure of a monster, the Yakshi.

Kadmattathu Kathanar (The Priest of Kadamattom)

There are many versions to Kathanar’s tale. But the earliest written one is in *Aithiyamala*. *Aithiyamala* by Kottarathil Sankunni was one of the earliest attempts made to collect the legends and myths surrounding different places and personalities in the Malayalam country. While some of the stories featured in the collection were published as newspaper articles as early as in 1898, the first collection in a book form was published only in 1909 (“Kottarathil Sankunni”). The whole collection came out in 8 parts/volumes from 1909-1934 (“Kottarathil Sankunni”). The story “Kadamattathu Kathanar” was part of the fourth volume and came out in September, 1926 and was based on the available oral accounts (“Kottarathil Sankunni”).

In order to make sense of the story of Kathanar and his magical powers, including his vanquishing the Yakshi, an “evil spirit” that was not recognised within

traditional Christianity, I believe that one needs to see it in the context of the overall spread of Christianity within Kerala and the transformation it underwent in the process. This necessitates reading the *context* of the tale, especially the religious history accompanying it, as a *co-text* since the paradox of Christianity entering into spaces hitherto considered the preserve of Hinduism (binding a Yakshi in this case) can be understood only with such a foregrounding of the former.

Thus, the story of a Christian Priest taking on a Yakshi, an “evil spirit” not recognised within traditional Christianity, defeating her using magical powers considered “unorthodox” within his religious order and then letting her stay in the precincts of a temple devoted to a Hindu goddess may seem incongruous if we approach religion with our “normative” understanding of it. Dempsey in “Lessons in Miracles from Kerala, South India: Stories of three ‘Christian Priests’ ” writes, “decontextualized understandings of religion that focus solely on established or projected belief systems and creeds at the expense of less-than-tidy practices forfeit vital complexities and ... notions of boundaries and identities that are more permeable than rigid” (175). Thus one needs to approach the story of Kathanar bearing in mind the distinction between “ahistorical constructions of overly tidy categories” such as “Hinduism” or “Christianity” and “lived expressions” which “reflect religious affiliations and identities that defy politically contrived rigidities” (Dempsey “Lessons in Miracles” 175).

In order to understand the Yakshi entering into the framework of a Christian saint’s legend, it is important to split hairs, so to say, and understand the specificities of his particular denomination. Kathanar is not just a Christian Priest. He is a Syrian Christian and the history of this branch of Christianity in Kerala is one worth exploring further since “the St Thomas or ‘Syrian’ Christians are a group who defy all

the received wisdom about Indian Christians” (Bayly 243). Throwing further light on their unique history, Susan Bayly in *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian society 1700-1900* comments,

Far from having been a low-status, low-caste convert group who owed their origins to European missionaries and the colonial state, the Syrians have a history of power and privilege which dates from many centuries before the coming of European rule. Syrian warriors, traders and church notables were honoured and rewarded by Malayali Hindu rulers, and the group has long regarded itself as ritually superior to all other Christian convert groups. This sense of distinct and superior status was bound up with the Syrians' claims of apostolic foundation for their church, and with their involvement in the cult of St Thomas the Apostle, 'Doubting Thomas', who is claimed as the group's patron and founder figure^{xvii}... [F]or centuries the Syrians' foundation accounts have maintained that the group is descended from local men of high standing - usually described as members of the elite Keralan Nambudiri Brahman caste group – who were converted by St Thomas during his stay in Malabar^{xviii}. (243-244)

Thus the Syrian Christian history in Kerala, as per legends, is believed to begin right in the early years of the formation of the religion when different disciples of Christ travelled to various parts of the world to spread Christianity. Some of the reasons for the superior status of Syrian Christians in Kerala's society at that time were their involvement in the maritime trade - the Malabar pepper trade and their prowess as warriors (Bayly 246). They were a part of Kerala's martial tradition along with the Nairs^{xix} and the Mappilas^{xx} and were “treated by their Hindu rulers as members of a ritually superior caste group equivalent in status to the upper Nayar

warrior groups” (Bayly 249)^{xxi}. In fact, some of the early European observers used to club the Syrian Christians and the Nairs together because of the similarity in their lifestyle and the rituals of pollution both observed, even going on to suggest that members of the two groups intermarried^{xxii} (Bayly 269).

Bayly observes that these and other customs which the Syrians shared with caste Hindus must be seen as “much more than superficial borrowings from Hinduism - mere 'accretions' as the European missionaries maintained” (269). For her, “they were rites which safeguarded the Syrians' corporate substance and guaranteed their status within a shared moral order which was defined in terms of gradations of ritual purity and pollution”. To be considered as *savarna*, “persons of clean caste and standing in the Hindu moral order”, it was imperative for the Syrians to adhere to these standards (269). It was because of this that they were “granted one of the most critical signs of ritual status within the society, the right of access to Hindu temples and sacred precincts” (269).

This was at a time when low-caste Hindus such as the *Ezhavas*, the untouchable *Cherumas* and *Pulayas* as well as the Christian converts from low-caste fishing and agricultural caste groups were banned from Hindu temple precincts and adjoining streets (Bayly 269-270). The most striking proof of the Syrian Christians' status within the caste order was they often held the status of donors at Hindu shrines and temples festivals and in many parts of Malabar, the Nairs participated in the festivals of the Syrian Church (Bayly 253).

It is important to know the linkages between the Syrian Christians and the caste Hindus during the pre-colonial period since otherwise a Christian Priest taking on the function of a Brahmin Priest by sparring with a Yakshi may appear more incongruous than it would have seemed to the people of that time. This is not to deny

that though some of these boundaries may have been more permeable than expected, crossing them did bring some censure as we see in Kathanar's own curious story and in the additions that enter the later versions of his story to explain away aspects which become "unorthodox" later.

Kadamattathu Kathanar , "Kadamattam" in his name referring to the place where he is supposed to have lived and "Kathanar" referring to his title which was that of a hereditary priest in the Syrian community, is supposed to have lived "approximately four hundred years ago" (Dempsey, "Lessons in Miracles" 162). The interesting thing about Kathanar is his ambiguous position within the Jacobite church (Jacobites are a subset of the Syrian Christians) he is part of. Corrine Dempsey who did research on him in 1994 and interacted with believers and priests around the Church of Kadamattom writes, "Katamattattachan's status in relation to Christianity is variously interpreted-not because he was professedly non-Christian but because his miraculous powers are decidedly unorthodox and, therefore, for some, suspect" ("Lessons in Miracles" 161). While Kathanar is counted among the most famous saints of Kerala and his fantastic exploits have been published, televised, staged as a play and even made into a movie, her interviewees (predominantly Christians) regularly told Dempsey that Kathanar had been excommunicated for his methods because of his reliance on magic for his sensational powers ("Lessons in Miracles" 161). Dempsey also found that the Jacobite Church apparently had "nothing to do, officially, with his current devotion" because of this ("Lessons in Miracles" 161).

Part of the reason why Kathanar's powers are considered unorthodox is also because they are believed to have come from a system outside Christianity. As per his legends published in *Aithihamala*, Kathanar received his powers of sorcery from a group of Mala Arayans or a forest tribe. The story goes that the young Kathanar,

whose real name was Poulouse, once lost his way in the forest and ended up in a cave of Mala Arayans. Many of the Mala Arayans were cannibals and were fearsome in appearance and nature. However, their leader took to Kathanar because of his gentle demeanour and treated him like a son. Kathanar learnt his magical powers from the Mala Arayan Chief who was skilled in sorcery and made his escape from the cave after many years of imprisonment there. Once he came back to his church, he started practising his powers of sorcery and even established a system of sorcery called the Kadamattathu system of training (Sankunni *Lore and Legends* 174-77)^{xxiii}.

Compared to the tales of Hindu tantriks/exorcists in *Aithihyamala*, the major difference in the tale of Kathanar is that much ink is spent on locating the source of his magical knowledge. This could have been because while magic and exorcism had been generally associated with Hindu priests, a Christian Priest acquiring magical powers was something out of the norm. Thus, unlike the tales of Hindu exorcists in *Aithihyamala* which begin with a brief statement about their being famous exorcists before going straight into the details of their exploits, Kathanar's amassing these powers itself becomes a major part of his tale.

As is obvious from the tale, Kathanar's powers of magic which as per his legend he receives from a group of cave-dwelling cannibals must appear "suspect" at best and "monstrous" at worst to the officials of his Church. I would like to discuss in detail Kathanar's magic since it serves as an interesting counter point to the Yakshi's own monstrosity. In the case of Kathanar, the monsterization of his magic can be either traced to the transformation his community underwent with the arrival of the Portuguese or to his having learnt them from a tribal group.

When we come to the first instance, what we find is the Syrian Christians having their own systems of magic and sorcery which become suspect with the

coming of the Portuguese to the shores of Kerala with a more centralised form of Christianity. Thus I would like to situate Kathanar's powers of magic in the Roman Catholic-Syrian Christian interface and the transformations that Syrian Christianity underwent in the process with some of their practices being labelled as "pagan" and banned.

In fact, Kathanar's tale can be read along with/as part of the changes Syrian Christianity itself underwent in the process of India and Kerala's colonisation. Before the coming of the Portuguese, the Syrian Christians derived their legitimacy from their ties to the West Asian primates and saint-bishops who used to visit the Syrian Christian settlements in Kerala from time to time and renew the faith of their followers (Bayly 257). But since the coming of these clerics to the Malayalam country was irregular and could not be predicted, the Syrian Christians, who had no indigenous bishops of their own, looked to the Hindu chiefs and rulers of the land to renew the authority of their indigenous leaders, the archdeacons (Bayly 257). The resemblance of many of the Syrian rituals to the Hindu rituals of worship thus needs to be seen in terms of a set up where the power of the Hindu rulers was an important legitimising source of the Syrian Christians' sacred power (Bayly 274).

These change with the coming of the Portuguese in 1498 with their missionaries who had been granted the right to control ecclesiastical appointments in all her overseas territories by the Papacy (Bayly 276). The term 'Padroado' was applied to this state-backed church system (Bayly 276). The Portuguese wanted the Syrian Christians to drop their allegiance to the West Asian Primates, whom they regarded as "Nestorian heretics^{xxiv}" and instead become "true clients and allies of Portugal" and part of the Roman papacy (Bayly 276).

What happens next is interesting with regard to Kathanar's tale as well since it tells us about the prevailing religious practices of the time which were now no longer in favour. The Synod of Diamper in 1599 is a watershed event in the Syrian Christian history since that signified a transfer in the allegiance of large numbers of Syrians to the Roman Catholic church.

In 1599, in the course of a church synod held at the Christian locality of Udayamperur (Diamper), the Padroado authorities induced the entire Syrian priesthood to repudiate their allegiance to the west Asian Catholicos, to abjure all un-Catholic doctrines and observances, and to swear allegiance to the Roman See. Much disapproval was expressed at the existence of practices such as the performance of ceremonial ablutions to remove the pollution caused by birth, death and other life-crisis events ... *The Synod also condemned Syrian priests for casting horoscopes in the Hindu manner, for using 'pagan' techniques of exorcism, divination and dream interpretation ...* (Bayly 282- 283)

In most cases though, the Syrians were asked to “Christianise the form of their rites and invocations instead of abandoning them altogether^{xxv}” (Bayly 283). Thus, for instance, while “the Synod banned the use of 'pagan' incantations in ceremonies of exorcism” it “upheld the belief in possession by demons as an essential element of Catholic doctrine” (Bayly 283).

Many of the books used by the Syrian Christians were also banned outright (Bayly 283). Some of them were even burnt (Menon 192). One of the banned books was called *Parisman*^{xxvi} or the *Persian Medicine* which was charged with being “full

of sorceries” and containing “many superstitious exorcisms for the casting out of devils” (Hough 549).

One needs to read this event with an episode from Kathanar’s own legend where the Patriarch of his Church takes offence at Kathanar’s dabbling in sorcery and calls it “unchristian”. Like in the Synod of Diamper where certain Syrian Christian texts were burnt, the Patriarch of Kathanar’s Church tries to burn down Kathanar’s library full of his books on sorcery.

The story goes that after Kathanar became a famous exorcist-magician, a *Patriarch*, a religious leader from the former’s Church from “Jerusalem or somewhere” came to visit him (*Sankunni Lore & Legends*^{xxvii} 180). Kathanar impressed him with a grand feast which included grapes he had produced using his magical powers (*Sankunni Lore & Legends* 180). However, once the Holy Father came to know that the grapes were the product of Kathanar’s magic and that his house had a collection of tomes on magic, he, with the help of his valets, tried to burn down Kathanar’s library (*Sankunni Aithihyamala* 532). However, to his surprise, the books flew to the sky as if they were birds with not even one of them catching fire (*Sankunni Aithihyamala* 532). The Holy Father then tried to persuade Kathanar to give up his magic and sorcery since they were “unbecoming of a Christian” (*Sankunni Aithihyamala* 532). Kathanar, however, replied that he had not done anything that hurt the people around or him or against the Lord he believed in (*Sankunni Aithihyamala* 532). Since he used his magic only for the benefit of the people around him, he wanted the Father to permit him to continue using it (*Sankunni Aithihyamala* 532). After a lot of persuasion, the Holy Father “magnanimously” gave Kathanar the permission to use his magic for social good before returning to his homeland (*Sankunni Aithihyamala* 532).

This segment can be seen as laying bare the anxieties regarding Kathanar's *unchristian* powers of magic before resolving them through the intervention of the Holy Father from abroad who "legitimises" them. Kathanar seems to have lived in the 17th century since there is a reference to Kathanar helping the King of Cochin in the battle against the Dutch by giving him an arrow blessed with magic which is supposed to have led to the latter's defeat (Sankunni 532). The Dutch and the kingdom of Cochin were locked in battle with each other in the 1660s and hence one can surmise that Kathanar must have been alive at that time. The Synod of Diamper which banned the use of Syrian Christian texts of magic was held in 1599. The tale of Kathanar's magical powers which included those of exorcism can be then read as the vestige of a past when Syrian Christian priests participated in rituals quite similar to those practised by the Hindu priests of the time. These were either practices which followed their own texts of magic like *Parisman* or which borrowed the vocabulary of the local Hindu exorcism rituals. As is quite apparent, these practices fell out of favour with the coming of European missionaries with a more centralised system of Christianity to the shores of Kerala. Thus, by the time of Kathanar, these practices were no longer looked upon with approval by the officials of his church. While analysing the legends of Kathanar in conjunction with the historical event of the Synod of Diamper, the scholar and historian Raghava Varier arrives at the same conclusion. To him, this episode from Kathanar's legends is an illustration of the observation that "the thin shards of the historical past can be seen scattered" even across the pastures of legends (Varier xi).

Whether Kathanar's magical powers were based on a Syrian Christian text of magic, texts which were considered as "heretical" and "dangerous" in the new order or whether they were similar to the Hindu tantriks of the time is a question difficult to

answer. The tale itself however points to another source – the hill tribe called the *Mala arayans*. In both cases, it is their religion, the source of their magic, which gets described as “pagan” and “monstrous”.

The word *Mala arayan* translates as “the monarchs of the hills” (Joseph 118). In the olden days, they used to be traditional agriculturists who sold their hill produce in the plains. They were independent in character and in rank were considered equal to “Muhammedans and Jews” (Mateer 73). In his “Native Life in Travancore” (1883), Rev. Samuel Mateer pejoratively refers to their religion as “demonolatry”, but what is interesting for us in his account is the mention of how they were feared for their spiritual powers, “

Though sometimes spoken of as an inferior race by the Hindus, yet we generally find them looked upon as beings in alliance with some powerful demonolatry; and presents are abundantly bestowed in order to prevent their curses producing ill-effects. ...The objects of Arayan worship are the spirits of their ancestors, or certain local demons supposed to reside in rocks or peaks and having influence only over particular villages, or families (Mateer 75).

V. V. Joseph doing research on them in 2010 calls their religion as “a system of spiritism or animism^{xxviii} ... They worship clan gods. The centre of their worship is often not the temple but the sacred wood (Kavu) (154)”.

What is interesting about the Mala arayans is that the Yakshi has been a deity worshipped in many of the temples thought to have been erected and administered by Arayan chieftains, temples which later came under the sway of Brahmanical Hinduism^{xxix} (Joseph 157). While at present, it would be difficult to precisely trace the religious system existing among the Mala Arayans at the time of Kathanar due to the

transformations it has undergone due to the Hinduisation and Christianisation among the community, it can be undoubtedly said that they were a group fabled to be skilled in magic and sorcery (Joseph 157). The existence of Yakshi as a deity in some of their temples which were originally sacred groves or *kaavus* points to a system of nature worship. However, this aspect of their religion has not been explored much.

The Mala arayans seem to have been part of the original non-brahminic groups who were skilled in mantravada or sorcery, which was often used to cure mental illness. In his dissertation on the management of mental illness in Kerala, Baiju Gopal writes that before the Aryanisation of Kerala, manthravada treatment was not organised and used to be the hereditary occupation of different non-brahmin communities (Gopal 162). “Their concepts about mental illness and its remedy were different from the well-organized practice of Brahmins. Many scholars argued that the mantravada treatment for mental illness was originated from tribal communities and later accommodated in Brahmin tradition [sic].” (Gopal 162-163) Citing the names of two famous Brahmin families renowned for sorcery, Gopal argues that the word *forest* in their family name can be interpreted as a sign of the non-vedic origins of their sorcery (Gopal 165).

In Kathanar’s tale, the *Mala arayans* are described as a group of fierce-looking men who reside in a cave and are skilled in magic. It is from the leader of the group that Kathanar learns his magic. The leader’s entourage includes cannibals as well and their policy of being unclothed is used to present them as barbaric in their habits and lifestyle. The leader of the group though is presented in a more benevolent light, as more of a “noble savage”.

The representation of the Mala arayans in the story points to the discourses about the tribals that were in circulation during this period. The presence of the Mala arayan as a recurring character in many stories of origin, whether they be of temples (for instance in the story of the Goddess of Chottanikkara) or systems of sorcery (in the case of the Kadamattathu system of training in sorcery) points to how the earliest systems of worship (which were closely linked with shamanism) were the preserve of the tribals.

It may seem ironical that it is from a tribe who were believed to worship the Yakshi that Kathanar learns the magic to bind her. However, in the tale itself, there is no reference to the Yakshi as being worshipped by the Mala arayans. While the magical prowess of the Mala arayan leader is foregrounded, their religion or gods do not get any mention. So, the magic that Kathanar learns, while it is rooted in an alien knowledge system, does not seem to be linked with any religion. Perhaps, this separation of magic from religion is a conscious ploy to play down the scandalous aspect of a Christian Priest learning magic from non-believers. Perhaps it is a reflection of Sankunni's own view point, one where he regarded the Mala arayans as having no religion.

After discussing Kathanar's 'monstrous' magic, I would now like to move on to his encounter with the 'magical monster', the Yakshi.

The Priest of Kadamattam and the Yakshi : the Tale

The story begins like any other Yakshi tale with a description of a deserted way. The path described here is one through a forest between Trivandrum and Padmanabhapuram (places in Southern Kerala) which though slightly deserted is the only way available for travellers in that area. One day, a Yakshi comes to reside in

that forest. Though this tale is also riddled with the stock features of a typical Yakshi tale, there is one specificity that stands out. The Yakshi here is described as taking on the appearance of a beautiful *prostitute* whereas usually she is just described as taking on the appearance of a beautiful woman (Sankunni *Aithihyamala* 526-529).

The Yakshi, the story goes, used to stand on the wayside in the daytime posing as a prostitute and asking the traveller for some lime to have her paan. She would then lure the traveller into the forest with her sweet words where as was the norm in such a tale, she would tear him to pieces, drink his blood and feed on him leaving nothing but his hair and nails (Sankunni *Aithihyamala* 526-529).

However, in this particular tale, the Yakshi also starts entering people's homes to get hold of her victims once they, fearing her, refuse to frequent the forest path. Though many magicians try their best, none can bind her. Finally, some people go and seek the help of the Priest of Kadamattom (Sankunni *Aithihyamala* 526-529). The stage is thus set for the Syrian Christian Priest-magician Kathanar's encounter with the *Yakshi*.

The Yakshi appears as a beautiful young woman to Kathanar as well and she asks him, as usual, for a bit of lime. Kathanar places some lime on an iron nail and offers it to the Yakshi who is at first reluctant to accept it. However, she finally accepts it not knowing that while offering the iron nail, Kathanar is actually driving it into her head and thus binding her. The bound Yakshi is forced to follow Kathanar like a Dasi or servant wherever he goes. On reaching Kayamkulam after four days of journey, Kathanar visits his aunt there. His aunt, an old widow who lives alone, wishes to have a servant of her own and Kathanar offers her the bound Yakshi for the job without revealing her true identity. After lunch, as Kathanar takes an afternoon

nap, the old woman while chatting with the servant girl starts combing the latter's hair affectionately. When the comb snags on something, the old woman takes a closer look and finds it to be an iron nail lodged in the girl's head. The old woman takes pity on the young girl and immediately removes the nail from her head upon which the Yakshi, whose binding has been undone, assumes her real form and vanishes into thin air. The old woman immediately wakes up Kathanar and informs him of the surprising turn of events. Kathanar, though perturbed, goes in pursuit of the Yakshi who has left some signs which indicate to Kathanar that she has gone north. He pursues her till he reaches a river in Munnar where she has taken the only ferry that is available to reach the other side where Panayannar Kaavu (a sacred grove dedicated to the goddess Bhadrakali whose temple is nearby) is located. He uses magic to immobilise the Yakshi on the other side and then cuts down a banana leaf which, because of his magical powers, acts like a ferry. When he reaches the other side, the Yakshi entreats him not to destroy her and gives her word that she would not harm anybody thereafter. She requests to be allowed to stay there and after taking her promise, Kathanar leaves the place. It is said that invisible to all, the Yakshi has been residing there from that day. On new moon days and Fridays, Sankunni says, there are some who claim to have seen her towards midnight either as a beautiful woman or as a ball of fire^{xxx}, but everybody agrees that she has not harmed anyone after her arrival there (Sankunni *Aithihyamala* 526-529).

Kathanar's tale involving the Yakshi is similar to that of another Brahmin sorcerer, Kumaramangalath Namboothiri^{xxxi}, who using his powers, transforms a Yakshi into a young girl and employs her as a servant in his household for a while. However, here too, while he is away, the Yakshi tricks the Antarjanams in the household and escapes. Kumaramangalath binds the Yakshi again using his magic,

but the Yakshi requests him not to make her into a servant. Kumaramangalath, after making her promise that she won't hurt anyone, creates a sanctum sanctorum for her in his illom under a pala tree or the Indian devil tree (*Alstonia Scholaris*) and worships her as his family deity (*Sankunni Aithiyamala* 1096-1101).

The similarities between the two stories are striking. Both the stories follow the trajectory of the magician-priest binding the Yakshi using his magic, using the bound Yakshi as a servant for his womenfolk, the Yakshi coming out of her imprisonment either by accident or by guile, the magician-priest re-finding her and finally coming up with a permanent solution which involves her transformation into a deity. Both stories don't end in the full submission of the Yakshi, but in an act of compromise between the sorcerer and the Yakshi. The differences are in the means: Kathanar binds her by offering lime on an iron pin while Kumaramangalath chants some mantras. Kathanar leaves the iron pin in her head while Kumaramangalath plants it in the inner courtyard of his home. The act of nailing the *Yakshi*^{xxxii} is one meant at domesticating her since both times, she is transformed into a young girl who has to enter into domestic service. Perhaps the iron pin signifies fetters or enslavement since after the sorcerer strikes it into the Yakshi's head or in the latter case into the ground (which could stand for the Yakshi's head), she becomes his servant. Dempsey sees the Yakshi's fear of nails as one seen in older Buddhist texts as well^{xxxiii}. One is also reminded of the Indonesian Sundelbolong who undergoes a similar process. "A large nail hammered into the head of the Sundelbolong instantly transforms her into a beautiful woman who will bring much luck and riches, either to the man who performs the deed or to one who marries her" (Siddique 168). The Langsuyar, on the other hand, "can rejoin the living community if her nails and hairs are cut off and placed within the hole in her neck" (Siddique 168).

These acts of Kathanar and Kumaramangalath thus place the Yakshi alongside other femme fatales like the Sundelbolongs and the Langsuyars who were “re-incorporated into the community life of village society after the enactment of ritual mutilations” (Siddique 169). However, what is different in the Yakshi’s case is that she does not stay in this state for long. Unless she is settled somewhere permanently and worshipped as a deity, there is always the chance of her breaking loose.

If we look at Kathanar’s story, it becomes clear that the Yakshi is finally left in the precincts of a Hindu sacred grove dedicated to the goddess Bhadrakali. I would like to read this curious fact of the tale – the installation of the Yakshi in *Panayannar Kaavu* in the context of the larger changes indigenous religions of Kerala underwent in the process of Hinduisation. There have been studies which have pointed out that in what we know today as Kerala, the earliest religious centres were sacred groves (*kaavukal*) mostly dedicated to the mother goddess. These were structures open to the natural forces such as the wind, rain, the sun etc (Venugopal 40). While the four corners of the *kaavu* were built to shield them from the rain and the sun, the place at the centre where the mother goddess was placed was open to the natural forces (Venugopal 40). There were sacred groves like this dedicated to the nagas (snake gods), the yakshis, Goddess Kali and Ayyappa (Venugopal 39). Some of the groves dedicated to the Yakshis were later converted into temples and according to Venugopal, Panayannar Kaavu was one among those (Venugopal 43). It, for him, thus exemplifies the transformation of *kaavus* to *mahakshetras* (the great temples) (Venugopal 43). Thus, if Panayannar Kaavu was originally a sacred grove dedicated to a Yakshi, the presence of the Yakshi as a deity there is no coincidence.

The Yakshi is still worshipped in Panayannar Kaavu as a sub-deity. The website of Panayannar Kaavu, in fact, does have a separate section on the Yakshi and

links her with Kathanar. As per the website, the Yakshi in her previous birth was a virgin goddess who later turned into a nymphomaniac and was cursed to be born as a Yakshi (“Yekshiyamma”). Kathanar bringing her into the jungle near the temple is said to have liberated her from the curse of previous life and restored her to her godly status (“Yekshiyamma”). In the temple website’s description, we find an attempt to reconcile the apparent contradictions in the Yakshi’s past identity and her present one. On the one hand, there is the need to acknowledge the Yakshi’s famous past since this Yakshi is quite popular to the devotees because of her presence in the legends of the Christian Priest of Kadamattom. At the same time, her present identity is that of a Goddess. The story on the website trying to reconcile these apparent incompatibilities uses the device of a reincarnation narrative to make sense of the Yakshi’s demonic and divine facets. The Yakshi, in this narrative, is a Virgin Goddess whose virginity seems to be a necessary condition of her divinity since it is her nymphomania which transforms her into a Yakshi. The website of the temple thus treats sexual desire as the marker that separates the Yakshi from the Goddess and even uses the instance of the Yakshi’s story to drive home the moral, “One can draw a lesson of being cautious against excessive lust” (“Yekshiyamma”). It is the Goddess Kali’s sacred grove which is supposed to have released the Yakshi from her curse and restored her to her divine status. The Yakshi in Panayannar Kaavu is now the mother goddess, stripped of her lust that made her earlier avatar descend into the demonic. It doesn’t need to be emphasized that a study of the history of the temple points to how modern narratives trying to reconcile the demonic and divine aspects of the Yakshi are engaged in an act of re-writing histories of different conceptions of the divine female. Thus, instead of the historical fact of the temple once having been a sacred grove dedicated to the Yakshi, in the temple’s official version of events, she becomes a virgin goddess who

descends into nymphomania. A story like this thus points to the difficulties the Yakshi still raises in official versions of religious history which are silent on her having been a goddess in her own right in the past.

Coming back to the tale, the Christianity that Kathanar represents resolves the problem of the Yakshi in the conventional way, similar to the tales of Yakshi that are popular among the Hindus. She is not destroyed, but domesticated. Corinne Dempsey points to how the Yakshi tales in Malayalam do not often end in violence^{xxxiv} (Dempsey 115). According to her, “in cases where the intended human victim is not eaten, the yakshi's life is often spared as well” (Dempsey 115). She refers to how in these tales, the Yakshi is usually tamed by the magical powers of a religious adept, either a Namboothiri Brahmin, or by the goddess Bhagavati (Dempsey 115). To her, “both act as a means for harnessing a yakshi's power, making it available for family members or temple visitors, respectively” (Dempsey 115).

Venugopal talks about how the Yakshi has been imagined as a family deity in some houses (Venugopal 43). Kumaramangalath Namboothiri's story ends with the Yakshi being worshipped in this manner where her power is harnessed for the well-being of the family and Kathanar's ends with her being placed in the precincts of a temple.

However, for Kathanar, rather than harnessing the Yakshi's powers and making them available for believers in a religion he does not share, establishing her in the temple precincts is the best way to get rid of her. Unlike Buddhist tales of Yakkhis where they get converted into Buddhism and act as “domesticated advocates for the wisdom and compassion of attachment and desire”, the decision of Kathanar to station the Yakshi at Panayannar Kaavu seems to indicate that her conversion to Christianity

is now neither possible nor desirable (qtd. in Dempsey 123) (Dempsey 123). Corinne Dempsey points to how a reformed Yakshi may find it difficult to get offerings in a church compound (Dempsey 123). She writes, “As a church worker in Kadamattam insisted during our discussion of Achan's famous yakshi now residing in Panayannarkavu, a major difference between Christians and Hindus is that ‘we Christians do not give devotion to yaksis’” (Dempsey 123). Also, in Christianity, generally, there is a neater separation of good from evil (Dempsey 123). Since she doesn’t find any logical reason for Kathanar to take on the Yakshi since his religion does not have a place for her, Dempsey concludes, “It appears that Kadamattachan is simply deposited into a Hindu story plot, not because of a shared belief in harnessing evil's potential but, rather, simply to prove his mettle as an efficacious magician^{xxxv}(Dempsey 123).

However, it must also be remembered that the Yakshi has been appropriated into a sub-deity in both Buddhism and Hinduism while that is not the case with Christianity where the Yakshi does not figure anywhere in its mythology. Also, the concept of supernatural beings like the Yakshis becoming spokespersons for Buddhism is not applicable for a religion like Christianity which does not have a tradition of this kind. Yet, having the Kathanar take on a Yakshi is not just about proving his mettle as an “efficacious magician”, it is also about proving that a Christian Priest can also do what was till then the sole preserve of the Hindu sorcerer – take on a Yakshi and defeat her.

I have been trying to read the tale of Kathanar and the Yakshi to understand the transformations a community underwent at a particular point of time and answer questions such as these: What did Kathanar’s sorcery represent at that particular point of time? Why was it important for him to take on a Yakshi at that point of time? Why

did he have to spare her life at the end of it? Why did that involve installing her in a Hindu temple?

Kathanar's tale with the Yakshi may end here. But the Yakshi after being bound by Kathanar continues to break loose in other tales. Dempsey in her article *Nailing Heads* mentions another tale involving this Yakshi and another Christian protagonist. In this "less developed yet well known" tale, the Yakshi gets out of her imprisonment and starts terrorizing the inhabitants of a nearby island called the Parumala island. No one is able to bind the Yakshi until "the greatly revered Orthodox Christian saint-bishop, St. Gregorios of Parumala (also known as Parumala Tirumen) ... comes to the rescue and banishes the yakshi from the area once and for all". In the story, Parumala thereafter becomes safe for night time travelers, and "St. Gregorios proves his superior powers over evil adversaries and, it seems, over his holy rival, Kadamattachan". (Dempsey 117)

Another story^{xxxvi} involving Kathanar is a *sthala purana* about a place called Kattanam which was once in the possession of a family of Hindu sorcerers called Maankavil Gurunaathanmar. It was supposedly haunted by a Yakshi, who was the ghost of a Brahmin woman who had been found murdered with her child in the family pond. Many magicians had tried to bind the Yakshi including the sorcerer family (whose members started dying one by one as a result) as well as the Priest of Kadamattom. Kathanar, who had just returned from binding the Yakshi at Panaynnar Kaavu, had to go back defeated as he was unsuccessful in binding this Yakshi. A consultation with an astrologer revealed that the land had to be sold to get rid of the curse. It was bought for a cheap price by a Christian Priest called Father Geevarghese or Velangattachan, who was also a *Kathanar*. This priest bound the Yakshi but refused to accede to her request to be stationed under a *pala* tree (Indian Devil Tree)

upon which the Yakshi's soul attained eternal peace. Many Christian families then started settling down in the region^{xxxvii} along with some Hindus ("Kattanam").

Thus Father Geevarghese, like St. Gregorius, scores over the Priest of Kadamattom and that too on two counts- he not only binds the Yakshi whom the latter is unable to (not to forget the Hindu sorcerers in the neighbourhood) but as befits a Christian Priest, refuses to follow the Hindu ritual of establishing her under a *pala* tree unlike the latter.

In both cases, that of Kodungallur Bhagavati and the Yakshi as well as this story, we see that for many early settlers, clearing forests to settle down in a region meant going against earlier belief systems, perhaps in older goddesses of forests exemplified by the Yakshi. Thus, the defeat of the Yakshi in these tales most often meant the displacement of an older system of worship with a newer one.

Another tale, less known, has the Panayannar Kaavu Yakshi getting moksha as the holy water (teertha) that the Tantri of the temple pours on the sacrificial stone outside the temple accidentally falls on her. The Yakshi then leaves Panayannar Kaavu and reaches a Chamundi (a form of Kali) temple in Trivandrum in Southern Kerala which is bound by temples on different sides. The Yakshi then approaches Kattoor Namboothiri, another tantrik, who has come to the temple for *darshan* seeking his help to move out of the temple, something which she cannot do by herself as it is surrounded by fierce deities on all sides. The story ends with the Yakshi getting released near the river and crossing over to the other side after bowing in gratitude to the Namboothiri (Sethunathan 138-140).

Thus the story of the Yakshi of Panayannar Kaavu becomes the fodder for many later stories. If the temple website constructs its own narrative reconciling the

sexual and blood lust of the Yakshi with her later divine status, the St. Gregorious version reflects scepticism about the Yakshi's alleged reformation, instead revealing the belief that beings like the Yakshi could never be trusted to keep their word and have to be banished once and for all for the well-being of the land. The sthalapurana of Kattanam that links the story of an ancient settlement with a local Priest's defeat of a Yakshi perhaps reveals the superimposition of a new belief system over an older one under which Yakshis were considered to be goddesses of forests. However, it is the references to the more celebrated story of Kathanar and the Panayannar Kaavu Yakshi that helps this tale stand out from other sthalapuranas. The fourth story of Kattoor Namboothiri can be seen as linking the sacred geography of a lesser known temple with that of a more well-known one through the figure of a popular Yakshi. It goes without saying that it also exhibits the prowess of the Brahmin priest-magician over Kathanar since in the story, the Yakshi is referred to as the one who tricked the Deacon Kathanar thrice.

Some of these tales may have currency only in a specific locality, but they reveal how influential this particular tale has been on popular imagination. Thus both Kathanar and the Panayannar Kaavu Yakshi continue to be the fodder for newer and newer stories which remould the older story to suit their ends.

Father Geevarghese's tale, though a later addition, does reveal anxieties about Kathanar's own curious boundary crossing. Can't a Christian Priest deal with the Yakshi as per the precepts of his own religion instead of borrowing rituals from another? What do Kathanar's unorthodox practices reveal about his identity as a Christian Priest? It goes without saying that his unchristian magic, as stated before, has been a source of anxiety for his church. However, there have been attempts to legitimise Kathanar's powers. Corinne Dempsey in her study on Kathanar, describes

the version of Kathanar's learning magic as described by the then Vicar of the Church. In this tale, Kathanar doesn't learn magic solely from the hill-tribe. A "miracle-working bishop from Persia" is his guru before he gets lost in the forest (Dempsey "Lessons" 164-165).

The elderly vicar's elaboration and emphasis on the foreign miracle-working bishop, replacing the local vicar-guru of other renditions, seems to give a boost to the institutional validity of the story and the saint on two accounts. First, the bishop's connection to Persia, once the ecclesial center of Kerala's Syrian Christian tradition, gives official validation to the guru and, by association, to his magical powers. Second, because the bishop-guru performs holy tricks of his own, Katamattattachan's magical capabilities, by association, become less suspect. We cannot attribute them solely to lessons learned from the cave-dwellers; a high church official who passes on this "holy" knowledge to the boy is also responsible. (Dempsey "Lessons" 164-165)

This is an anxiety both the movies based on Kadamattachan (1984) seem to share. There were two movies made on Kadamattachan, one in 1966^{xxxviii} and the other in 1984.

The Priest of Kathanar and the Yakshi: the movies

In the 1966 version, Kathanar learns his magic from the leader of a forest tribe who is referred to as *Paatala Rajavu*. Thus *Paatala Rajavu* which literally means the "king of the netherworld" replaces the Mala arayan of the tale. In the tale, Kathanar was about to be eaten by the cannibals in the cave when their leader intervenes and assures them that he is worthy enough to live with them. Here, instead of wanting to eat him, the tribe wants to sacrifice him to their blood-thirsty goddess *Pattadakali*

(“Kadamattachan”). Both *Paatala Rajavu* and the goddess *Pattadakali* seem to be instances of what Zhang calls “filmic folklore^{xxxix}”. Tribals depicted as cannibals worshipping a blood-thirsty goddess is a stock feature of movies like these which are in fact engaged in a process where ‘the invented becomes the identifiable’” (qtd. in Iyer 105).

There are significant differences in the story of Kathanar which serve a larger purpose. Thus in the movie version, unlike in the tale, once Poulouse returns home after learning all the magical tricks from *Paatala Rajavu*, he refuses to go back to the church or take up the responsibilities associated with his office. He becomes a famous magician who performs various tricks to help the needy. But at the end of his life, he decides to give up his powers and returns to meet the *Paatala Rajavu* to give him back his books of magic. This enrages the *Rajavu* who sends his army of ghosts and *pisachus* after Kathanar who then takes refuge in the Kadamattom Church (“Kadamattachan”).

One can easily see how the basic story of Kathanar has been remoulded here to *correct* the anomaly of his learning magic from a non-christian source. Though Kathanar’s magic may be attributed to the learning he received from the *Paatala Rajavu*, finally, he has to turn to his own church to save himself from the vengeful *Rajavu* and his henchmen.

The 1984 version starring the old superstar of Malayalam cinema Prem Nazir follows the conventions of the commercial movies of the time though the subject is a religious figure^{xl}. The *Mala arayans* in the tale are presented here as tribals who live in a cave and worship a goddess referred to as *Kula Devata*. Their leader is referred to as *Mooppan* or Chief. However, there are differences in this version from both the tale

and the 1966 version. Unlike in the tale where the threat is one of being consumed by the cannibals in the cave, the 1984 movie follows the 1966 version in having it as one of being made a sacrifice to the goddess. As is usual in films of this kind, the daughter of the chief falls in love with Kathanar and it is on her request that the father spares his life. She then starts teaching Kathanar various magical tricks (unlike in the tale where the teacher is the *Mala arayan* leader) and finally bids him a tearful adieu when he asks her permission to leave the cave. This is in contrast to the 1966 version where the daughter is portrayed in a less sympathetic light as one with a more aggressive sexuality (though the 1984 version follows the clichéd trope of the self-sacrificing tribal girl).

Unlike the 1966 version though, in this version, Kathanar returns to his church and takes up his responsibilities. He does not give up on his magic at the end of his life, but instead convinces the visiting Patriarch of his good intentions. However, he also makes a promise to the Patriarch that he would not use magic for his gain. The movie legitimises Kathanar's unorthodox powers by having the men from the cave chase him towards the climax of the movie. Kathanar, because of his promise to the Patriarch, refuses to use his powers to battle the men and tries to seek refuge in the church. He tries to use his powers to open the Church door but to no avail. Kathanar then pleads to God, the Holy Father to save him, apologising for any sins he may have committed unknowingly and asserting that he has never denounced him. A light comes from the heavens and blinds the men from the cave who run away in fear. The Church door finally opens before Kathanar.

Kathanar's plea to the Holy Father at the end thus makes up for whatever transgressions he might have been charged with in official circles because of his unorthodox magical powers while his being rescued by direct intervention from the

Holy Father legitimises his contested position as a Christian Priest. It also legitimises the power of his religion since the doors of the Church cannot be opened by his revered magic. Only his humble plea before the Holy Father can do that.

Kathanar's fight with the Yakshi is a major component of both the movies. The 1966 movie version names the Yakshi as *Kattanam Yakshi*^{xli} and her crime is not one of waylaying travellers and killing them, but of killing pregnant women and drinking their blood, perhaps to make her appear more monstrous. The songbook of the movie (shown below) has the a cover which shows the Yakshi in a *rakshasi*-like form standing before the body of a young woman, presumably her victim.



The 1984 movie, however, is more faithful to the tale and the Yakshi's crime is the familiar one of waylaying male travellers and killing them. However, the Yakshi here has a backstory which follows the conventions of a tragic love story. The Yakshi is the ghost of a princess who committed suicide when her father, the King, got her lover (who was a soldier in his army) killed.

In *Aithihyamala*, while Kadamattathu Kathanar's legends also contained his epic rivalry with a Brahmin sorcerer known as Kunjamon Potti, the tale of the Yakshi per se did not feature the latter. However, the movie uses Kunjamon Potti as a recurring character whose rivalry with Kathanar becomes a major arc of the narrative which is otherwise a potpourri of different unrelated stories, some based on Kathanar's legends and others created to serve the ends of a commercial film. In the movie, Potti, who is a Brahmin, albeit one from outside Kerala and hence considered inferior in status to the Kerala Brahmins or Namboothiris, and Kathanar compete with each other to bind the Yakshi.



The episode of their rivalry over the Yakshi begins with a visual representation of the typical Yakshi tale where a lascivious Namboothiri, (who in the movie is definitely past his prime) meets a Yakshi on his way. The Yakshi is first shown as coming out of the jungle onto the one way path that runs through it. Like in *Chottanikkara Amma*, her real form resembles a rakshasi. The Yakshi is a big-bodied woman who is jet black in colour, has long frizzly unkempt hair and wears a chain of human skulls around her neck. To a careful observer, it becomes apparent that the

Yakshi is a male actor dressed up as a woman with black paint all over his face and body.

The Yakshi then assumes her seductress avatar and turns into a *beautiful* young woman. She is dressed in the traditional *mundu and neriathu* (though the movie takes cinematic liberties dressing her in a blouse as well), decked with jewellery and with half of her long hair tied up in a sort of bun decorated with ornamental pieces and half left open. The Yakshi's "beautiful" avatar was played by Srividya, an actress considered to be one of the most beautiful actresses at that time. As mentioned earlier, she is the same actress who played the Goddess in the movie *Chottanikkara Amma* (1976) and her being the face for the two figures, the Yakshi and Goddess, can be read as an ironic coincidence that points to the similarity underlying their polar opposite representations in popular culture.



As in the case of the Yakshi in *Chottanikkara Amma*, it is a male actor who plays the Yakshi's real form. One wonders if this is because the Yakshi's real form in both the movies is imagined as so visibly "unfeminine" and "unnatural" that it can only be portrayed by a man in drag.

The Yakshi launches into a conversation with the Namboothiri, the comic subtext of which comes from the Namboothiri's complete misrecognition of the Yakshi^{xlii} and the contrast between the Namboothiri's image of the Yakshi and her real identity. What also gives the scene its comic irony is the role playing done by both the Namboothiri and the Yakshi as per the gender norms of the day which is at odds with the reality. Thus, the Yakshi plays the role of a helpless young woman who needs the company of the Namboothiri to reach her home safely as both the time (night) and the place (a forest) are considered dangerous for a woman to travel alone. Her foot slips while walking which prompts the Namboothiri to offer to carry her in his arms which he avers is something he has done for many women before. The Yakshi consciously projects an image of herself as a *fragile* young woman unused to travelling alone while the Namboothiri projects an image of himself as a virile, strong and experienced man who can take care of the Yakshi. The Yakshi's projected self-image can be said to be rooted in the mock performance of a *desirable femininity* while the Namboothiri's can be said to be a performance of his version of a *desirable masculinity*. The contrast between these self-images and the reality where the Yakshi is as far from the fragile young woman she plays as the Namboothiri from his gives the comic depth to the scene. I have already discussed a similar scene in *Chottanikkara Amma*.

When the Yakshi invites the Namboothiri to rest in her home and whispers seductively that there is no one at home except her mother who cannot see well at night, the Namboothiri can't believe his luck. The subtext of the scene can be read as a mockery of the narcissistic nature of the Namboothiri who regards a woman, especially of a caste lower to his, as someone who gets inevitably drawn towards him.

It is this narcissism and lustfulness of the Namboothiri that the Yakshi takes advantage of as she draws him nearer and nearer towards her palm tree.



The Namboothiri asks the Yakshi to hold him and walk behind so that she does not fall any more. The Yakshi starts walking behind the Namboothiri who is busy describing his own prowess and she soon changes into her true form. This is a scene which exemplifies the contrast between the Namboothiri's false perception of the woman behind him and the reality. The Yakshi, once she reaches her palm tree drags the Namboothiri towards it and their shrieks ring through the forest, hers of victory and his of alarm.

After establishing the Yakshi as a danger, the movie goes on to show the rivalry of the two magicians. In Kunjaman Potti's encounter with the Yakshi, we get to see a cinematic representation of Hindu sorcery. Potti, accompanied by his servant, meets the Yakshi in a forest where she appears dressed in the mundu and neriyathu. As expected, she asks them for some lime and Potti, who realises that she is the Yakshi, offers it to her on an iron pin. This trick is attributed to Kathanar in the tale in

Aitiyamala. However, it does not work as the Yakshi refuses to take it protesting that she is not a Yakshi to be offered lime in such a manner. She wants Potti to instead offer it on his finger so that she will also get to touch his hand in the process. This conversation is an illustration of the odds the sorcerer faces – the Yakshi is wily enough to predict the sorcerer's each move.

Potti, however, declares that in the night, this is the only possible way to offer lime to a stranger and asks the Yakshi if she is willing to come with him to his home. While the question seems to be sexual in its overtone, it is also Potti's indirect way of asking the Yakshi if she is ready to admit defeat and be bound by him. The Yakshi acts hurt by his words and leaves saying that she would not go anywhere with a man who does not even give her lime on his fingertip.



Potti then performs a pooja in front of a fire altar in the jungle and makes his servant stick a stylus into the ground in front of the altar. As the pooja intensifies, the stylus starts bending indicating the Yakshi coming under Potti's binding. However, each time, the stylus then springs back to its original height which astounds the

sorcerer. Finally, the Yakshi appears there in her true form and the fire in the altar dies down on its own. Potti runs away from the place. Potti is thus unable to bind the Yakshi either using his wife or his powers of magic.

Potti's attempts to bind the Yakshi are contrasted with that of Kathanar. To Kathanar, as if in accordance with his religion, the Yakshi appears as a young woman in a white sari^{xliii}. Kathanar who does not at first recognise her for a Yakshi later does when she asks him for some lime to have her paan. He takes a bit of lime on his fingertip, whirls it in the air and then offers it to the Yakshi who when she touches it falls under Achan's spell. One can see here the greater prowess of Kathanar since unlike Potti, Kathanar has no fear in offering the lime on his fingertip. Unlike Potti, Kathanar also doesn't need an iron object to bind the Yakshi. His magic is powerful enough to bind her. The whole process of the Yakshi coming under Kathanar's spell resembles a process of electrocution as the Yakshi's face gets contorted and she grinds her teeth in agony. The binding process is presented by showing a series of close ups of the Yakshi's face in negatives where the lightest areas on her face appear the darkest and vice versa.



The bound Yakshi follows Achan who takes her to his aunt and the rest of the story is as told in the tale. The only difference is that when Achan offers the Yakshi the chance to be worshipped by many on her agreeing to settle down in the precincts of Panayannar Kaavu, the Yakshi also requests him to let her roam around once a day in a year.



In *Aitihyamala*, unlike in the movie, Kathanar's rivalry with Potti does not involve the Yakshi. However, one of the legends involving their rivalry involves other women and brings to the fore the role women play in stories where Hindu and Christian sorcerers battle it out to prove their prowess in magic. One of Kathanar's legends involves his visiting Kunjamon Potti's *illom* (house of a Brahmin in Kerala). Potti's prowess as a sorcerer came from his mastery over *chaatans*^{xliv} or imps. When Kathanar visits Potti's home in a boat that propels itself, Potti takes offence in secret since he understands that Kathanar is ridiculing his use of imps as oarsmen to propel his own boat. So, when Kathanar is about to leave his home after the friendly visit, he cannot find his boat which is now lodged high above a mango tree. Kathanar realises that Potti is trying to outwit him by using his *chaatans*. Kathanar then warns Potti that

if the boat does not come down on its own, then the *Antarjanams* or the Namboothiri women of his house would come out naked and get his boat for him. When Potti refuses to believe that Kathanar has enough skills to do that, he sees the *Antarjanams* coming out naked from his house. Potti who thus comes to realise Kathanar's superiority in magic entreats him to stop his trick upon which the women go back. Potti then brings down the boat using his imps and the two magicians patch up.

Here it is the Hindu femininity which becomes the ground on which Kathanar wins the battle over Potti. The ultimate insult Potti can suffer is to have the women of his own house do Kathanar's bidding in such a state. The battle here is finally won by Kathanar by encroaching into the space of the brahmin Potti's family by involving his women who as *Antarjanams* were forbidden to show their faces to men outside their family and caste.

Like the *Antarjanams* in this story, is the Yakshi also just the ground on which Potti and Kathanar battle it out to establish the supremacy of their own religion and sorcery? Corinne Dempsey, however, sees the Yakshi here as more than just the ground of the debate. She writes,

Clearly, many of his stories do not portray human females as agents who can act or be harmed but as caricatures, vessels into which male honor, shame, and hopes for the lineage are placed. The yaksi, by contrast, falls into an entirely different category. Somewhat like the Christian-Hindu dynamics related by Kerala's yaksi stories, simultaneously demonstrating competition as well as shared religious turf and symbol systems, worthy competition between yaksi and holy man assents to common terrain in the form of power-both in its strength and form. (Dempsey 127)

In the case of Kathanar, defeat of the Yakshi is also meant to emphasize his superiority over the other sorcerers of his time, especially the Hindu sorcerers. However, these tales prove to us that the Yakshi cannot be bound without a compromise being reached between her and the sorcerer which often involves an upgradation in her status. Hence, compared to the other women who figure in Kathanar's tales, the Yakshi defies "tidy systems of opposition" such as "misogynistic distinctions between an idealized male/female as agent/object" (126-127).

Rather than simply posing as an inanimate foil against which he proves his worth the yaksi is a key participant in sacred power dynamics. Demonstrating the importance of the yaksi's agency is the fact that Kadmattachan's "nailed" (or "screwed") yaksi-the perfectly unreflexive domestic servant-is not the final, realistic answer to the problem. The more permanent and seemingly more satisfying solution is a type of compromise, requiring a restoration of her memory and powers, allowing her continued presence within the sacred/magical realm ... In spite of animosity between yaksis and holy men and between Hindus and Christians, total domestication or conversion is not the desirable end to the tale since, by destroying the competition, we negate an important means against which the self is defined and enhanced. Nor is conversion entirely suitable because the Other, under close inspection, really is not. ("Nailing Heads" 126 – 127)

What Dempsey points to is the fact that when placed side by side and compared, the Yakshi differs only in degree from the holy man, not in kind. He is able to tame her due to his superior magical power, something which she also possesses to a lesser degree. Dempsey compares it with the Buddhist tales where the yakkhas and the yakkhis are converted into Buddhism by the bodhisattva where both represent

different ideological systems and the difference is one of kind. Dempsey refers to Gail Sutherland's study where she asserts that "Buddhist tales spare the lives of yakkhas and yakkhis in order that they act as domesticated advocates for the wisdom and compassion of the Buddhist dhamma". In contrast to the Yakkhas and Yakkhis in Buddhist tales, Dempsey argues, "Hindu demons ... are spared in order perpetually to rise up and rechallenge the gods" (qtd. in Dempsey 121).

However, it must be said that even in Buddhism, there are Yakshis such as Gardabha from Mathura whose penchant for kidnapping children comes to an end when Buddha requests the people of Mathura to build a monastery in her honour (Dempsey 120). This is similar to "Kerala Hindu and Christian stories" where malevolence is held at bay not necessarily through personal transformation but ... by food offerings" (Dempsey 120)

To conclude, what emerges at the end of this comparison is the "other-but-not quite" character of the Yakshi. Thus the Yakshi on the one hand is the "other" against which the self, whether it be of the Christian Priest Kathanar or the Hindu goddess of Chottanikkara, defines itself, what critics call "the self-consolidating other" (Ghose 8). On the other hand, the Yakshi is also not quite the *other* in the sense that she also partakes of some of their powers and finally needs to be situated within the sacred realm to stop posing a threat to their selfhood. In fact, in a tale like that of the Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi, it becomes at times difficult to pinpoint where the Yakshi differs from the Bhagavati since both seem to partake of similar qualities.

The larger network of stories featuring the Yakshi of Panayannar Kaavu is again a clear indication of this interdependence as it shows how the Yakshi of even a well-resolved tale has to rise up again and again to lend credence and legitimacy to

the protagonists of the newer stories. In Kathanar's tale, the interdependence is more striking in that the yakshi and Kathanar do not seem to be that different from each other. The Yakshi can be called a magical monster known for her powers of illusion which let her shape-shift and let her palm tree appear as a mansion to the unsuspecting traveller. Kathanar may not be a "monster" like the Yakshi, but his powers of magic are no less "monstrous" since they were considered in many quarters as *heretical*.

In the case of the Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi, the links between the Yakshi and the Goddess are not that apparent on the surface. However, as mentioned before, when one looks closely, the fear of the Yakshi's curse which makes the Guru refuse to help Guptan beyond a point is an indication of her latent divinity. Similarly, the installation of the Yakshi as a mother goddess, even after her decapitation at the hands of the Goddess, points to how the threat that the Yakshi symbolises needs to be overcome through appeasement where her deification becomes an act of domestication. It also raises questions about the Goddess' own deification and through that, the domestication of the wilder sensibilities she shares with the Yakshi. In fact, the story of the Panayannar Kaavu Yakshi detailed in the temple website can be read as the embodiment of this anxiety – what if the Goddess transforms into a Yakshi?

Both the tale of Kathanar and the Yakshi as well as the Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi, on a close study, thus appear to be tales about managing the *other* who is not *quite* the *other*. These stories also point at the end to the ruptures within what are generally considered as fixed categories such as religion by revealing the common ground inhabited by different religious traditions which on the surface may appear completely different from one another (Dempsey 124).

If the Yakshi in these tales stands outside the home of the protagonists (and the family unit) except for forced incursions into a servile domesticity (as in Kathanar's and Kumaramangalath's case) which remain brief, in the next chapter, I am going to look at a tale (and its re-tellings) where the Yakshi encroaches into the space of the family not as a servant, but as a rival to the family woman.

Sarah Caldwell in her discussion of Bhadrakali and the Yakshi (mentioned earlier) regards the drinking of blood as a symbolic displacement of the intaking of the semen by the vagina, where the act of sex is seen as depleting the man. It is no wonder then that in the story of Venmoni and the Yakshi which I deal with in the next chapter, the symbolic displacement is done away with and the act of sex which in folk physiology is believed to drain the man of his essential life fluids becomes the source of danger.

Notes:

ⁱ The Goddess is here worshipped in three different forms – as Saraswati in the morning clothed in white, Bhadrakali at noon clothed in crimson and as Durga in the evening clothed in blue (“Chottanikkara Bhagavati”).

ⁱⁱ The discriminatory caste system of the day considered the Pulayas as part of the “untouchable” community.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Dalrymple's *The Age of Kali: Indian Travels and Encounters* contains an excerpt devoted to this temple.

^{iv} Translation mine

^v One wonders whether the Keezhkaavu is older than the Melkaavu since the worship of Bhadrakali and the rituals of exorcism that still go on in the former seem to hark back to an older period of mother-goddess worship. In contrast, the Bhagavathi of the Melkaavu is comparatively more *saatvic* in disposition and is worshipped along with Vishnu as Lakshmi Narayana. The additional presence of a consort as against being worshipped independently as a mother goddess could be an indication that the Melkaavu came into being later than the Keezhkaavu. However, it could also be that the Melkaavu was *hinduised* to a greater extent compared to the Keezhkaavu which still seems to retain some of the original Shaktic elements. It must also be noted that hierarchy is inscribed in their very location, the Lakshmi Narayana temple being situated higher than the Bhadrakali temple, one being the upper grove and the other the lower.

^{vi} It is believed that worshipping there for a period of 41 days removes mental ailments and rids one of evil spirits. “There is a tree inside this temple with hundreds of nails driven into it as a mark of devotees being exorcised here” (“Chottanikkara Bhagavathi Temple – Kochi”).

^{vii} “Shaktism, worship of the Hindu goddess Sakti (Sanskrit: “Power” or “Energy”). Shaktism is, together with Vaishnavism and Shaivism, one of the major forms of modern Hinduism and is especially popular in Bengal and Assam. Shakti is conceived of either as the paramount goddess or as the consort of a male deity, generally Siva. Many Hindus worship Shakti as the divine mother who calls for absolute surrender. Yogis regard Sakti as the power, lying dormant within the body as a coiled serpent (kundalini), that must be aroused and realized to reach spiritual liberation. Shaktism is an essential part of Hindu Tantra, a system of practices involving the worship of the goddess and designed to empower and release both mind and body. (“Shaktism”).

^{viii} It needs to be mentioned that while the Goddess is supposed to be present in three different forms in the temple, Vaishnavism has been a strong influence on the current system of worship since Lakshmi is worshipped along with an idol of Vishnu in the temple as Lakshmi Narayana.

^{ix} George was a local expert on folk religion that Caldwell interviewed for her project on Mudiyyettu. According to him, in the olden days people believed that virgins (referring here to virgin women) entered men’s dreams, had sex with them and made them ooze fluids or nocturnal emissions. They believed that these virgins drained them and drunk the fluids. (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 211)

^x “The Kodungallur Bhagavati temple in central Kerala is renowned for its unusual annual festival at the asterism of *Meenam Bharani* (in the month of March – April). On this day, the temple, closed until this century to any but the highest castes, was thrown open for ritual pollution by low-caste people. This pollution was accomplished in various ways: through the mere presence of low-caste men and women but also through drunken dancing, highly obscene songs and gestures directed towards the goddess, the presence of hordes of *velicchappadu* (oracles – including female oracles from the hilly tribal areas), who danced possessed and cut their heads with swords to produce blood, swift running around the temple, and the blood sacrifice of vast numbers of cocks” (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 212).

^{xii} Dalrymple uses the spelling Mannarkkadu. However, the most commonly used spelling for the region which is situated in Kottayam district (central Kerala) is Manarcad. I am going by the latter usage since Mannarkadu is the spelling generally used for another region in Palakkad district (northern Kerala).

^{xiii} In religious tales in Kerala, Vilwamangalam is believed to have possessed the ability to see in person the deities of the temples he visited.

^{xiv} The overarching story is that of a young married woman Mallika who on her bridal night shows signs of being “possessed”. As her husband tries to make love to her, she warns her husband not to touch her and says that she would tear him to pieces and drink his blood. Mallika is sent off to her home by her in-laws and her unhappy parents bring her to Chottanikkara where exorcism rituals in the lower grove or Keezhkkavu are famous. The movie then takes us through different legends associated with the Goddess. At the end of the movie, the in-laws have a dream where they see Mallika crying in front of the Goddess which makes them seek her out in the temple. At the same time, we are shown Mallika in front of the altars of the Goddess in the Melkkavu and the Keezhkkavu one after the other. As Mallika dances around in front of the altar of Goddess Kali in the Keezhkkavu in her possessed state, the Goddess’ voice from the inner sanctum asks the yakshi (who is just addressed as ‘you’) to leave the woman’s body. As the possessed woman refuses, the Goddess appears in the inner sanctum with her trident and warns the yakshi of dire consequences if she does not do so. The yakshi relents and the Goddess asks her to drive an iron nail into the pala tree (considered the haunt of yakshis) in the compound. We are then shown Mallika driving an iron nail into the pala tree with her forehead which goes on dripping with blood. Along with that, we get to see the yakshi’s “real form” which resembles a rakshasi getting nailed on to the tree. A visibly cured Mallika then praises the Goddess and the movie ends with her husband and in-laws coming to the temple to find her and take her home.

^{xv} In the mundum neriyathum, the most basic traditional piece is the mundu or lower garment while the *neriyathu* forms the upper garment the mundu. The mundum neriyathum consists of two pieces of cloth, and could be worn in either the traditional style with the *neriyathu* tucked inside the blouse, or in the modern style with the *neriyathu* worn over the left shoulder (Boulanger 78).

^{xvi} Yakshis were believed to be scared of iron objects. Even *Yakkas* and *Yakkinis* in the Buddhist tales were scared of iron objects. Was the yakshi's fear of iron a reflection of the fear of a different religious system brought in by the Aryans? For long, just like the horse, the introduction of iron has been attributed to the coming of the Aryans to the Indian subcontinent. However, modern archeologists have rejected the belief that iron was introduced to the Indian subcontinent after unearthing evidence of its presence in Harappan sites (Bryant 185). So, the *Yakshi's* fear of iron is still something worth investigating.

^{xvii} However, many scholars dispute the claim that St. Thomas himself arrived on the Malabar coast. Susan Bayly writes, "These accounts have much in common with an early west Asian hagiography, the Acts of St Thomas, which described the apostle's exploits in a setting which seems to have been based on the first-century Indo-Parthian kingdom of Taxila. The obvious conclusion is that the St Thomas tradition was brought to south India by the west Asian merchants and navigators who had been frequenting the Keralan spice-marketing localities since Roman times. Over the centuries the tale would simply have been transformed to fit the local sacred landscape" (Bayly 261).

^{xviii} However, there is no historical evidence to support this claim and many scholars see it as a later invention. James Forbes and Francis Buchanan, in fact, noted a shift to a Brahmanical lifestyle in the community, especially among the Kathanars, in the 19th century (qtd. in Bayly 301). S. Sadasivan in 'A Social History of India' also sees this as a later invention arguing that the caste system was a later development in Kerala and could not have existed in 1st century A.D and that neither St. Thomas during his alleged short stint in Kerala nor his Brahmin converts were proficient in each other's language to create the conditions for "the remoulding of the psyche of an individual necessary for his proselytization" which needs "prolonged persuasion through inducement, enticement and prospective attainments for which language is the essential medium" (413).

^{xix} "Although a wide range of occupational and status groups have claimed Nayar identity, the highest ranking and most powerful of these were Nayar title-holders who established themselves as elite military service groups in the pre-colonial kingdoms. These were the people who have come to be thought of as the bearers of Kerala's 'traditional' warrior lifestyle with its martial goddess cults, and its system of martial preceptorship under which young boys were trained to arms in *kalari* gymnasias under the tuition of master warriors known as *panikkars*" (Bayly 249).

^{xx} "[T]he indigenous Malayalam-speaking Shafi'i Muslims, the Mappilas" were also known for their martial prowess (Bayly 249).

^{xxi} Similarly, "their lifestyle and religious traditions linked them to this same wider world of martial skills and martial cult activity" (Bayly 249). They were often rewarded by the "formally Hindu rulers of Malabar" for their services with royal grants and privileges, and many of their important churches were founded with indigenous kings acting as patrons and benefactors (Bayly 267).

^{xxii} Some of the commonalities included their rituals for the dead as well as birth, puberty and marriage rites. "For many centuries the Syrian Christians performed *sradhas* (oblations to the family dead which also remove the ritual pollution caused by death) just as Hindus did. Many of their birth, puberty and marriage rites were almost indistinguishable from domestic rituals enacted by high-ranking Hindu Malayalis, and they shared the same terminology for many of these rites with the region's caste Hindus" (Bayly 269).

^{xxiii} The Priest of Kathanar, before he became a renowned Priest, was the orphan Poulouse whom the Vicar of the Church at Kadamattom took under his wings. He was a novice training to be a Priest when he lost his way in the jungle while searching for a cow which had gone missing from his master's herd. He was seized and forcibly taken into a cave by a fearsome man. Poulouse found out that the cave was inhabited by a group of men of frightful appearance whose leader was a 'Mala arayan', the member of a hill tribe. The leader was well-versed in all kinds of magic since the knowledge of magical skills was part of their tribe's tradition. The men in his cave, some belonging to his tribe and others outsiders, were all his servants. There were also cannibals amongst them. None of them except the leader was allowed to leave the cave since he didn't want anyone to find out about his whereabouts. The ones who obeyed the rules of the cave could lead a comfortable life inside the cave while those who disobeyed them became the food of the cannibals amongst them. The leader of the tribe got impressed by

Paulose's gentle and humble demeanour and let him stay in the cave provided he lived there according to the rules of the group, one of which was that the inmates should be unclothed. Poulouse learnt all the magical tricks from the leader of the group and developed an attachment towards the man who in turn treated him like a son. Poulouse, after spending 12 years there, started missing the outside world, especially the Vicar who was like a father to him. His tribesman teacher unwillingly granted him the permission thinking that Paulose would be similarly grateful to him, but only on the condition that none of the other inmates came to know of it. He also made Poulouse promise that he would not let anyone know of the cave or its inhabitants. Poulouse made his escape after performing a magical trick on the inmates which made them fall asleep for some time. However, when he finally reached the abode of the Vicar, he came to know that the fearsome men from the cave had assembled in the nearby church looking for him. As the men's presence made it difficult for the evening prayer to be held, Poulouse went and confronted them and performed another magical trick which made all of the men fall down in a faint. They got scared of Poulouse and agreed to leave the place for ever. Poulouse impressed all with his magical prowess which he attributed to the grace of the Lord and came to be known as the Priest of Kathanar. He became renowned for his magical skills which he used to help the people around him and even started imparting training to students which came to be called the Kadamattathu system of training. It was said that he never disclosed the source of his magical knowledge to anyone. Thankfully, he left a record of his story on some Palmyra leaves which is how, Sankunni says, we know of it today (Sankunni, *Lore & Legends* 171-181).

^{xxiv} “Long before the St Thomas Christians came into contact with European missionaries, the group had built up a deep-rooted attachment to the Christian primates of west Asia. The headquarters of these overseas churches were located at different times in Mardin, Mosul and other centres in what is now Turkey and Iraq, and the St Thomas Christians' earliest ties were probably to the line of Nestorian or 'east Syrian' primates who used the title 'Catholicos of Babylon'. (In Nestorian doctrine, which the Roman Catholic church views as heretical, the divine and human persons of Christ are perceived as separate entities.)” (Bayly 271)

^{xxv} One may argue that those practices which fit in with Roman Catholicism were kept while others not in line were rejected as heretical. So, more than seeing it as encouraging the Syrian Christians not to abandon all their practices, it may be argued that what happened was a selection where certain practices were allowed to remain because they fit with the official version.

^{xxvi} Parisman or the Persian Medicine was said to be “very common in this diocese; most curates having this book” (qtd. in Chatonnet 4). It was thus described in the decree XIV of the Synod of Diamper: “Also the book called Parisman, or the Persian medicine, which is full of Sorceries, teaching certain methods whereby one may do mischief to their enemies, and may gain women, and for a great many other lewd and prohibited purposes; there are likewise in it strange names of devils, of whom they affirm, that whosoever shall carry the names of seven of them about him writ in a paper, shall be in no danger of any evil: It contains also many superstitious exorcisms for the casting out of devils; mixing some godly words with others that are not intelligible; and with the invocation of the most holy trinity, oftentimes desiring the doing of lewd things, and enormous sins, joyning the Merits of Nestorius and his followers, many times, in the same Prayer with those of the blessed Virgin, and those of their devils, with those of the holy angels; all which is very common in this Diocess; most Curates having this Book, and making use of it to this very day; all which sort of books the synod prohibits in this Diocess under the forementioned censures; and whosoever from henceforwards shall be found to have any of them, besides the censure they have incurred thereby, shall be severely punished by their Prelate” (Hough 549).

^{xxvii} There are two English translations of Kottarathil Sankunni's *Aithiyamala*, one by T.C. Narayanan and the other by Sreekumari Ramachandran. The reason I am using both the translations while describing this segment from Kathanar's tale is because both of them differ at times from the source text. For instance, in Ramachandran's translation, the Patriarch comes from Bethlahem. However, in the source text, the Patriarch is mentioned as coming from “Jerusalem or somewhere”. In Narayanan's translation, the place where the Patriarch comes is referred to as in the source text. Hence, while describing this part, I decided to rely on Naryanan's translation. However, when it comes to the translation of the Patriarch's injunction to Kathanar, while both the translations do justice to the line from the source text in their own ways (in the source text, the line reads “this is unbecoming of a Christian”), I chose Ramachandran's translation since it was the more literal and faithful translation of

the injunction in retaining the word “Christian” compared to Naryanan’s translation of “inappropriate in their religion” (Sankunni, *Aithiyamala* 440; Sankunni, *Aithiyamala* 532; Sankunni, *Lore & Legends* 180). Since I am discussing a context where certain Syrian Christian Practices are being deemed pagan with the coming of the Portuguese, I felt the phrase “unbecoming of a Christian” was more appropriate.

^{xxviii} Similarities with Hindu faith though have been recorded and after 1930s, their religious practices have come to resemble those of Hinduism more. There has also been a large section of Christian Mala arayans who have started practising the rites and rituals of Anglican communion with a smattering of Indianisation (qtd. in Joseph 156)

^{xxix} “The Encyclopedia of the temples of Kerala refers to a number of temples which are believed to have been erected and administered by Arayan Chieftains. The Araankavu temple, Arattupuzha temple, Mancombumkavu temple, Arakulam Sasta temple, etc are such centres of worship” (Joseph 157). There still exists a temple among them called the Pazhaya paschima Kshetram (The Ancient West temple) whose main deity is Ayleshi Yakshi (Joseph 157-158). According to Joseph, “her destructive power is believed to be greater than that of even Bhadrakali, the puranic symbol of ultimate destructiveness” (Joseph 158).

^{xxx} Caldwell’s article on Bhagavati is curiously titled “Ball of fire”. Kali is believed to have originated from the third eye of Siva and hence Kali is often referred to as a ball of fire by her devotees to highlight her power which is assumed to be born from that of Siva’s own anger (Caldwell 203)

^{xxxi} Kumaramangalath Namboothiri lived in the same taluk as Kathanar. Kumaramangalath, on the request of the King of Kayamkulam, tries to get rid of a Yakshi terrorizing the land in a fashion similar to that of Kathanar. When the Yakshi asks for lime, Kumaramangalath chants a mantra and binds her upon which she is forced to follow him in the guise of a beautiful damsel. When he reaches his illom, he informs the Antarjanams that she is an orphan he found on the way and asks them to keep her as a servant. He however warns them against letting her enter the nalukettu, the interior of the house and instructs them to let her stay in the outhouse. This is because the iron nail with which he had bound her had been buried in the inner courtyard. However, once when Kumaramangalath is off on some journey, the Yakshi beseeches the ladies of the house to let her in and the Antarjanams finally let her take a survey of the house for two minutes. The Yakshi uproots the nail from the courtyard and vanishes into thin air. The freed Yakshi goes back to her old ways and the King again summons Kumaramangalath. Kumaramangalath binds the Yakshi again using his magic, but the Yakshi requests him not to make her into a servant. Kumaramangalath, after making her promise that she won’t hurt anyone, creates a sanctum sanctorum for her in his illom under a pala tree (*Alstonia Scholaris*) and worships her as his family deity (Sankunni *Aithiyamala* 1096-1101).

^{xxxiii} Dempsey writes, “A yakshi’s fear of nails consistently emerges in Kerala folklore and film tales. Yakkhas, like Kerala yaksis, are described in Buddhist texts as being afraid of iron as well. Both Kerala folklore and Buddhist texts also describe yaksis, on occasion, as being afraid of palmyra leaf and as having red, unblinking eyes (Sharma: 47; Misra: 155)” (Dempsey 116).

^{xxxiv} However, to call Yakshi’s domestication “non-violent” is also problematic since domestication is also a form of (covert) violence.

^{xxxv} Dempsey however points out that in the Church compound there is a well believed to have been the path through which Kadamattachan went to learn magic with the *rakshasas* (the cavemen in popular narration become *rakshasas*). Hindus and Christians light candles and offer sacrifices of birds at the well to please the *rakshasas* and get their blessings (Dempsey 122).

^{xxxvi} This is based on a wikipedia entry on Kattanam which I have not been able to access anywhere else. My theory is that just like the story of Manarcad Bhagavati and the *Yakshi*, these are part of local sthalapuranas which need to cast the *yakshi* as a protagonist to establish the antiquity of the region.

^{xxxvii} The story of Father Geevarghese and the *Yakshi* could have been a legend created to explain how the land which was previously in the possession of Hindu sorcerers came into the possession of a Christian Priest as well as establish his spiritual superiority.

^{xxxviii} This is a movie I have not been able to access. The only record I have been able to access of the movie is its basic plotline. It was directed by Reverend Father George Thariyan and the story was also credited to him. It came out in 1966 and starred the thespian Thikkurissi Sukumaran Nair in the lead role of Kathanar.

^{xxxix} This is a term coined by Zhang to “refer to an artificial folklore-like phenomenon that only exists cinematically, and while it may behave like ‘proper’ folklore does ... is entirely a construct for the cinema”. (qtd. in Iyer 105)

^{xl} Some of these included additional stories like Kathanar’s tragic love affair with a woman in the neighbourhood before getting lost in the forest. The *Mala arayans* were also presented in the stereotypical fashion in which they have been often portrayed in Malayalam films. Unlike the comparatively gentler leader in the tale whose followers are many (including cannibals), the cinematic version presents him as the leader of a group of cannibals who would have eaten Kathanar had it not been for the leader’s “beautiful” daughter.

^{xli} It needs to be noted that the Kattanam *yakshi* in the Wikipedia entry on the place Kattanam makes it clear that Kathanar was unsuccessful in taming the *yakshi* and that it was Father Geevarghese who bound her. The tale itself does not specify the name of the *yakshi*.

^{xlii} To a large extent, this holds true for the typical *Yakshi* tale as well where the Namboothiri’s lustfulness which clouds his judgement and intelligence is subtly mocked at.

^{xliii} The white sari in Malayalam movies is usually the ubiquitous marker of a female ghost. While the *Yakshi* in the movie has been described as a ghost, she is the ghost of a princess who, in her lifetime, was never shown as wearing a sari. The sartorial choice of a sari for the *yakshi* when she meets the Kathanar must be linked with his religion where a white sari is more the norm than a mundu-neryathu.

^{xliv} *Chaatanas*, the deities Potti worships are sub-deities unlike those worshipped by the other Nambuthiris in *Aithiyamala* who Ganapati or Bhadrakali. *Chaatanas* are believed to be the children of Siva and Vishnumaya (Vishnu in the female form).

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Chapter 3

The Golden Binds of Love

Yakshi as the Other Woman

The Yakshi has been seen as the embodiment of an unbridled female sexuality in popular imagination. In this chapter, the attempt is to explore this aspect of the Yakshi by reading a popular folktale and its retellings. The question of caste gets inextricably linked with the question of gender in this tale and overtly/covertly in the retellings since as discussed in the introduction, the index of caste is enmeshed with that of gender in the case of the typical folktale concerning the Yakshi where the Namboothiri meets her on the way. However, it must be said that there are differences in how the Yakshi is represented in this tale when one compares it with the typical Yakshi tale, differences which also extend to how the indices of gender and caste play out in them.

Many of the representations of the Yakshi, whether it be in literature or film, have been retellings of an older narrative. An interesting instance of this chain of retellings is a novel like Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's *Yakshi* (to be discussed in detail in the 4th chapter). The novel itself can be said to have taken off from the folktale of Venmoni and the Yakshi giving the older narrative a 20th century twist making it into a psychological thriller. This novel was adapted into a movieⁱ within a year of its publication in the 1960s. However, the retellings didn't end there. It was adapted into quite a different type of movie again in 2012. Thus retellings, through different genres and mediums, have been part and parcel of the attempts to represent the figure of the Yakshi over the years.

The tale which is the subject of this chapter is the one concerning the relationship between a Yakshi and a human, Venmoniⁱⁱ Namboothiri. The story of Venmoni Namboothiri and the Yakshi has taken on different forms through the years. One of the first major written records of this lore occurs in *Aitihiyamala* (The Garland of Legends), a compilation of the lores and legends of Kerala by Kottarathil Sankunni in 1909. This lore was titled *Venmoni Namboothirippadanmar* and was about the unfortunate consequences of a relationship between a Namboothiri and a Yakshi. This tale was adapted into a stage play by the artist and critic Narendra Prasad in 1981 titled *Sauparnika*. *Sauparnika* was a radical play in both its subject matter and form. The play used the form of a traditional Sanskrit drama to deconstruct the hierarchies inherent in the genre itself. It also foregrounded the caste question relegated to the background in the lore. The story of Venmoni and the Yakshi was adapted into a movie in 2013 titled *Yakshi, Faithfully Yours* which played with the question of bigamy which was at the centre of the lore though there were some major changes in the overall narrative.

Before I move towards a discussion of the tale and its retellings, it would be worthwhile at this point to investigate where this particular tale differs from the typical folktale featuring the Yakshi and the Namboothiri. As I mentioned in the introduction, one can make a division among the different works featuring the Yakshi based on her position with regard to the family unit. In the first group, we can look at tales like those discussed in the previous chapter where the Yakshi is the femme fatale waiting on the wayside for her male victim. If we remove the trappings of blood and terror from the tale, then the Yakshi transforms into the *other woman* standing on the wayside, promising a night of sexual pleasure for the male traveller sans any responsibilities. If one considers this tale as a warning tale, as discussed earlier, then

the Yakshi here stands as the danger a man (generally a brahmin man) can get into if he enters into casual sexual relationships with women (from castes lower to his) he meets on the way. In this tale, the danger of this *other woman*'s sexuality is presented covertly since her sexuality is not the danger per se, but her being a monster.

In the second group, we can look at tales like those of Venmoni and the Yakshi where the *other woman* no longer stands on the wayside, but encroaches into the space of the family. These tales unlike the previous one are more direct in how they portray the Yakshi's sexuality itself as the danger. Thus the sexuality of the Yakshi gets presented here not as a ruse to trap her victim, but as an end in itself. Her sexuality is dangerous because it is uncontrollable and insatiable. The tale goes about domesticating this unruly sexuality of the Yakshi into a pleasurable one for the male partner. However, this process of domestication has dangerous consequences since this also entails the encroachment of the *other woman* into the space of the family and her inevitable transformation into a rival for the *family woman*.

In the third group, we can look at works where the Yakshi is no longer the woman from the outside or the *other woman*, but the *family woman*. Works like *Manichitrathazhu* and *Yakshi* tap on the biggest of all anxieties— what if one's wife turns out to be a bloodthirsty Yakshi?

If religion was the element of the Yakshi tale that was explored in detail in the last chapter, in this tale, the focus is on fantasy. The tale of Venmoni and the Yakshi and its retellings are interesting because they are engaged in trying to bridge the gap between an alternately imagined femaleness like that of a Yakshi and the more conventional one of a mortal woman since the basic plot is about the Yakshi transforming into a more domesticated female. Engaged as they are in the process of

domesticating the Yakshi's hitherto uncontrollable sexuality, they also reveal the social mores that govern the construction of femininity itself, be it a conventional one or an alternate one. Thus these retellings are simultaneously an exploration of the limits and possibilities of fantasy itself.

Needless to say, this chapter is also an attempt to understand the act of *retelling* itself. What creates the context for a retelling? What gets foregrounded in a retelling and what loses focus? What gets created and what gets elided? And is the Yakshi, a monster, the perfect site of re-tellings? Also, how does the figure of the Yakshi lend herself to such retellings?

The title of this chapter also refers to an important process that happens in these texts- the act of self-binding. The Yakshi in these texts is willing to bind her powers for the sake of her lover – it may not be the iron nail of the sorcerer that binds her; yet the binds of love that imprison her forcing her to give up her powers as a (semi)divine entity to be the *other woman* in the male protagonist's life are no different. These texts also end with the Yakshi coming out of that binding which while it is liberating also entails her either losing her own life or part of herself.

The folktale - *Venmoni Namboothiripadanmar*ⁱⁱⁱ

This was the title of the story when it appeared in *Aitihiyamala* (The Garland of Legends). As per the author Kottarathil Sankunni, many of these stories had been in circulation in different parts of the Malayalam country for many centuries. *Aitihiyamala* was also not the first written record of these stories for they had appeared as articles in a major newspaper (*Malayala Manorama*) and periodical (*Bhashaposhini*) written by Sankunni himself much before they found the form of a book in 1909 (Narayanan xii). *Aitihiyamala* was the result of the author's "painstaking

travel through Kerala, those days part of two princely states and a part of Madras presidency when travel facilities were less than basic” and his deliberations with local experts to “obtain a reasonably believable and interesting account of the subject” (Narayanan xiii). The stories he collected were of legendary figures, historical luminaries, kings, local chieftains, magicians, priests, elephants, gods and goddesses, temples, festivals, art forms etc ” (Narayanan xiii).

The story *Venmoni Namboothirippadanmar*, or *The Dilemma of Bigamy* as it has been called in the English translation, in a nutshell, is about Venmoni’s relationship with a Yakshi and its unfortunate consequences. The Yakshi here, on the surface, cuts a different figure from the Yakshi of popular folklore who waits on the wayside as a beautiful young woman. The Yakshi here is a female spirit who comes to *manifest* herself when an artist paints a perfect representation of a Yakshi on a temple wall. The “divinity” of the Yakshi is apparent here since in Kerala, it is usually gods and goddesses who are believed to manifest themselves whenever there is such an attempt at perfect representation/capturing the essence of the subject^{iv}. But what the Yakshi does next places her far beyond the realm of “divine” as is commonly understood^v. The Yakshi, once she “comes to life” starts roaming around in the neighbourhood looking for young men to sleep with. The Yakshi’s sexual prowess is so much that very few men are able to satisfy her and either die in the attempt or become paralysed.

The Yakshi in this tale and the Yakshi of popular folklore are both marked by their overt sexuality. However, while in the popular folklore, as stated before, the Yakshi’s sexuality is presented as an instrument for her to achieve her final aim – to eat her victim and drink his blood, in this tale, the Yakshi’s sexuality is presented as

the danger for the man involved. In these tales, what her sexuality means for the Yakshi rarely gets a mention.

The protagonist of the story, Venmoni, is a young brahmin boy who is a simpleton. He is learning the scriptures at his guru's place when his friends trick him into inviting the Yakshi to spend the night with him. Venmoni, a celibate till then, is able to please the Yakshi who agrees to be his lover provided he remains faithful to her. When he returns home after studies, the Yakshi follows him there and continues to remain his lover. However, Venmoni is forced to get married on his father's insistence and the Yakshi agrees to the marriage provided he continues to remain her lover. When Venmoni's son by his legally wedded wife grows up and the day of his sacred thread ceremony arrives, the Yakshi tells Venmoni that as his first wife, she should be the first to give him alms after the ceremony. Venmoni agrees to it and during the ceremony, asks the priest to let the Yakshi (who has come in the disguise of a brahmin woman) to be the first alms-giver. But since this is the right of the child's mother, the priest refuses. The revelation that the stranger is Venmoni's first wife stuns everybody, especially angering his wife and her relatives. They throw the Yakshi out of the house and the angry Yakshi assumes her real form. While she does not blame Venmoni, she curses that there will be no male heir to carry on the family line from the third generation. Subsequently, she burns herself in celestial fire declaring that she won't be accepted in her own world after her relationship with a mortal.

When one compares this story with the other Yakshi stories like the one with the 'Priest of Kathanar' and the 'Goddess of Chottanikkara' where the Yakshi's sexuality is just an instrument for her to kill a man and eat him/drink his blood and who can only be subdued by magic (as in the case of Kathanar) or by divine powers

(as in the case of the Goddess), the difference becomes obvious. In this story, the essence of the Yakshi, that aspect of her which makes her distinct from mortal women and from goddesses whom she resembles in some degree, is her sexual appetite, one which cannot be appeased by mortal men. In the previous chapter, in the case of the Yakshi of Panayannar Kaavu, as per the story on the temple's website, it was a Goddess' uncontrollable sexuality that transformed her into a Yakshi. No wonder then that in this tale as well, the Yakshi is marked by her dangerous sexuality.

It is quite obvious that what happens in this folktale is a re-imagining of the figure of the Yakshi. The Yakshi we find at the beginning of the tale is a female spirit who does not follow any rules of the mortal world with regard to female conduct, especially the sexual mores. But once she becomes Venmoni's lover, there is a sea change in her. The Yakshi, by nature an outsider to the concept of matrimony or marital fidelity, becomes Venmoni's "faithful" lover. Even when Venmoni marries/is forced to marry another woman, the Yakshi does not desert him or take on another lover. She continues to remain "faithful" to him.

Among the Namboothiris^{vi} at that time, it was common for the elder son to marry more than once, with the first wife usually considered to be more privileged in some respects than the other wives^{vii}. The Yakshi in this tale also gets reduced to being the "first wife", but without the privileges of a "wife", let alone the "first wife". The Yakshi's desire to be the first one to offer alms to Venmoni's son by his "legally wedded wife" is indirectly an attempt to assert her claims as Venmoni's wife, his "first wife". This leads to the tragic climax of the story where the Yakshi is thrown out of Venmoni's house by his relatives and is forced to assume her true form.

The Yakshi, carrying traces of her earlier divine status in Kerala's religious life^{viii}, has the power to curse, something which comes up in other folktales as well. Her earlier status as a goddess of fertility comes out in the Yakshi's curse where her curse affects the future generations of the *kulam* (the family) in that from the third generation, it does not get any male heirs to carry on the lineage. In the previous chapter, in one version of the tale of Guptan Namboothiri and the Yakshi, the Guru whose house Guptan takes refuge in, refuses to help him beyond a point fearing the Yakshi's curse which would affect the progeny of his *kulam*. The Yakshi in this tale does not curse Venmoni, but the future generations of his *kulam*. However, even that curse is qualified by her blessing that the next two generations would see the birth of great men. The Yakshi here takes on her divine avatar having both the power to bless and the power to curse.

This is not the only story where the Yakshi enters into a relationship with a human. Another story in *Aitihiyamala* titled *Vayaskara Chathurvedi Bhattathiriyum Yakshiyum* ('Vayaskara Chathurvedi Bhattathiri and the Yakshi') translated into English as 'The Invisible Family' by T.C. Naryanan talks about another such relationship. Here, the Yakshi falls in love with the exorcist Brahmin priest Bhattathiri when he exorcises her out of the body of the ruler of the land^{ix}. She becomes his wife and stays with him in his house unknown to all and even gives birth to his daughter who is a Yakshi like her. She leaves him when she and her husband get tired of each other^x. The Bhattathiri, on his deathbed, confesses everything to his son by his legally wedded wife and makes him promise that he will worship the young Yakshi as the family deity (Sankunni 188-190).

In Venmoni's story, the "racial miscegenation", if we can call it that, ends in tragedy. However, in this story, the Bhattathiri's relationship with the Yakshi does not

pose that many problems precisely because everyone gets to know of it only after the Yakshi leaves the Bhattathiri. She no longer therefore stakes any claim to having rights as his wife. The daughter of Bhattathiri and the Yakshi, who is herself a Yakshi, assumes/is made to assume the role of a family deity and thus any threat of her entering into mortal affairs is kept at bay. Compared to the older Yakshi who despite falling in love with the Bhattathiri at least had the freedom to leave him when she got tired of him, the younger Yakshi is stripped of all her Yakshi-like qualities, be it her sexual appetite or her power to possess another being. She is transformed into a benevolent mother goddess- like figure.

In fact, the Yakshi's and Bhattathiri's relationship can be said to resemble a *sambandham* in that the Namboothiris used to have with the Nair, Ambalavasi and Kshatriya women where the man and the woman engaged in contractual relationships that they could dissolve at will. The only difference is that the Yakshi's daughter belongs to the husband's family and not the wife's. However, even here, the daughter's identity is sublimated to the well-being of Bhattathiri's family. While the mother Yakshi is able to go back to her world after her tryst with Bhattathiri, the daughter Yakshi is left behind perhaps because of her human lineage. While the feminist J. Devika employed the terms *Kulina* and *Kulata* in a different context while discussing the poles around which the "early modern discourse of ideal womanly subjectivity" circulated in Kerala, these terms can also be used to understand this tale (Devika "Beyond Kulina" 223). According to Devika, "[t]he terms 'kulina' and 'kulata' represent contrasting notions defining women in relation to the home, and are linked in a binary relation. Kulina roughly translated, means 'respectable woman', linked in a positive relation to the kulam, or the family. In contrast, kulata means the 'family-wrecker', the 'loose woman', in a negative relation to the family" (Devika

“Beyond Kulina” 223). In this tale, one can see that the mother Yakshi enters the family possibly in the role of a *Kulata* though her invisibility takes away any threat that she poses to the family. In her daughter’s case, while she is not a *Kulina* in the literal sense, it is important to note that her very identity gets tied to the wellbeing of the *kulam* in her installation as a family deity (Devika “Beyond Kulina” 221).

One can see that compared to the other Yakshi stories in *Aitihiyamala*, the Yakshi’s divine status is more apparent in this particular tale since the Yakshi’s daughter becomes a family deity at the end of the tale. In order to understand such a tale where the figure of the Yakshi strikes a different note from her usual figure, one needs to situate such tales in the context of worshipping Yakshis as Tantric deities. Gail Sutherland considers the predominant worship of Yakshis (and to some extent) the Yakshas as tutelary deities and devotional objects among “the earliest examples of enshrinement and employment of demigods as instruments of power” (Sutherland 146). She situates the worship of Yakshis in this manner as a response to “the growing use of female *ishtadevatas* (deities chosen by a worshipper to aid him in his practice) in Tantric-style rites” and considers the Yakshis as then becoming a part of the “the burgeoning pantheon of *saktis* (female energies, powers, aspects, or individual manifestations of the Goddess)” (Sutherland 146). She mentions how “the magical subjection of yaksas and yaksis” spreads to Shaivism and gives the instance of a Shaivite text where a *Kapalika*^{xi} is reputed to be “able to call forth yaksis to do his bidding when and wherever he chooses” (Sutherland 146).

Sutherland talks about how “in medieval and Tantric texts, a yaksa or yaksini *sadhana* is known, in which the deities are invoked and persuaded to render service to the devotee” (Sutherland 146). Sutherland also alludes to how, in the *Kathasaritasagara*, rites for taming Yakshis are mentioned and mentions the story of

a Brahman who learns them and marries a Yakshi who grants him all that he desires, even taking him to the Yaksha heaven where she gives birth to a son (Sutherland 146). The story of the Brahman in *Kathasaritasagara* seems to bear close resemblance to both the stories of Venmoni and that of the Bhattathiri. What Sutherland says with regard to the stories in *Kathasaritasagara* and others can be said to apply in the case of these tales as well. “In the Tantric context, the symbolic domestication of the wilderness, which the yaksa embodies, takes the form of a sexual subjugation of the wild (i.e., erotic) yakshi by the male practitioner. Her undomesticated sexuality is brought to heel and transmuted into familial goodwill, serving simultaneously and conversely as a metaphor for her actual sexual enslavement by the practitioner (a motif that is perhaps latent in the Muslim tales of geniis as well)” (Sutherland 147).

Venmoni and Bhattathiri hence can be considered as Tantric practitioners engaged in the sexual subjugation of the wild Yakshi since in both cases, the Yakshi’s uncontrollable sexuality is tamed and is transformed into a benevolent one for the practitioners. The Yakshi not only transforms into the pleasure-giving partner, but her very presence adds to the prosperity of the family.

Compared to the fairytale-like quality of Bhattathiri’s story which almost reads like the story of a successful Tantric practitioner, Venmoni’s story is more tragic in tone. Hence, it requires a more serious reading keeping the social context of the time in mind as well.

One thus needs to ask what function stories like that of Venmoni and the Yakshi could have served in the society of that time. If one removes the fact that Venmoni’s lover is a Yakshi, then it is about a love affair outside marriage, an upper-

caste man falling in love with a woman outside his caste. The situation in Kerala at that time as per the rigid rules of the caste system was such that only the elder son in the Namboothiri caste was allowed to marry from his own caste^{xii} (Devika *Engendering* 121). Venmoni, here, is the eldest son and therefore has the duty to carry on the family line by marrying from his own caste. As per the social and caste codes of the time, Venmoni's falling in love with a woman outside his caste can only end in tragedy since she cannot be his legal wife.

In the story, however, this "other woman", the woman outside Venmoni's caste is a Yakshi, whose sexuality is unbridled. If we see the traveller's tale of the Yakshi as a warning tale to the Namboothiris to be wary of entering into relationships with "promiscuous" lower caste women they meet on the way^{xiii}, the parallel becomes more apparent. The Yakshi here, unlike the Yakshi of the traveller's tales, is almost a divine being. She has both divine and human aspects to her. She falls in love like a "normal" woman, remains faithful to her lover, gets attached to his son and wants to be recognised as his wife. However, what does not change is the fact that she is a woman outside the Namboothiri's caste, one with whom a marital relationship is not permitted as per the social codes. Such a relationship can then only take place in the realm of fantasy and the Yakshi is precisely such a fantastical figure.

When one compares this story with the story of Bhattathiri and the Yakshi, the difference is striking. Bhattathiri's Yakshi does not leave her fantastical realm to enter into mortal affairs. She remains invisible to everyone except her husband. She is the "other woman" who does not encroach into the space of the family. But in the case of Venmoni, the Yakshi refuses to stay in the fantastical realm. She becomes more and more human as days pass by and tries to find her space in the human world only to be

ridiculed and rejected. Venmoni's story is a case of even the world of fantasy crumbling down in the face of cold reality.

Is the Yakshi a male society's fantasy for a woman whose sexuality is not controlled by societal norms? Is Venmoni, in desiring a woman like that as his life partner, seeking to enter into hitherto forbidden worlds? To understand the function of such a story, it is necessary to look at the overall functions of folklore as well as the genre of fantasy since this tale is both a fantasy and a folktale. In the case of folklore, one can try to understand such a tale using William Bascom's concept of the "basic paradox of folklore" (Bascom 349). According to him, this paradox is that "while it [folklore] plays a vital role in transmitting and maintaining the institutions of culture and in forcing the individual to conform to them, at the same time it provides socially approved outlets for the repressions which these same institutions impose upon him" (Bascom 349).

Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* defines "fantasy" as one which "characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints; it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence or loss" (Jackson 3). Jackson talks of the twin ways fantasy can operate by playing on the twin meanings of the word "express" since fantastical literature is all about the "expression of desire". According to her, "it can 'tell of', manifest or show desire (expression in the sense of portrayal, representation, manifestation, linguistic utterance, mention, description), or it can 'expel' desire when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity (expression in the sense of pressing out, squeezing, expulsion, getting rid of something by force)" (Jackson 3-4). Fantasy, according to her, often performs both these functions at once,

“for fantasy can be ‘expelled’ through having been ‘told of’ and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader” (Jackson 4).

Isn't this the function that this folktale also serves? On the one hand, the fantasy of a “legitimate” relationship with a woman of one's choice who is outside one's caste is played out to be “vicariously experienced” by the author/teller and the listener/reader. On the other hand, the tragic ending of the tale is a confirmation that making such choices in one's own life can only end in disaster, thereby upholding the social order to a certain extent. However, since the very nature of a story, especially a fantastical story, is to resist such closed endings, what the listener/reader carries home is always open to debate.

A more gendered reading of this story would see this as a male fantasy about the ideal lover in such a caste order. The Yakshi here stands for a devouring female sexuality. The Yakshi, as the tale states, is sexually so active that no man is able to please her. Only the hero of the tale, Venmoni is able to meet her sexual demands. Not only that, he is able to transform her sexuality into a non-devouring, pleasurable one. The Yakshi who had multiple sexual partners before gives up her earlier lifestyle to remain Venmoni's faithful lover. The fantasy of the ideal lover continues to function even after Venmoni's marriage. One even suspects that it enters into more ideal realms of fantasy. The sexual relationship with the Yakshi is a non-procreative one. At the same time, the Yakshi being a non-human, does not place any demands on Venmoni which a human lover, outside his caste, would have. It is thus a relationship which is all about pleasure sans any responsibilities. Thus, perversely enough the Yakshi's desire to be recognised as Venmoni's first wife (which is what the ritual of being the first person to give alms to his son symbolises) is on the one hand the final step in her domestication as well as the first step in her breaking out of her passivity.

Thus the tale can also be read as the one about the possibilities and limitations of male desire in such a system.

However, another function of these stories also needs to be stressed. The tales in *Aitihiyamala* are also a tracing and recording of the *lineages* of certain noble families in Kerala. Thus both Venmoni's and Vayaskara Bhattathiri's tales briefly locate their families in the local histories before going on quickly to the tale itself. The tale then ends with a taking stock of the current situation. Thus 'The Invisible Family' ends with these lines, "An annual festival is conducted even to this day in Vayaskara in which the forms of Bhattathiri and the Yakshi are drawn on the ground using powders of five colours and the rituals include singing of prayers one of which refers to the Yakshi as Bhattathiri's daughter. In the light of these one has to assume that the story is not entirely without truth" (Sankunni 190).

Such tales also remind us of studies which link the worship of Yakshas and Yakshis with ancestor worship. Yakshas and Yakshis in folktales are often described as being tutelary or guardian deities of different clans/families. Thus, the Sakya clan to which Siddharta/Buddha belonged had a Yaksha as its tutelary deity and as mentioned in the introduction, Nanda (Hariti) was originally the tutelary deity of the royal family of Magadha (DeCaroli 92). DeCaroli traces the concept of a tutelary/guardian deity particular to a particular clan/family to its ancestors, "The presence of a family deity is usually associated with ancestor worship in that it is only descendants of an honored ancestor who are required to offer devotion" (92).

DeCaroli's contention is that Yakshis (and Yakshas) could have been ancestors who then became family deities and later transformed into local deities. For instance, in the story of Kali Yakkhini, DeCaroli sees "the transition of an ancestral

family deity into a spirit-deity recognized by and accessible to the entire community” (93). In this tale, “the spirit deity first resides in the rafters of a householder’s hut, but being uncomfortable, she moves successively to a flail hut, water chatty, bake house, store room, dust heap, and ultimately to the village gate ... Kali begins by inhabiting parts of one family’s home, but being uncomfortable, she gradually moves out into the public space of the village” (DeCaroli 93). This view is shared by the scholar Ram Nath Misra who also opines that ancestor worship had its unmistakable bearing on the Yaksha cult (DeCaroli 93).

In Kerala’s folktales, Yakshis often appear as tutelary deities of clans or of villages or of kingdoms. There are even tales where the fall of a kingdom is linked to the binding of its tutelary deity, a Yakshi^{xiv} (Sethunadhan, 32). However, there have not been many studies on the link between ancestral worship and Yakshi worship as tutelary deities. It is an area worth exploring since in both these popular tales, we have particular brahmin families where an ancestor is supposed to have had a Yakshi as a wife. The Yakshi in some of these stories then can be said to perform the role of a tutelary deity. Perhaps tales like that of the Bhattathiri are instances of a female ancestor of an older generation getting transformed into a Yakshi down the generations.

While this is an area that can be explored further, this is obviously something that does not come up in the tale itself. The tale in fact is about domesticating a semi-divine being’s powers to such an extent that she transforms into a family deity. To have a domesticated Yakshi as a family deity, one whose powers are all benevolent and channelled towards maintaining the well-being of the family must be definitely a matter of prestige for the descendants. Thus the tale of Vayaskara Bhattathiri and the

Yakshi is one which also serves the function of establishing the spiritual superiority of the family line.

Venmoni's tale ends with an attempt to establish the veracity of the tale in the light of actual events that transpired after the Yakshi's curse. There is also an attempt to explain away things which seem be out of line with the version presented in the tale. Sankunni sums up the tale thus, "The Venmoni family has no male members now as cursed by the divine spirit but as predicted by her, two men from the last generation of males were great scholars. The Venmoni Nambudiripads one hears of now are members of a branch which had detached itself from the main family a very long time ago, and therefore, did not come under the curse." (Sankunni 79)

Venmoni's tale may have had a more tragic ending when one compares it with Vayaskara Bhattathiri's tale. However, despite the alleged tragedy of not having any male heirs to carry on the family lineage due to the Yakshi's curse, an ancestor who had the physical and spiritual prowess to satisfy a Yakshi and make her fall in love with him is definitely someone who adds to claims made of the spiritual superiority of the lineage. The Yakshi's curse is also a convenient device to explain away the degeneration of the family. Thus one function of these tales where ancestors of certain brahmin families had forbidden relationships with Yakshis is definitely to boost their claims to being spiritually superior compared to other brahmin/non-brahmin families without similar histories.

While these tales may be about the entry of the 'other woman' in the guise of the Yakshi into the patriarchal family unit, one should not forget that the families they enter into are already marked by the presence of the family woman. However, the family woman, in both cases, is unaware of her husband's infidelity. In Bhattathiri's

case, his wife is unaware of the presence of the ‘other woman’ until her husband is on his death bed. It may be the Yakshi’s invisibility that is the theme of the story, but for all purposes, the wife is as invisible in the overall narrative of the story since her rights or concerns do not get any attention. In Venmoni’s story, his wife remains unaware of the Yakshi’s presence until the day of her son’s *upanayana*. It is the family woman’s attempt to claim her rights over her son and husband that causes the disruption of the status quo, plunging the future of the *illom* into darkness. These tales thus either completely refuse to engage with the figure of the family woman (as in Bhattathiri’s tale) or use her as a functional device to bring about the resolution of the tale.

Now I would like to discuss the play inspired by the tale of Venmoni and the Yakshi – *Sauparnika*.

Retelling as a Play – *Sauparnika*^{xv}(1981)

The old tale of Venmoni and the Yakshi got one of its major re-tellings in 1981 when Narendra Prasad, noted literary critic and an emerging playwright^{xvi}, adapted it for the stage^{xvii}. The Yakshi was no longer unnamed as in the folktale. She had a name – Sauparnika. She was the “moonlight/that fled^{xviii} the sky/wild with desire” (Prasad 112).

Sauparnika was produced at a time “when the theatre movement in Kerala was poised for a leap or a plunge.” (Harris 11) According to Harris, “the conflicting traditions, practices and values that informed the theatrical work of the time revolved round a certain kind of polarity—the realist vs the indigenous” and it was here that *Sauparnika* with its contemporary take on an old folktale broke new ground (Harris 11). To quote Harris, “On the one hand, it [Sauparnika] has all the surface trappings

of an indigenous theatrical production: a story based on a folk cultural tradition, a reworking of the “classical” theatrical devices such as the Sutradharan and the Chorus, and a certain privileging of a bygone era of mysteries and superhuman forces. On the other hand, the play also raises important questions that are truly contemporary in character: questions relating to individual romantic love, the family, the caste system, the decline of the feudal order, etc. Poised between these two worlds, Sauparnika seeks to achieve a difficult balance: between the past and the present, between life and death, so to speak, and between the real and what is often termed the unreal” (Harris 11-12).

Narendra Prasad, the playwright, belonged to the indigenous theatre movement in Kerala called ‘Thanathu Nataka Vedi’ (Pillai 5). This was a movement that began in the late 1960s due to a general feeling among different dramatists and scholars that the audience was fed up of the prevailing trends and needed something new (Pillai 4). Symposiums and discussions on theatre were held during this period and an experimental phase in Kerala’s theatre tradition began under the aegis of a few dramatists like M. Govindan, C.N. Sreekantan Nair, G. Sankara Pillai, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar etc (Pillai 4). This was in fact part of a movement all over India as theatre artists in various parts of the country like Mohan Rakesh of the Hindi theatre, Vijay Tendulkar of the Marathi theatre, Girish Karnad of the Kannada theatre etc felt that the Western form was not sufficient to give “full dramatic expression” to indigenous themes (Pillai 4-5). They called for a “meaningful theatre with a new indigenous culture” (Pillai 5). Changes in theatre-concepts in the West also influenced these playwrights, especially the works of Antonin Artaud of France, Perzy Grotowski of Poland and others (Pillai 5). Artaud’s attempts to frame a new language for his plays by going back to myths and exorcism rituals was a great influence on

these dramatists (Pillai 5). There was also the call for a more sacred performer-audience relationship which was to take as its model ancient rituals in which the whole clan participated (Pillai 5). The dramatists belonging to the “Thanathu Nataka Vedi” began to explore the rich traditions of the ritual arts of Kerala in order to develop a new trend in the Modern Malayalam Theatre (Pillai 5). Narendra Prasad belonged to the younger generation of these dramatists (Pillai 6).

Sauparnika can then be considered as the product of a particular trend in Modern Malayalam theatre that started in the late 1960s and continued up to the 1980s. While it was in some ways nativist in its attempt to borrow from indigenous sources and find a language that could give “full expression to indigenous themes”, its national and international leanings cannot also be ignored since it was part of a national movement in Indian theatre to develop a theatre that could reflect indigenous concerns and was inspired by European dramatists who were attempting to go back to indigenous themes which included ancient myths and exorcism rituals.

One can see in Narendra Prasad’s *Sauparnika* the dramatist’s attempt to use an old folktale to ask larger questions about the human condition. For instance, at a basic level, the play goes about exploring the human condition by bringing together the human world rooted in rules and regulations with the fantastical world of the Yakshi, free of the restraints associated with the former. What happens when these two worlds meet through the two protagonists, one a human and the other a Yakshi, the changes it brings forth in both, forms the core of the story. The drama raised questions as to whether it is possible to free oneself of human rules and regulations that bind the individual. However, the play also shows influence of international trends in art and literature. Thus one can see the modernist slant to *Sauparnika* in its attempt to use an

old folktale to pose the kind of existentialist questions that the modernist movement was known for.

The ‘Bharatavakyam’ of *Sauparnika*, for instance, is a statement of man’s existential anguish.

Man wanders alone,
 Bereft of love and solace,
 Reaches the face of the great river,
 Presses, with a prayer, the fire
 In his hand against his bosom,
 Looks back and shudders
 At the memory of dead fathers,
 Again puts his right foot forward
 And falls and dissolves
 Into the deathless waves. (Prasad 141)

It can also be read as a re-telling of a doomed love story. However, at another level, this re-telling was also about foregrounding the socio-political context in which this story originated and the caste structures that framed it. Venmoni is a Namboothiri, a brahmin man from a very wealthy and reputed illom. He is a landlord as well, a role which he is reluctant to play. His father and grandfather are men who care only about their family, their clan and the scriptures. They are men who believe that as the highest caste, they have every right to the labour of men lower in the caste

hierarchy. As long as there is a surplus of paddy in their cellars, they don't care whether their tenants live or die. The caste and the feudal systems of that day get represented through the brahmin landlords, the *Karyasthan*^{xix} and the lower caste tenants.

When the play begins, we get to see Venmoni's prosperous family which has been enjoying material and financial abundance for many centuries. The only blot in the otherwise happy picture, which is not stated directly, is the son Venmoni, who is an 'idiot' and one who cannot be trusted to carry on the duties of his ancestors. However, this does not provoke any distress in his family until the grandfather has some ominous dreams. It is the birth of a new age that the grandfather fears, one where the changes in the outer world will carry echoes of ruin for their family and its until then unrivalled prosperity. It is also a world where things that held together the rigid norms governing interactions between different castes crumble down.

To a family at the threshold of ruin, nature will appear wayward and distorted. Jasmines will sprout on mango trees. Calves will be born with twin heads. *Those that should remain separate will get mixed up. Everything will cease to be exclusive.* The dead ancestors will turn restless. Elephants will run amuck and *evil spirits will roam the yards at night ... The servants and tenants will grow powerful.* (Prasad 120)

In the play, the Yakshi Sauparnika and Venmoni's relationship is the direct embodiment of this feared mixing of "*those that should remain separate*". The analogy of two "separate" worlds works at many levels, some of which will be taken up later in this chapter. Firstly, the Yakshi is an immortal, someone who can die only when she wishes. Venmoni, on the other hand, is a mortal. Their relationship goes

through several stages as each of them changes in remarkable ways with Venmoni desiring to be free of the shackles of human life and the Yakshi desiring to be a human being. The Sutradharan describes a Yakshi as “an incarnation of desire” in the beginning of the play (Prasad 111). It is her unquenchable desire/lust that makes her a Yakshi and makes her the terrifying figure she is^{xx}. Hers is a world of feeling and freedom as against the world of Venmoni’s father and grandfather rooted in knowledge and restraints.

However, it must be noted that the Yakshi’s world is not completely a world of feeling bereft of knowledge. The “idiot” Venmoni’s enlightenment comes not through the scriptures he learns, but through his first night of intercourse with the Yakshi who also achieves through it the peace which had kept eluding her. Venmoni’s attaining enlightenment through his sexual union with the Yakshi is an interesting case. Here the body is invested with the power to reach the wisdom traditionally reserved for a religious education. Strangely enough, Venmoni, who has been a student of the Vedic scriptures, gets his enlightenment not through his education, but through his sexual relationship with the Yakshi. One way to understand this anomaly is to situate it within the context of more esoteric religious systems like that of the Tantra^{xxi}. In certain schools of Tantra, the tantric adepts are instructed to engage “in a ritualized form of sexual intercourse that is explicitly compared with a sacrificial ritual, where, however, the female partner is consecrated as the embodiment of the Goddess” (Iyer 107).

Another way to understand it is by looking at the Yakshi as the *Vesya* of classical texts. In these texts,

The Vesya was the vessel of culture, the provider of pleasure- aesthetic, intellectual and bodily pleasure-to men, of certain social standing, at a price. The list of the skills of the ideal vesya, according to the Arthasastra, included singing, playing musical instruments, recitation, dancing, acting, belles-letters, painting, making fragrances, the art of knowing the minds of others, dress and decoration, massaging and seduction. The Kulina, in contrast, was to bear heirs, perpetuate traditional norms and values. The provision of pleasure was seen to be the Vesya's special task and producing legitimate progeny, the Kulina's. (Devika "The Aesthetic Woman" 480-481)

The Yakshi's ability to awaken Venmoni intellectually as well as sexually can be read as stemming from her Vesya-like identity. I will come to this aspect later when I discuss the Yakshi in contrast with Venmoni's wife.

As the play progresses, one gets to see this constant tension between Venmoni's desire to be an immortal and Sauparnika's desire to be a mortal, something both can't achieve. Venmoni wants to be free of the rules that bind him as an individual, including caste rules. Sauparnika often points out how he aspires to be a part of her world and wants to be a *Gandharva*^{xxii}. On the other hand, Sauparnika, once she falls in love with Venmoni, wants to lead her life as his lover and is willing to go to any lengths to do so. It is she who finally convinces him to agree to marry another woman from his own caste and after his marriage, when Venmoni wants to go with her "to some distant land" away from it all, she reminds him of his duties to his wife. As he reluctantly agrees, Sauparnika states with a heavy heart, "Friend, you can live on this earth only if you share your love" (Prasad 133).

SAUPARNIKA. I am now trying to understand you, now, for the first time,
the way the humans do.

VENMONI. Why? You may love me as a goddess, not as a human being.

SAUPARNIKA. You want to be a god, a Gandharva. And I want to be a
woman of the earth.

VENMONI. I don't accept any limits to desire.

SAUPARNIKA. But you have no right to ignore your family, your caste and
its customs.

VENMONI. What if they turn out to be walls around my mind?

SAUPARNIKA. Rivers here on earth have predetermined channels. And
oceans have their bounds. Even the cloud that soars
ultimately comes down tumbling as rain to the earth.

VENMONI. But when it becomes the rain and falls on the earth, it is no longer
a cloud.

SAUPARNIKA. (Laughs) You are speaking of my fate, not yours.

...

SAUPARNIKA. Can you stride the sky formlessly?

VENMONI. (Laughs) No. Making fun of me?

SAUPARNIKA. (Laughs) Can you plant your soul in other bodies?

VENMONI. I am only human.

SAUPARNIKA. Yes. Precisely. You can only live here. Go back. (Prasad 130)

As their relationship progresses, Sauparnika becomes more and more “human” in her desires. She longs to play the role of a mother to Venmoni’s son, something which he sees as uncharacteristic of her. Sauparnika on the other hand resents Venmoni’s accusation that she is behaving like an ordinary woman.

SAUPARNIKA. Why, you don't like me to talk about the child?

VENMONI. Why do you talk like this ... like ordinary women?

SAUPARNIKA. You are hurting me with your words. Yes, you are right! What right have I to speak about children like an ordinary woman? (Almost in tears) I can't be a mother, after all!

VENMONI. (To himself) Am I losing that Sauparnika who is untouched by the earth's squalor? (Venmoni moves closer to Sauparnika and is about to touch her.)

SAUPARNIKA. No, please. Let me go alone today. Only the child is in my mind. Let me not pollute this happiness. (Suddenly) Your child is mine too, isn't he? (She begins to walk away.)

VENMONI. Sauparnika!

SAUPARNIKA. Can a child have two mothers? (Prasad 134)

At the end, when Sauparnika is thrown out of the house, Venmoni makes a final plea. He wants them both to go to a world which is free of chains and wicked customs. Sauparnika, however, states that in her heart now, she has turned a “woman

of this world” (Prasad 139). She cannot go back to the spirit world now for her sojourns into the mortal world have made her unfit to enter it and says, “Now everything is here.... heaven and hell.... beginning and end.... everything” (Prasad 140).

One can read the play as a conflict between the world of fantasy embodied by the Yakshi and reality. Sauparnika, as stated in the beginning, belongs to a world of fantasy and this becomes clear when the actress who plays Sauparnika wonders,

ACTRESS. Anarya! What's all this? A play about *Yakshis*? But aren't these
Yakshis mere figments of imagination?

SUTRADHARAN. Perhaps you are right. But can there be truth without
imagination? And, as far as imagination is concerned...
(beckons the Actors who, as Chorus, enter singing).

CHORUS. What man imagines

Perfects the karmic cycle,

And dreams are truly

The honey of life. (Prasad 110)

The play is thus also about the limits of fantasy in the face of an all-powerful reality. Venmoni, once he falls in love with Sauparnika, dreams of a world where he can feel the true joy of his spirit while his grandfather warns him that any joy should be experienced within the bounds of custom.

VENMONI. Does the joy of my spirit have no meaning then?

GRANDFATHER. One should experience joy within the bounds of custom.

Grandson, we are but pawns on the chess board of karma.

You never know the forces that control you. You are the little doe that gets allured to mysterious fragrances and thus hops off into dense and dangerous forests. Desire is blind.

VENMONI. But, better than wisdom that is bereft of love....

GRANDFATHER. It's the senses that speak now. Senses are mad horses, my child.

VENMONI. Grandfather, why don't you understand simple things? What is my desire? Is it merely an impulse of the body? No. Never! Is it just a matter of curiosity, an eagerness to know what is yet unknown? No. There is something else. It's exactly that which you don't understand, Grandfather.

GRANDFATHER. I have no place in your dream world. May you be happy!

(Prasad 129)

Venmoni tries to attain his “joy of spirit” through Sauparnika, through a relationship where both his mind and body are in tune with each other. The sensual aspect of Venmoni’s relationship with Sauparnika also needs to be stressed since in the traditional marriage among the Namboothiris, “the impulse of the body” had no place (Prasad 129). In the notion of marriage as it comes out in the conversation between Venmoni, his father and the *Karyasthan* in the play, it becomes quite clear that love for one’s wife is not part of it. In that order, the woman to be loved was the Dasi^{xxiii} and it becomes quite clear that “love” here corresponds only to a physical

desire for the woman. The mutual desire that characterises Venmoni's relationship with Sauparnika is absent in the relationship with his wife where their act of making love is described in the play as "joyless" (Prasad 198). Venmoni's state of mind after the first night with his wife is described thus.

CHORUS. I was not here,

Not in my body,

Not in the layers of flesh,

I was the silence of the rock

Amid the dashing waves. (Prasad 198)

If the Yakshi Sauparnika is the embodiment of an unreachable fantasy, then as the play progresses, what one sees is the incapability of the fantastical world she represents to hold itself together in the face of an oppressive reality. Sauparnika turns out to be the more conservative of the two, who keeps reminding Venmoni that his flights of fantasy are not possible for her world is impossible for him to reach. She turns out to be the realist who tells Venmoni time and again that there is no world to which they can escape. The uneasy blending of the two worlds finally comes to an end when Venmoni's fantastical world is forced to confront his real world and in the process, falls apart.

The ending of the play is interesting in how it tries to interpret the tragedy of the tale. The "Bharatavakyam" speaks of man's Sisyphean struggle to find joy and solace in life, to be defeated again and again. Is the play fatalistic in the way it charts out Venmoni's futile attempts to imagine a world where his senses and mind are in tune with each other?

In order to answer this question, one needs to look at the other actors in the play. Venmoni, though a rebel in the order, is finally concerned only about his salvation. He would rather not play the role of the landlord and perform his caste duties which he finds oppressive, but at no point does he consider going beyond his concerns to identify with a larger cause, that of his tenants.

There is a scene in the play where Venmoni happens to hear the curse of an old man, who is their lower caste tenant. Venmoni's father does not show any mercy towards his tenants when they lose their crop in the flood and are unable to pay their land rent. The old man, as Venmoni watches unseen, curses the family that their children would not be able to benefit from the wealth they amass. Venmoni feels perturbed on hearing the curse of the old man, but his unease doesn't amount to his identifying with their plight beyond a point. His wife, Tatri, is least bothered by the "curse of the outcastes" which she does not find even slightly threatening (Prasad 133).

It is interesting that in the play, the curse of the outcaste tenant comes before the curse of Sauparnika in the climactic scene of the play. In the folktale, the only person who curses Venmoni's clan is the Yakshi. Here the outcaste tenant's curse acts as the double of the Yakshi's curse and in the final scene, when Sauparnika is rejected and humiliated, she identifies herself as the "Mother Outcaste" and curses Venmoni's clan, bringing the parallel to the fore again.

VENMONI. Pardon me, Sauparnika!

SAUPARNIKA. I have neither caste nor family dignity. But I feel like an
insulted outcaste. I am an outcaste. Yes, nothing else. An
untouchable mother! (Prasad 139)

V.C. Harris in his discussion of the caste dynamics in the play talks about how while on the one hand the Yakshi's curse exteriorises the curse of the lower castes and renders visible their basic responses, the in/visibility of the Yakshi herself as a figure problematises the process.

A *Yakshi* like Sauparnika, in her final moments of desperation, characterising herself as a "Mother Outcaste" and thus aligning herself with the lower castes is no small matter, for the terrible curse that she utters at the height of her despair over defeated love is, in a sense, an exteriorisation—and amplification—of the curses that the lower castes shower stealthily on their overlords. It is easy to see that this exteriorisation helps render the basic responses of the lower castes visible; yet, paradoxically, the curious in/visibility of the *Yakshi* herself problematises the whole process—so much so that the question of caste, which apparently defies easy analysis and representation, gets intermeshed with several questions relating to gender, modernity, and what not. And this notwithstanding the Sutradharan's opening remarks on his own "Anaryan" (non Aryan) being. (Harris 12)

One has to look at Sauparnika's identification with the lower castes a bit more closely. Unlike the lower castes, Sauparnika had a pride of place in her world once, a world which she left long ago. Venmoni treats her like an *apsara*^{xxiv} and as an immortal being. Though she is positioned outside the namboothiri family like the lower castes, her position is quite different from that of the former. However, what makes such a parallel possible is their respective positioning with respect to the centre. They are both at the margins, their labour invisible to those occupying the centre. Venmoni's enlightenment is attributed to a visit by Lord Vadakkunathan^{xxv} and the prosperity of their home, which is partly due to the presence of the Yakshi

who as a fertility spirit has the power to bless as to curse, is attributed to their good karma as a Namboothiri family. The lower caste tenants' labour is similarly rendered invisible in a caste hierarchy where any failure of crop is attributed to their laziness by the upper caste brahmins. As long as the Yakshi remains invisible to everyone else but Venmoni, she can aspire to be part of his world. Besides, unlike the lower castes who in that system could not aspire to move away from the margins to the centre, Sauparnika believes she is in a position where she can do so. It is when she attempts to become "visible" in Venmoni's world bound by customs, i.e., enter into a space denied to those who do not have brahmin blood that tragedy ensues. As she is humiliated and her birth and dignity questioned, Sauparnika comes to the late realisation that her dream of becoming a mortal woman, despite all attempts to adapt to manmade customs, will amount to nothing. She who had always insisted that Venmoni could never be part of her world realizes that she too cannot be a part of his world. She finally has no space in her world or his and becomes an outcaste in both worlds.

However, in the final reckoning, like Harris suggests, the identification of the Yakshi with the lower castes is an uneasy one since her "outcaste status" is not just different in quantity from that of the lower caste tenants, but also in quality. Since there are no indications within the play that the Yakshi identifies with the lower caste tenants other than when she is thrown out of Venmoni's *illom* at the end, her labelling herself as an "outcaste" or an "untouchable mother" seems more suspect and I am not as convinced as Harris about how *political* such an identification is. It rather seems like the Yakshi uses these terms to foreground the depths of her deprivation than consciously align herself with the lower castes. In fact, one even wonders whether the term "untouchable mother" denotes the ultimate form of abjection that the Yakshi can

visualise, perhaps indicating the Yakshi's own collusion with the caste structures of the day.

While the play does deal with the caste question to some extent, it has to be said that it is never one of the central themes of the play. In fact, the Yakshi's portrayal as the more conservative of the two protagonists itself raises some interesting questions. The Yakshi seems to believe that as long as one is human, one cannot break out of the chains of human customs, especially the caste norms of the day. While this does point to the pervasiveness and deep-rootedness of caste structures in the society since the play depicts how even a fantastical figure has to bow down to the caste dictates of the day, the play seems to be defeatist or pessimistic in its view on social change. Can there be no change in the social norms, especially the caste rules, as long as one is a human? Does being human equate to being a part of artificially constructed rules and regulations by the group in power? Hence, one has to wonder whether the setting up of a Yakshi-Human binary thus inevitably polarises the debate on social change. This is because the play treats Sauparnika, the Yakshi as occupying the space of an unreachable fantasy. Even though fantasy has the connotation of something unreal, it has often been employed to imagine alternate worlds that challenge the status quo. However, in the case of this play, while Sauparnika's world is depicted as being free of the chains of human custom, it is still treated as a world impossible to reach for a human being. The radical potential that an alternate world holds to re-write the codes that govern the social organisation of Venmoni's world is never explored.

My point about how the setting up the binary of the Yakshi-Human polarises the debate on social change holds good when it comes to the play's interpretation of human life. For instance, in the final "bharatavakyam" of the play which interprets

human life as Sisyphean in its purposelessness, what one sees is the foregrounding of an existentialist philosophy that reads the concerns of the play as part of the overall misery of the human condition. What happens as a result is that the engagement with the caste question that the play attempts at two levels, one through the frame narrative and the other through the tale of Venmoni whose tragedy can be entirely attributed to the caste dictates of his society, is swept under the carpet in the final picture of a “homogenous” human condition which doesn’t take into account the differences within it.

The play, however, does not consider caste hierarchies as things of the past. The “Aryan- Anaryan” dynamic of the play proves that the power structures that frame the story are very much part of the present. The Sutradharan of a traditional Sanskrit play was supposed to be a “high-born Aryan” (Prasad 197). However, the structure of the play, with a Sutradharan who declares himself to be an “Anaryan” and an actress who has “no nobility of birth” playing the central role of the Yakshi in the midst of a “highborn” audience, draws attention to the power structures of caste that continue to operate (Prasad 197).

Thus, while the play does deal with the caste question to some extent, its setting up of certain universalist notions of human life work against a fuller engagement with the caste question.

I will now move on to the play’s engagement with the gender question. V. C. Harris argues that while on the one hand, Sauparnika’s being a “spirit” problematizes any easy definitions of it being a gender question, a gendered reading is still possible.

That Sauparnika is not a woman per se, partaking of all the worldly concerns, aspirations and limits of the women of the earth, but, instead, only a being

from the spirit world who wishes to become a woman, necessarily problematises the question of gender as it operates in the play. Yet it is possible to see how Sauparnika enacts a double move in relation to gender: on the one hand, it seeks to foreground (not necessarily privilege) woman's sexuality as an oppositional force, conflicting as it does with the accepted norms of family and caste hierarchies; on the other, it reinscribes the limits of her sexuality through a series of subtle positionings in relation to Venmoni, her earthly lover, and the patriarchal order he represents. What lends this double move a peculiar charm (charm that helps cover up the ideology of the text and render it invisible) and at the same time undercuts it is Sauparnika's in/visibility—a positioning she tries to grapple with through a visibly uneasy identification with the underprivileged. And hence the peculiar caste/gender problematic that informs the play. (Harris 12)

However, I feel that setting up a binary like “spirit – woman” in the case of Sauparnika seeing these two as diametrically opposite terms is missing out on the fact that Sauparnika is a *female* spirit. Her *femaleness* is already inscribed in her identity as a Yakshi. She may be different from an ordinary woman, but her gender identity is *not* neuter. Such a reading therefore misses out on differently imagined “femalenesses”.

There are two ways to look at the Yakshi Sauparnika and her transformation in the play. One is to see her as the Yakshi who, once she falls in romantic love, loses her sexual and other freedoms permanently. The other is to see her as the “other woman” seeking legitimacy as the (first) wife of Venmoni.

The Yakshi in the play comes from a different world. However, there is not much description of this world or what she originally used to be other than in her conversation with Venmoni where she asks him if he can do what she can, fly the sky formlessly and plant her soul in other bodies. When she is humiliated during the upanayana ceremony and Venmoni wants to leave with her to a world where they are free, she talks about once being happy and free while roaming forests and desolate valleys, something which she says she has lost forever. Thus the play doesn't itself offer any concrete description of her world. What we get is instead a general description which stresses on the Yakshi's freedom of movement as a spirit. She is not bound by the constraints of a physical body since she can fly formlessly and plant her soul in other bodies. There is nothing much said about her sexual life before her materialising in the human world as a result of the artist's painting. The Yakshi who materialises approaches the painter with desire, but as he collapses in her arms, she becomes vengeful and discontent and drinks his blood. Thus the Yakshi's vampirism is attributed to her sexual discontent. However, the Yakshi's search for sexual satisfaction comes to a halt when the women of the land beseech her to spare their men. Thus at this point, the Yakshi, the "monstrous feminine" is pitted against the women of the land whose prayers make the Yakshi weep with pity. The Yakshi can then be compared with a terrible goddess who needs to be appeased with the tears of her devotees. The Yakshi's promise to reside in a stone and be worshipped comes after this, with the caveat that she will come out if a man comes and invites her. Thus the Yakshi's uncontrollable sexuality gets bound for some time as she takes on a goddess-like function^{xxvi}. Thus turning into a goddess is a process that transforms the Yakshi into a more passive sexual being since unlike previously where she had been the active seeker, now she becomes someone who can only respond to a man's sexual

interest in her. One can see this as a process of gradual domestication of the Yakshi's sexuality. The Yakshi's wait for a sexual partner ends when Venmoni approaches her and she gets the peace that had eluded her for long in her sexual relationship with him. Thus this alternate female sexuality of the Yakshi is here imagined as one that can be domesticated by a patriarchal society and channelized into a monogamous union, while keeping the pleasure factor intact.

The Yakshi in the play was initially marked by a sexuality that did not fit into the gender norms of the day. However, once she becomes Venmoni's lover, she becomes more and more "feminine". She becomes the noble lover who is ready to enter even into a secret bigamous relationship with Venmoni, moving farther and farther away from the world of power she inhabited before. She is ready to compromise her own identity in the process. It is ironic that while the Yakshi moves from multiple sexual relationships to monogamy, Venmoni goes through a reverse process moving from monogamy to bigamy. It is also important to note that all the compromises are on the Yakshi's part. It is she who gives up her world to be with Venmoni, she who has to share her loved one with another woman in secret and she who finally has to even give up her life after being insulted in front of his kin.

Venmoni, despite his initial reluctance, settles down/resigns himself to his domestic life with his wife fairly quickly. His wife may not have the intellectual or sexual prowess of the Yakshi and the short verse which compares his participation in their first sexual union to the silence of a rock is an indication of this, but she is still able to give birth to a son he is very proud of. One can even see this as an ideal arrangement for Venmoni since the wife takes on the function of the *kulina* who as per the classical Sanskrit Texts was "only supposed to bear heirs, perpetuate traditional norms and values" while the Yakshi takes on the functions of the *vesya*

who as the “vessel of culture” was supposed to be “the provider of ... pleasure – aesthetic, intellectual and bodily pleasure” (Devika “The Aesthetic Woman” 281). It is when the Yakshi tries to take on the functions of the *kulina* on to herself and enter domesticity that the inevitable rupture occurs.

Once Venmoni gets a son, Sauparnika’s relationship with Venmoni changes. What had marked her as the Yakshi above all was her desire as a woman. There comes a time when Sauparnika even forgets her desire for Venmoni in her desire to play with his child as its mother. Venmoni accuses her of behaving like “ordinary women” when she blames him for disliking her talk about his son. One wonders whether for Venmoni, the development of maternal feelings in Sauparnika is part of “the earth’s squalor” she had been free of before (Prasad 134).

It must be noted that as long as Sauparnika stays content remaining the lover of Venmoni, she doesn’t threaten the orderliness of his clan or family. It is the development of her maternal feelings and her desire to be identified as the mother of Venmoni’s son that lead to her claiming her agency after long. The Yakshi has often been depicted as a mother goddess, but her motherhood has rarely been a part of her avatar in folktales. Even in this play, the Yakshi is not a “mother” in the literal sense in that it is not she who gives birth to Venmoni’s son. However, the development of the Yakshi’s maternal feelings in the play has nothing to do with her reproductive capacity. Venmoni’s legally wedded wife may be the actual mother of his son, but by virtue of being his first wife, the Yakshi is staking claims to being his mother as well, whether or not she has actually given birth to him. As per the caste system of the day, in a sambandham that the Namboothiri contracted with a woman of the matrilineal castes, the children belonged to the mother’s taravad and the father had no claims over them or responsibility to provide for them (Kodoth 366). In the case of the

Yakshi Sauparnika, we see the reverse, the “other woman”, the woman from outside Venmoni’s caste, laying claims to the child born out of his legally wedded wife. In the play, marriage is seen by Venmoni’s father as the means to producing a (male) heir for the family. Sauparnika’s motherly feelings which make her stake claim over Venmoni’s son who is born out of Brahmin parents is also thus about laying claim over the family’s lineage and hence they can be read as especially dangerous for the orderliness of his clan.

In the final reckoning, the Yakshi in the play as in the folktale that served as its inspiration is a *humanized* figure, quite different from the blood-thirsty Yakshi of popular folklore. The element of fantasy with regard to the Yakshi is greater in these stories than the element of horror. The folktale treats the Yakshi as almost an apsara and there is no mention of any vampirism/cannibalistic tendencies. The play does briefly mention Sauparnika as drinking the blood of the artist who draws her painting, but it is presented more as her anger at him unable to sexually satisfy her than any desire for his blood per se. The “humanized” Yakshi is again a very “feminine” Yakshi, faithful to her lover and full of maternal feelings for the son. As against the Yakshi is the man Venmoni, who is such an ideal man that he is able to transform even a Yakshi into a very “feminine” woman. Through the *humanizing*, the Yakshi who is generally an “inaccessible” figure because of her dangerous but desirable sexuality is transformed into an ideal lover sans the danger. One can say that what happens here is the domestication of an unruly female sexuality as the femme fatale gets transformed into a monogamous lover/wife who is ready to even stay on the margins for her beloved. The Yakshi does reclaim some of her power at the end, but it comes too late and is rendered meaningless by her own sacrifice.

However, this is not the only way one can look at the tale of Venmoni and the play based on it. Another way of looking at the tale and the play is to explore the role of fantasy itself and the Yakshi as a fantasy about an alternate femininity. To discuss this angle, I would like to briefly discuss N. Renuka's article called *Nishachari* where she tries to locate the origin of concepts like those of the Yakshi and her male counterpart, the Gandharva in "fantasy" itself.

Renuka considers fantasy as something born in the tug of war between nature and culture, nature's instinct for freedom and culture's method of binding humans by means of rigorous social structures (Renuka 37). Yakshis and their male counterparts *Gandharvas*, for her, are characters born out of the thirst in the human heart for freedom. In a poetic description of these two fantastical creations, she says, "beating the wild and silent drums of darkness, they come out of the underworlds of the night^{xxvii}" (Renuka 37). What she does here is to link up the concept of fantasy with that of the night, as the time when the innate desire for freedom in the human heart takes a form. Nights get described as the "other worlds" where men and women seek an escape from their unfulfilled and complicated desires by indulging in/creating fantastical worlds. No wonder then that the Yakshi and the Gandharva are beings of the night who embody for her such desires of men and women respectively. This is an interesting way to look at the night as a concept since it is more often linked with fear (of the darkness) than desire.

However, according to Renuka, Kerala's extremely complicated history bears proof to the fact that the Yakshis and the Gandharvas were not free in their fantastical worlds (Renuka 36). She argues that since two god-centred cultures and their conflicts were there behind the night fantasies of the Malayali, in the paths of history, Yakshis and Gandharvas underwent a change in their appearance, the former becoming a part

of folk tradition and the latter turning into Sattvic lovers who were also divine (Renuka 36). The Yakshi and the Gandharva also came to be treated both culturally and ritually differently from each other (Renuka 36). Though the Yakshi was seen as the symbol of beauty in sculptures and there were systems of worship surrounding her in places, it was not as a symbol of beauty that she came to be rooted in the unconscious of the Keralites, but as an embodiment of desire, one who killed men after seducing them (Renuka 36). The Gandharva's initial conception which was that of a lover granting eternal novelty to the life of his beloved however continued to survive (Renuka 36). Thus this romantic pair (the Yakshi and the Gandharva) who used to enjoy the complementary pleasures of the night – uncontrollable lust as well as love – got separated from each other in course of time (Renuka 36).

The one place Renuka especially locates this difference is in the exorcism rituals of the Yakshi and the Gandharva (Renuka 36). As mentioned earlier, local Hinduism in Kerala, which has elements of spirit religion, believes in spirit possession and Yakshis and Gandharvas are commonly held to be spirits that possess people. However, the difference in the rituals that are followed to exorcise a Yakshi out of the body of the possessed is striking in its difference from one involving the Gandharva. The Yakshi is exorcised violently out of the body of the possessed while the exorcism ritual involving the Gandharva is much gentler (Renuka 36). The exorcism ritual of the Yakshi is one where a nail is driven in or other torture tactics are employed to suppress the tempestuous emotions of the woman (Renuka 36). On the other hand the Gandharva, considered the God of Arts and the symbol of aesthetics, is exorcised very differently (Renuka 36). The Gandharva (and his desires) is exorcised out of female bodies with all the privileges and sympathy accorded to a cursed divine being (Renuka 36 -37).

Renuka suspects that it was the influence of the Vedic culture with its desire for female beauty and indifference towards woman's independence on the folk culture of Kerala that was behind the Yakshi's transformation (Renuka 37). She talks about how one can see in this transformation the enmity that a centralized system of worship had towards the independent Dravidian character (Renuka 37). The "stories of Yakshis" in Kottarathil Sankunni's *Aithiyamala* (The Garland of Legends), one of the earliest written collection of legends about the Malayalam country, according to her, point to such a conclusion (Renuka 37). The Yakshi who waited for her lover with an enchanting smile or the *Sundara Yakshi* (beautiful Yakshi) who was benevolent in her disposition changed into a monster in folkloric imagination (Renuka 37). Yakshis came to be portrayed as enchantresses who, in nights that the *pala* tree (Alstonia Scholaris/Indian Devil Tree) bloomed, seduced Namboothiris on their way to take part in a temple festival, luring them instead to their enchanted palaces and feeding on them, leaving only their hair and nails behind (Renuka 37).

Renuka sets this transformation in the backdrop of a historical situation that emerged where such components related to affection like beauty and love came to be seen only as "illusion" and the emotion of lust came to predominate (Renuka 37). She talks about how the Yakshis, as time passes, turn into folk rebels who stand as a challenge to divine authority and Satvic beliefs (Renuka 37). To corroborate her argument about the transformation of the figure of the Yakshi, Renuka tries to stress the non-vedic origins of the term Yakshi (Renuka 37). In *Sabdataravali*, a dictionary containing the meanings and usages of different Malayalm words, Yakshi is described on the one hand as "Yaksha's woman" (which according to Renuks must have been one of her earlier definitions as the Yaksha does not have any of the negative connotations associated with the Yakshi) and then as "a *Pisachu* who changes her

appearance to trouble people” (later meaning given to the Yakshi, according to Renuka) (Renuka 37). Renuka argues that this shows a transformation in the meanings given to the term in Kerala and locates this change in definition in the cultural history of Kerala (Renuka 37).

It must be said that Renuka’s assertions about the transformations that the figure of the Yakshi underwent from a completely benevolent being to a malevolent one do not seem to be historically accurate. The Jataka tales, for instance, seem to have plenty of cannibalistic Yakshas and Yakshis. The Yakshas also had negative connotations just like the Yakshis in these tales. Similarly, the Gandharvas seem to be a different class of beings from the Yakshas and their links with art and aesthetics are not something usually associated with the Yaksha. Hence, while functionally, the Yaksha and the Gandharva have been considered as similar beings, there have also been major differences in their characteristics. Thus, a comparison of Yakshi and the Gandharva as beings who were initially a pair and then underwent divergent historical transformations doesn’t seem to be a valid one. Where I agree with Renuka though is in a comparison of the functionality of these figures in Kerala’s folktales. Both can be read as embodiments of male and female desire. However, while in the treatment of the Yakshi, it is the element of horror that dominates, in the case of the Gandharva, it is the element of fantasy that dominates.

Renuka does not consider the concept of Yakshi as the sole creation of a patriarchal culture which fears and hence tries to suppress women’s freedom (Renuka 37). She makes this claim due to the existence of *Maaya Yakshi Kaavukal* (groves dedicated to *Maya Yakshi*) in places like Adoor and Ochira where she is worshipped as a goddess (Renuka 37). She points to the origin of the concept in a system of nature worship and traces the transformation it underwent to the Brahmin priesthood’s

attempts to dominate a system of nature worship which was “free” in all its aspects (Renuka 37).

So what was the Yakshi in the beginning? Was it a male fantasy for the perfectly beautiful woman, another Apsara? The Gandharva, even today, in popular imagination, is considered as the “ideal lover”, a man who satisfies all the desires, sexual and otherwise, of his woman (Renuka 37). Was the Yakshi also cast in a similar mould? *Aitihiyamala* is thus interesting since it has tales which show her as the enchantress who seduces men and kills them (those discussed in the previous chapter) as well as those like Venmoni’s where the Yakshi becomes the divine lover.

Thus one way of looking at this tale and the play is to see the Yakshi as the symbol of an alternate femininity that is desired for the freedom it represents, a femininity which can never actually exist in the binding social structures that the protagonists are part of for the very same reason. So, the domestication of the Yakshi can never reach its completion because the desire for the Yakshi is itself rooted in her *not* being domestic. This is particularly evident in the case of *Sauparnika* where Venmoni’s fascination for Sauparnika is partly also his desire for the freedom from the social structures he cannot escape, but desires to.

Before going on to the discussion of the movie based on the legend where the Yakshi is more a divine being/goddess, I would like to briefly discuss an episode in the play where the Yakshi’s divine status is more pronounced. This is the episode where women, young and old, beseech the Yakshi calling out her name. Sauparnika is addressed as “*Sundara Yakshi*”^{xxviii} (the beautiful Yakshi) and their prayer to her has echoes of prayers made to other terrible goddesses like Kali and Mariamman whose thirst for destruction has to be at times appeased by the devotees through prayers and

offerings. The Yakshi's blood-lust where she kills men who cannot satisfy her sexually also reminds one of Donna Jordan's research into early mother goddesses and their sacrificial consorts. To Jordan, "the personification of the processes of nature, the Neolithic planter goddesses ruled the cycles of birth, death, and resurrection of the agricultural seasons, and their sons, kings, and consorts were cyclically sacrificed to ensure the productivity of the fields" (Jordan 30).

Aged grandams beat their heads.

Their grey hair flying like snakes,

And chanted in bitter surrender,

Enough, enough, you Beautiful *Yakshi* girl,

Enough of your lust, Beautiful *Yakshi* girl,

Enough of your thirst for blood!

And the womenfolk

Beat their breasts and cried,

Don't kill, beautiful *Yakshi*,

Don't kill our menfolk! (Prasad 115)

In the prayers made by womenfolk and Sauparnika's relenting to reside in a stone in front of which a lamp is lit and rituals performed, we have Sauparnika briefly taking on a goddess-like avatar harking back to the Yakshi's status as a tree goddess in the beginning.

This is interesting since when we come to the most recent retelling of the story, the Yakshi is identified as a goddess more definitively – she is in fact a *Naga Yakshi*, one who has her own altar and worshippers.

The movie retelling – *Yakshi, faithfully yours* (2012)

Another re-telling of this myth was a very recent one, coming as it did in 2012 for a movie called *Yakshi, faithfully yours*^{xxix}. During the film promotions, this was a movie which was touted to be based on a tale from *Aitihiyamala*. It was not mentioned which particular tale was being taken as the source. In one way, this was to differentiate this movie from the run of the mill Yakshi movies of the day^{xxx} where the figure of the Yakshi as well as the overall narrative had become fairly standardised. While, as mentioned in the last chapter, there had been mythologicals in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s based on *Aitihiyamala* like those centred around the Christian Priest of Kadamattom and the Goddess of Chottanikkara, both of which had episodes dealing with their eponymous characters vanquishing different Yakshis, it had been decades since a Yakshi's tale in *Aitihiyamala* had become the source material for a movie of this genre. The curious omission of the name of the tale in *Aitihiyamala* which served as its inspiration from the promotional material indicates that for the filmmakers, the cultural capital of the corpus of writing known as *Aitihiyamala* was more important than the tale per se. But that may not have been the only reason. The movie's re-telling does create its own *filmic folklore* associated with the Yakshi which is quite different from the traditional folklore associated with her. I will focus on this aspect shortly.

This movie was released in December, 2012 and was the directorial debut of Abhiram Suresh Unnithan, the son of a popular film director in Malayalam. As is

usually the case with almost all movies now, social media had a huge part to play in the film promotions and the movie had a Facebook page much before its release. The two highlights of the movie, according to the producers, were going to be what it did with real time film-making and how it re-interpreted the Yakshi myth. One of the promotional articles mentions the two USPs and throws further light on the theme of the movie: “The movie will be an experimental film dealing with real time film making. *The movie will present the title character of Yakshi as the one who is not to be looked upon with fear or horror, but with emotions and feelings, a lady who can be faithful to you, if you are truthful towards her.*” (“Yakshi-Faithfully yours”)

Another article throws further light on the story.

The classic mythological symbol of lust Naga-Yakshi, who comes down to earth on gandharva yamam and mates with virgin boys and kills them straight away after having her orgasm ... But Yakshi falls in love with two people in her life, who were not virgin and breaks all laws of nature which were put on her by the great God himself ... what happens to her and the boys , watch out "Yakshi faithfully Yours - The YfY" , 'Myth is past, Truth is now, Fiction is future ...' ! (“YAKSHI FAITHFULLY YOURS”)

What one needs to note here is that while the film makers explicitly identify only one process, that of the reinterpretation of the Yakshi figure, another process is simultaneously going on – the re-imagining of the figure of the *Naga-Yakshi*. Naga-Yakshi has rarely been considered as a “classic mythological symbol of lust” or imagined as someone who “comes down to earth on gandharva yamam and mates with virgin boys”. There are other figures like *Vada Yakshi* believed to reside in the *Vada Vriksha* (banyan tree) and mate with passerbys^{xxxi}, but Naga-Yakshi has

generally been seen as a consort of Naga- Raja, the King of snakes and seen more as a Queen of snakes rather than as Yakshi per se. She is rarely associated with the attributes of blood-drinking and mating with men that are part of the Yakshi myth.

What is the need for this re-imagining of Naga Yakshi? Why won't Yakshi do? If one looks at the folktale of Venmoni and the Yakshi, one can see that the attributes of the Naga Yakshi here are those of the Yakshi in the folk tale. However, the Yakshi there is considered as a divine being though she drinks blood and possesses an uncontrollable sexuality. She is imagined to come from a Yaksha loka (a world of Yakshas), different from the mortal world and is an immortal being with powers of her own. When *Aitihiyamala* was written in the early 20th century, the fantastical aspect of the Yakshi was as prominent as the fearsome aspect, so one could imagine the Yakshi as a divine being as well as a femme fatale. The Yakshi still carried traces of her earlier divine status when she was worshipped as a tree goddess. However when we come to the 21st century, the Yakshi's image has been standardised to such an extent through horror films where she is the femme fatale par excellence that the term cannot evoke the notion of divinity that it once used to. Hence, a new signifier needs to take the place of the old one and thus the re-imagining of the Yakshi as Naga Yakshi.

The worship of Nagas or snake worship is still very much a part of the Hindu religious rituals in Kerala. The Nagas have had as long a history as that of the Yakshas/Yakshis. However, compared to Hinduism, it is in the Buddhist Jatakas that they have been compared together more. For instance, based on the Jatakas, Sutherland talks about how both are symbols of fertility and also on how "male and especially female demons of these two races are known to seduce and capture their unsuspecting human victims" (Sutherland 38). However, in Kerala, Nagas generally

do not have the negative connotations associated with Yakshis and are worshipped as fertility deities. The Naga cult or worship of snakes has been an old tradition in Kerala and there have been different theories^{xxxii} regarding its entry into Kerala. The most interesting instance of the synthesis of the Yakshi cult and the Naga cult lies in the figure of the Naga Yakshi, generally worshipped in Kerala's Hindu temples as the Queen of the snakes. Shashibhooshan in his article on snake worship in Kerala, "Keralathile Nagaradhana" sees in this figure the result of the synthesis of two ancient traditions ("Kerala" 85). Thus Naga Yakshi, being a Naga or snake, is firmly located in the divine realm in popular imagination. However, when one looks at the image of the Naga Yakshi in this movie, it becomes apparent that it does not have any of the prominent features associated with a Naga Yakshi. The Naga Yakshi here nowhere takes the form of a snake though she is identified as one.

The movie itself offers different signifieds for the signifier Yakshi. One of the characters says that she is the ghost of the virgin in grandmother tales. Another says that she is a spirit who descends on the earth in the night and mates with young men and ultimately kills them. The Yakshi in the movie presents herself as a goddess though she also says she is the ghost of the virgin in grandmother tales. Thus the signifier Naga Yakshi has at least three varying signifieds^{xxxiii} in this movie. This multiplicity in signifieds may perhaps be traced to the very essence of a monster. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohan says, "This refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration." (Cohen 6) While this may be true^{xxxiv}, I do think that in this particular case, the inconsistencies are also due to the film maker's failure at world building, in his inability to create a fully coherent myth of the Naga Yakshi. Thus there is no attempt

anywhere in the movie to explore the serpent-like nature of the Naga Yakshi. One of the characters in the movie somewhere says that even gods cannot do anything against the Naga Yakshi since she has the company of the snakes, which makes her something along the lines of a Yakshi who keeps the company of nagas and hence known as one rather than as a Yakshi who is also a naga/snake.

Richard Dorson, the folklorist, used to refer to such “behaviour that is presented as traditional folklore although no traditional circulation exists” as *fakelore* (qtd. in Iyer 105). However, critics tend to prefer the term filmic folklore instead since it “allows for an engagement with folklore that is not mired in and dismissed away by the discourses of derivativeness and misrepresentation” (Iyer 105). This is a term coined by Zhang to “refer to an artificial folklore-like phenomenon that only exists cinematically, and while it may behave like ‘proper’ folklore does, ... is entirely a construct for the cinema” (qtd. in Iyer 105). Engaged in “‘deconstructing and reconstructing folklore through the medium of film, thus creating a time out of time’ and in influencing spectators and folklore practitioners, filmic folklore may be seen to facilitate the construction of new identities, where ‘the invented becomes the identifiable’” (qtd. in Iyer 105). Thus in this particular case, while the Naga Yakshi in the film takes on to her the characteristics of the Yakshi she did not have before, she is also losing the characteristics which are usually attributed to her. The Naga Yakshi in the movie, as mentioned before, is neither a serpent nor does she exhibit any serpent-like characteristics^{xxxv}.

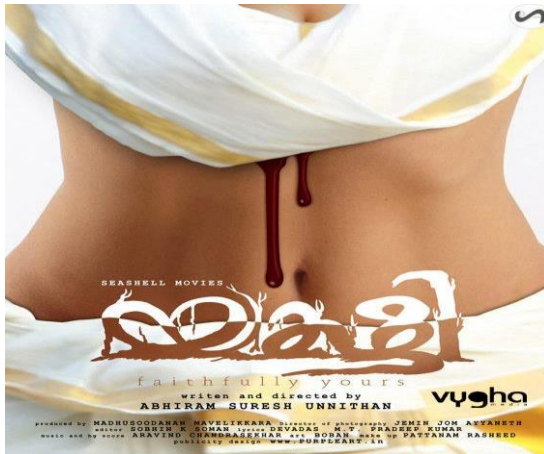
While the re-imagining of Naga Yakshi is something the filmmakers have chosen not to draw attention to, the re-imagining of Yakshi is very much a part and parcel of this project. The conscious attempt of the film makers, as they explicitly state in the promotions, has been to reinterpret the figure of the Yakshi as “one who is

not to be looked upon with fear or horror, but with emotions and feelings, a lady who can be faithful to you, if you are truthful towards her” and the story they go back to for this is the old folktale of Venmoni and the Yakshi (“*Yakshi* –Faithfully yours”). It is not that the Yakshi has only been looked upon with fear or horror. The Yakshi has been as much a focal point of male desire as she has been of fear. Of course, one can argue like Cohen that the fear for the monster is as much a part of the desire for it and vice versa.

The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint. This simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster's composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity, for the fact that the monster seldom can be contained in a simple, binary dialectic. (Cohen 16)

However, what this movie tries to do is to *humanize* the Yakshi and thus highlight her *desirability* as the tagline announces, “If you are truthful to her, She will be faithfully yours” (“*Yakshi* –Faithfully yours”).

While the promotional articles highlighted the *humanness* of the Yakshi, the posters still highlighted the beauty/danger dichotomy that the Yakshi represented in popular imagination. The focus was on Yakshi's dangerous sexuality and one of the posters which shows the torso of a woman wearing the traditional set and mundu^{xxxvi} is a case in point.



In this particular poster, the Yakshi's face is invisible. The focus is on her desirable body while hinting at the danger she represents, as blood trickles through her chest on to her navel. There is no "humanized" Yakshi here as the emphasis is on her desirable but dangerous sexuality. This is a poster which was not based on stills from the movie, as most of the others were and hence can be taken as an abstract embodiment of the concept of Yakshi that the movie wanted to promote. The Yakshi's dangerous but desirable semi-nude body is the object of the voyeuristic gaze of the camera/ onlooker and one wonders if the danger, hinted at, was enough to offset the desirability of the body, stripped of all of the humanizing impulses the promotional articles highlighted. Another poster which has an asymmetrical close up shot of her face focuses more on the danger she represents. This is a still from the movie and shows a woman whose hair and parts of the face are smeared with mud.

One of her eyes is light green and shines in the semi-dark and her other eye, from what can be seen of it is blood red in colour. She looks on at the camera, her gaze piercing and predator-like, the greenness of them adding to their sharpness. A third poster shows the Yakshi sitting at a window, her side profile showing the snake tattoo etched on her arm. An eagle flaps in the background. This is a poster which mainly focuses on the Yakshi's beauty though the symbol of the snake on her arm and the eagle point to the danger lurking beneath it. A fourth poster shows the Yakshi in a snake-like pose, slithering on the ground, her dress smeared in mud and her cat-like eyes staring straight ahead. This is one of the few posters that foreground the snake-like aspect of the Naga Yakshi. Her sensuality is still very much a part of her essence in this poster as well.

After dealing with the re-constructions and re-imaginings that were a part of the promotional material, I will move on to the narrative itself. The movie, *Yakshi, faithfully yours*, has two parallel narratives running through it. One is that of a group of youngsters who want to do a docu-fiction on Yakshi as part of a college project. Their major source for this project is the diary of the chief protagonist Vishwa's great grandfather. The illom of his great grandfather is still believed to be haunted by the Yakshi and so lies deserted. Vishwa wants his project to be a study of the superstition among the villagers. The other narrative is set in colonial Kerala in the late 19th or early 20th century at a time when Madras had become an epicentre for educated high caste Malayali young men. The older narrative follows the events that happen after Vishwa's great-grandfather Vishnu comes back home from Madras, where he is employed, for a few days. The 21st century narrative uses the real life film making technique that was highlighted as one of the movie's USPs during its promotion. A handheld camera follows Vishwa, his girlfriend Shreya and his two friends Kishore

and Jithu wherever they go, with each of them wielding it in turn to capture the events that happen before them. The older narrative on the other hand is presented as if from an omniscient narrator, though in the beginning at least, it follows events as written in Vishnu's diary. The movie is a piecing together of the fate of Vishnu, the great grandfather, whose diary abruptly ends with his meeting the Yakshi and falling for her.

The parallel narrative of the grandson and his friends going to the Yakshi-haunted illom is supposed to look like a documentary and so the whole sequence, a la *Blair Witch Project*, from which it seems to be inspired, is made to look like one shot from a handheld camera. The inroads of other ghost narratives from the west make their presence not only implicitly, but explicitly as well as the friends discuss the Yakshi using figures from the west. One of the friends dismisses the whole thing as "another ghost story" (his words are in English) while another argues out the riskiness of the whole venture with examples from *Ghost Hunter*. The term he uses for such phenomenon is an English one, "paranormal". It is interesting that for him, it is the international symbols of horror who give credence to his faith in local monsters.

First of all, I want to look at how the movie goes about *humanizing* the *Yakshi* and then examine its implications. I will be examining particular sequences from the movie which either confirm or challenge the viewer's "horizon of expectation" since the movie claims that it will "present the title character of Yakshi as the one who is not to be looked upon with fear or horror, but with emotions and feeling, a lady who can be faithful to you, if you are truthful towards her" ("*Yakshi*-Faithfully yours").

The Yakshi is presented in the opening scenes indirectly through the bullock cart man's words as the "*satvam* (monstrous being) that descends in the night upon

earth, seduces men who are virgins and drinks their blood^{xxxvii}.” There follows a montage sequence where the Yakshi makes her first appearance and the cart man’s story gets a visual representation to the accompaniment of haunting folk music. In a snake grove where lamps have been lit in front of the snake deity, a woman stands with her back to the camera and a man is seen approaching her, his face facing the camera. In the entire sequence, we do not get to see the woman’s face. The woman is dressed in white and her hair is open. As the man approaches the woman, his face changes into that of another and then another as the woman extends her long fair arm to embrace the men who approach her one by one and then lies down with each of them. There soon follows close up shots of the men lying dead with blood flowing out of their slit throats near a branch which has the holy red cloth tied around it and turmeric smeared further down it (all sacred symbols associated with the snake grove). The sequence ends with a splitscreen shot of the four men lying dead, victims to the Yakshi. This is the sequence that establishes the Yakshi of popular imagination though it has to be noted that details like seduction of virgin men and the Yakshi being a Naga Yakshi are elements peculiar to the filmic folklore of this particular movie.

The second scene featuring the Yakshi is set in the snake grove as Vishnu, the protagonist, sees the Yakshi for the first time. As a folk song starts playing in the background, a woman is shown standing smiling in the moonlight as smoke filters through the air around her. She is dressed in a traditional set-mundu with vermillion and turmeric marks on her forehead. She is tall, fair, her eyes are cat-like and her hair is long. To an audience well-versed in markers of the Yakshi myth, her long hair, cat eyes and white dress as well her appearance all by herself in a deserted place and consequent disappearance all are indicative of her identity.

Compared to other portrayals of Yakshi in Malayalam cinema, what is different this time is that while the Yakshi does smile, there is an enhanced air of serenity and mystery about her. She does not look ‘dangerous’ at all, in fact the whole scene has a romantic undertone. Unlike the Yakshi in *Kadamattathu Kathanar* or *Chottanikkara Amma* where the Yakshi immediately launches into a conversation with the Namboothiri, the Yakshi here does not wait for Vishnu and disappears soon afterwards.



The first real meeting between Vishnu and the Yakshi happens soon afterwards. The setting is romantic as he sees a woman standing drenched in the rain. Unlike the previous times they met where the background score kept alive the mystery of the woman, this time, the score is romantic.

The woman runs away as Vishnu approaches her and her quick dash through the forest as Vishnu follows her and moves further away from his own house is a familiar trope in Yakshi movies. As Vishnu comes to the snake grove, he sees the woman standing there with her back to him. This reminds us of the first Yakshi scene which had a similar setting with the Yakshi standing in the snake grove with her back to the camera and the viewers had to witness a carnage. In this sequence, when

Vishnu touches her, she turns and faces him. A close up shot of her face reveals that her face is yellow in colour as if smeared with turmeric and there is the tattoo of a snake on her right shoulder. She calls Vishnu by his name and tells him that she is in front of him as he wanted her to. The otherwise romantic scene is suddenly interrupted by close up shots of a sacred tree in the grove whose branches look like snakes. Ominous music plays in the background.

The scenes involving their subsequent sexual intercourse have a lot of ambiguity about them. One is not sure whether they are having intercourse or whether the woman is drinking Vishnu's blood. As the woman lies down (followed by Vishnu) in the ground where pools of water have formed and turmeric and vermillion have mixed together, what comes out predominantly is their desire for each other (whether this is a desire for the man's body or his blood remains ambiguous from the woman's side). The montage sequence is filled with close up shots of a man's hand as it pulls at the turmeric-laden mud, close up shots of the tree and extreme closeup shots of the woman's eyes as they look on something below her. Her eyes are wild and the whole scene leaves the audience unsure of what is going on.

The ambiguity about the Yakshi is maintained up to this point. In the conversation that follows, we get to see the Yakshi's romantic side as she confesses she desires Vishnu since he was born on *Ayilyam*, the star sacred to the snakes. The birth of Vishnu on a day sacred to the snakes is supposed to lend a more sacred quality to the Yakshi's desire for Vishnu and foreground her being a 'Naga-Yakshi'. The Yakshi's desire for Vishnu is so strong that she confesses to wanting to live as his wife provided he also remains faithful to her. The Yakshi assures Vishnu that she will not touch or look at another man once she becomes his wife. The movie thus presents the Yakshi as willing to let go of her 'yakshi-ness', her overpowering sexuality and

limitless desire that cannot be circumscribed into any monogamous unions, for Vishnu. This promise is something reminiscent of Venmoni's promise to the Yakshi. The Yakshi, as per her promise, visits Vishnu^{xxxviii} and later, he marries her in front of her own altar and ties the tali around her neck accordingly. There is no concept of marriage between Venmoni and the Yakshi in the folktale or the play. The Yakshi becomes Venmoni's consort without any of the rituals the movie deems as important. The Yakshi in the play also doesn't have any anxieties about Venmoni's devotion to her, at least in the beginning, unlike the movie where the Yakshi makes it clear that she will remain faithful to Vishnu provided he also remains faithful to her.

Where this re-telling mainly differs from the folktale is in Vishnu's characterisation. Unlike Venmoni who is in the tale unwilling to marry another woman and has to be forced by the Yakshi to do so, Vishnu readily agrees to his marriage with his uncle's daughter. Thus the film diverges from the folktale in a major way and introduces the trope of the Yakshi as a wronged woman. What happens to the Yakshi remains the mystery of the story and it is only towards the end that the mystery is cleared.

The climactic scene in the movie is of Vishnu's wedding night. When Meenakshi, Vishnu's bride, asks him if he had always liked her, Vishnu avers that she has been the only woman in his heart. However Meenakshi doesn't seem to be impressed by his answer and instead asks him sorrowfully as to why he cheated on her. The tone of her voice changes; it is angry now as she repeats the question. Suddenly the silence in the background is broken by the sound of thunder and lightning. Meenakshi repeats the question, but the tone is completely disrespectful as she calls her husband "Eda". The change in the form of address from "Vishnuettan", where his being older is respected and acknowledged to "eda" used here to indicate

contempt and emphasize his inferior status is startling. Her question which echoes in the room as lights go out and curtains flap in the wind introduces the supernatural dimension to the picture. A close up shot of Meenakshi's face shows a changed woman. Her hair is loose, her eyes are wild with anger, the pottu/bindi (a symbol of auspiciousness and a symbol of her married status) is smeared on her forehead, her *chutti* (an ornament used to adorn the forehead) is all awry.

The ensuing conversation reveals the identity of the woman facing Vishnu. It becomes clear that the Yakshi has possessed Meenakshi. The Yakshi's attempt here at first seems to have been to ascertain Vishnu's reason for marrying Meenakshi. As it becomes clear that he had no qualms whatsoever in marrying another woman after promising the Yakshi that he would remain faithful to her, the Yakshi shows her real face. In the ensuing conversation, it becomes clear that Vishnu loves only himself and does not have any qualms even in sacrificing his wife's life to save his life.

YAKSHI. Then why did you cheat me, you unfaithful dog? Each time I met you, I was breaking the rules of nature. Each time I gave you my love, I was taking on myself the curse of the snakes. The time you tied a tali around my neck, I was challenging all the rules that govern nature. Yet seeing her, you forgot me, you unfaithful dog. Unfaithful dog! Why did you cheat me?

VISHNU. Meenakshi!

YAKSHI. Meenakshi! You only saw my body, you didn't see my heart. Spirits don't have hearts, do they? Only your Meenakshi has a heart, right?

VISHNU. Please don't harm me.

YAKSHI. Then shall I kill her?

VISHNU. You can kill her. You can kill her.

YAKSHI. Dhoo... Filthy despicable human!

VISHNU. You can kill her.

YAKSHI. Was it you whom I loved? Was it on your chest that I found refuge?

You have no right to continue living on this earth. Go! Go^{xxxix}!

The movie doesn't offer a fully developed filmic folklore to make sense of the Yakshi's identity as a Naga Yakshi. However, the indication here is that the Yakshi sees her union with a human being as going against the credo of her being a goddess of the snakes, of even being against the laws of nature. The Yakshi in the movie, before her meeting with Vishnu, had intercourse with men, killed them and drunk their blood, yet in her words here, it doesn't seem that they were things which went against her identity. Instead, it is her falling in love and becoming the wife of a mortal that is presented by the movie as out of character with her real self as well as the rules of the system she is part of. In the folktale and the play, the Yakshi is not a Naga Yakshi, so while her union with Venmoni draws her away so much from her world that she cannot go back, she is not cursed by anyone. In the movie, making her a Naga Yakshi makes their relationship much more taboo. She is a goddess and has her obligation to the Nagas which she breaks with her relationship to the mortal and her subsequent marriage. She has gone against all rules of nature in pursuing such a relationship.

This is one of those rare movies where the Yakshi is shown as physically thrashing her victim before killing him. The Yakshi has her arm around Vishnu's neck and suffocates him as she lists out with anger and sadness the sacrifices she underwent to be with him. The Yakshi at one point presses her foot on Vishnu's chest as she gets hold of him by his hair, a pose that reminds one of terrible goddesses like Kali.



The flashes of lightning as dark and light interplay add to the horror. As the Yakshi embraces Vishnu in a death embrace, her fangs come out. This is one of those movies where the Yakshi feeding on her victim, here the lover/husband who betrayed her, is shown in all its goriness. The scene where the Yakshi breaks open his neck and exults in the blood that gushes out is truly one of the most horrifying scenes of the whole sequence. As the Yakshi slurps on his blood like a wild animal feeding on its victim and watches him die, sounds of a conch shell are heard in the background. The Yakshi's revenge is thus presented as almost a sacred victory. This could be due to the fact that being a Naga Yakshi, the act of her drinking (her traitor lover/husband's) blood, a part of her essence which she let go of as she fell in love with him, is also an act whereby she avenges her disgrace and gets back her former status. She is restored

to her semi-divine status. One can compare this with blood sacrifices used to propitiate fierce goddesses like Kali and Koravvai. The parallels thus set up between the Yakshi and a Goddess like Kali/Durga/Sakti are more striking here, for a moment, blurring the boundaries between the figures of the Yakshi and the Goddess. Thus the ending is completely different from that of the folktale and the play and follows the trope of a wronged woman avenging herself. One can compare this with a tale like that of the Yakshi Kalliankattu Neeli where the woman after murdered by her husband becomes a Yakshi and avenges her death by feeding on her husband. Here, the difference is that the wronged woman is not a mortal woman, but a Yakshi.

The folk song begins again in the background, the mournfulness of its tone echoing that of the atmosphere as the Yakshi flings with distaste her tali on the bed near her dead lover and walks away. She breaks the mirror in the room, its broken pieces showing a woman whose face is invisible and her clothes bloodied. Drums start beating slowly in the background and another folk song, mournful in tone, plays as the Yakshi in Meenakshi uses a glass piece from the broken mirror to cut open her jugular vein, thus destroying Meenakshi's body in the process. The medium close-up shot of the Yakshi records the anguish on her face as she commits the deed, her slight sobs revealing a myriad of emotions. The bodies are discovered by Vishnu's younger brother.

This climactic scene in some way can be read against the earlier scene where Vishnu meets the Yakshi in the snake grove for the first time. In that scene, what we expect is a blood bath for we get the sense that the woman who invites Vishnu to sleep with her is a Yakshi and their mating ritual seems to us to be just a smokescreen for her real agenda – to drink his blood and kill him. However, contrary to expectation, the episode does not end in Vishnu getting killed, but in being accepted

as her lover by the Yakshi. In contrast, this scene is set in Vishnu's bedroom. He is supposed to have his first night alone with his new wife. Thus what we do not expect is the bloodbath that follows as the bedroom, supposed to be the setting for their love, turns into a chamber of death as the Yakshi who possesses Meenakshi, the bride, drinks Vishnu's blood and kills him.



In the parallel narrative of the movie, as Vishwa visits his illom with his friends, they all fall victim to the Yakshi. The last surviving person is Vishwa who

records their story using his handycam. As he starts recording his final message, the Yakshi is shown in the background. This sequence has the Yakshi repeating the same things to Viswa that she had told his grandfather in their first meeting – that he is born on a day sacred to the snakes and hence is dear to him. She tells him that if she had been a woman, she might have been his great grandmother, but she is not and confesses her desire for Vishwa. The movie indirectly hints at the fate of Vishwa when after two years, his friend is shown recovering his camera and handycam. Even towards the end, there is an attempt to maintain the movie's pseudo-realism since Viswa's friend calls himself the director of the movie whose attempt was to explore his friend's unknown fate through it. In the last shot, the Yakshi appears in the handycam and addresses the viewer with the words "I will come every night for you". The end of the movie thus shows the Yakshi turning back into the predator that she used to be.

The movie is interesting since unlike most movies featuring a Yakshi in Malayalam, the major setting of the narrative is not contemporary Kerala. There is a conscious attempt on the part of the team to project what they claim to be a more authentic portrayal of the Yakshi and hence setting one of the narratives in a time period where the belief in Yakshis was considered to be normal. However, the time period is not of a period far away in the past. It is the 20th century, a transition period, when there is an unprecedented questioning of traditional values including its myths. This comes out especially in the exchange between Vishnu and his father with their conflicting views on (colonial) modernity. Vishnu's father argues that one should not forget traditional values when one learns new things while Vishnu believes that there is no need to separate them and that one should choose the best from what is available. The father insists on the greatness of traditional knowledge which has

withstood the test of time and asks the son not to make his life a site to experiment his modern knowledge.

Vishnu appears to be a progressive minded young man in how he tends to privilege individual enterprise over ancestral wealth. Vishnu plans to be an accountant for the British since he claims that even Indians are now allowed to go higher up in the administration if they have education. When the bullock cart driver scolds him mildly wondering why he has to go searching for a job when their illom has enough property to satiate future generations, Vishnu avers that it is better to live on one's own hard-earned income than depend on the property one's ancestors have amassed.

Making Vishnu an English-educated young man during colonial times is an interesting choice when we take into account the background of the protagonist of the folktale – Venmoni, who is educated in the Sanskrit scriptures. Vishnu, on the surface, appears to be a progressive minded young man in how he has strayed away from his traditional occupation. He is also courageous enough to start a relationship with a Yakshi (something many of his contemporaries may not have attempted). However, ultimately he turns out to be a callous lover who uses the Yakshi as he pleases and leaves her to enter into a socially legitimate relationship with another woman as and when it fits him. Both Venmoni and Vishnu go against tradition by entering into forbidden relationships with a Yakshi. However, in the case of Vishnu and Venmoni, one needs to note the significant differences in their rebellions. In the case of Venmoni, though the Yakshi is an immortal being, she is not part of his tradition in any sense. She is an outsider to his caste order. In the case of Vishnu though, the Yakshi being a Naga Yakshi, is someone worshipped by his family as a goddess. In fact, their first meeting happens when he goes to her altar as per his mother's instruction to light the lamp. Thus Vishnu's relationship with the Yakshi is

complicated in the sense that while mating with a goddess may be forbidden, what is more forbidden is breaking that relationship. Thus Vishnu's death at the hands of the Yakshi can be read in different ways. In one way, it can be read as the inevitable consequence of going against the traditional codes of conduct by daring to enter into a relationship with a Yakshi, a daring which his father might trace to his *modern* new-fangled notions. At the same time, his fate can be traced to his father's words about not using his life to experiment with new-fangled notions. Vishnu breaks some traditional taboos by entering into a relationship with the Yakshi, but he breaks more by cheating on the Yakshi, who is the family's tutelary deity, without thinking about the consequences. On the other hand, he does marry in the traditional way, thus not going against his family. So, one wonders as to how far Vishnu's actions can be read as a rebellion against his tradition. He, perhaps, as he himself puts it, is someone who picks and chooses what he wants from both, colonial modernity as well as tradition, as and how it fits his needs. Both his relationships with the Yakshi and Meenakshi need to be read in that way. At the same time, the Yakshi is also going against the traditions in her own divine community by entering into a relationship with Vishnu. Though she can be called the tutelary deity of the family which should make Vishnu's act of betrayal much more ominous, the rage she displays is only reflective of her feelings at him seeing her as a mere body and betraying the individualistic contract of trust they had both entered into.

It is also worthwhile to compare the setting of the older narrative with the newer one. Vishwa's story is set in present day Kerala and he and his friends are presented as representatives of a global modernity. Vishwa is presented as a rational modern young man who sees the Yakshi as an older symbol of female discontent and wants to understand the belief system behind such a myth. The movie chooses to

construct its 21st century narrative around the binaries of falsehood and truth. Vishwa's interest in using the belief in Yakshi, something which he terms as "mithya" (falsehood) as the focus of study for his college project finally ends in his confession, his last recording, that "sathyam" (truth) has to be experienced to be understood. It is also pertinent to note that the Yakshi starts killing the different members of Vishwa's group after he and his girlfriend have sexual intercourse on the same bed where in the past the Yakshi after possessing Meenakshi had murdered Vishnu on their first night after marriage. The Yakshi kills his friends and his girlfriend and finally tells a frightened Viswa that she wants him as her lover. The grandfather's betrayal of the Yakshi, it seems, has marked the grandson as well as a potential victim of the Yakshi. It is interesting to speculate if the Yakshi at the end of the movie is what she used to be before she met Vishnu though the movie itself doesn't offer any clues to interpret her behaviour. Was the Yakshi trying to isolate Vishwa by killing his friends to get him for herself? Is her declaration of love where she mouths the exact same words she used before the grandfather a genuine one or is it a mock repetition of her earlier one? All we know is that Vishwa is heard of no more after that and all that remains of him is his diary and handycam. Was he murdered because of another betrayal or was it a doomed relationship from the beginning since Viswa only has fear towards the Yakshi or were those words just a prelude to his murder at the Yakshi's hands? These are questions the movie leaves unanswered instead choosing to focus on its narrative as an investigation of truth which needs to be experienced to be understood.

When one compares the folktale, the play and the movie, the elision of caste question from the narrative of the movie becomes apparent. In the beginning of the movie, Vishnu's father reminds his son who has returned from Madras that Vishnu's mother is worried that he would marry an Englishwoman or a Tamilian. The problem

of racial miscegenation is introduced here though the “other” curiously enough is not someone from a lower caste, but a ‘Tamilian’, from a different language community and an “Englishwoman”, one from another race. This could be because Vishnu is stationed in Madras where as per the movie, the familiar caste order does not exist to pose problems of inter-caste relationships for the male protagonist.

This is a striking aspect of this re-telling. An engagement with the caste question which was implicit in the folktale and explicit in the drama is completely absent here. It is not that the caste structure is absent in the narrative. Vishnu is a Namboothiri and part of an order where the bullock cart man addresses him as *Tambran* (His Highness) and where his friend, presumably belonging to his caste, makes a crass joke about having to make do with the local women, their names an indication of their caste status, compared to Vishnu who gets to spend time with European women. However, unlike in the case of Venmoni, Vishnu’s *illom* is peopled by benevolent parents. Vishnu’s father is a man of wealth and most possibly a landlord as well, but none of this comes into the narrative. His family’s wealth is taken as a natural fact, divorced from the reality of lower-caste labour that must have produced it unlike in the play where it is explicitly mentioned. When we come to the 21st century, the trend continues as expected. The caste identities of none of his friends come into play other than Vishwa’s which is implied. From their names, they all seem to be Hindus and belong to a well-to-do English educated and urban milieu, reflected in their frequent code switching to English and their references to western popular culture.

The focus supposedly is on the gender question through a re-interpretation of the figure of the Yakshi. Viswa gives a 21st century interpretation of the myth of the Yakshi as one invented by women of the day who had been forced to live under the

thumb of men. As a horror movie, this kind of rational explanation comes before the protagonists discover that the myth is actually real and not a human creation. But what the narrative does through the whole process of *humanizing* the *Yakshi* is also to strip her of her danger. Thus, the *Yakshi* who can be read as a female rebel in a patriarchal society gets presented as a woman who just wants faithfulness from her partner. Since there is no questioning of the existing social norms here as it happens in the folktale and the play, the patriarchal order to which Vishnu belongs with the institution of marriage, is presented uncritically. The *Yakshi* may be presented as a demi-goddess, but falling in love still involves for her the traditional ritual of marriage albeit performed in front of her own altar. The overall implication is that if Vishnu had kept his promise to the *Yakshi* of loving her, she would have happily remained his wife in the traditional way. As Vishwa reads from his grandfather's diary, one of his friends quips that having a ghost girl friend is the best thing in the world since sex is free and there are no responsibilities. The movie goes on to show that there are responsibilities involved and that the violation of them can be disastrous for the male partner, but at the end of the day, the process of *humanizing* involves stripping the *Yakshi* of her potency and transforming her into a benign apsara-like figure whose sexuality can be properly channelled and controlled.

When one compares this re-telling with the others, what is clear is that the pattern of domesticating the *Yakshi*'s sexuality is common in all the three. Unlike the folktale and the play, in this movie, the *Yakshi* refuses to be the benign first wife right from the beginning whereas in the other two, that happens much later, over the question of who has rights of a mother over the boy. However unlike the play and the folktale where the impossibility of marrying a woman of one's choice outside one's caste is linked to the existing social order and the caste hierarchy, here it gets limited

to the familiar trope of the revenge of the wronged woman, albeit one as powerful as a Yakshi. It is also interesting that the Yakshi does not curse Vishnu or his family for wronging her, but kills him instead.

In the three texts, we get to see the Yakshi getting bound by the golden fetters of love and finally coming out of these binds having to pay a heavy price in the process. In the tale of Venmoni and *Sauparnika*, the Yakshi loses her status in her own world when she falls in love with Venmoni. She gives up her freedom and many of her powers to be with him. However, losing her powers doesn't give her much in return since she has to share the man she loves with another woman and has to remain invisible. She is never granted the legitimacy that she seeks. Her attempts to claim the right of being Venmoni's first wife do not succeed. However, they help her in getting out of the fetters with which she had bound herself. From the invisible other woman in Venmoni's life, she stands as his visible partner claiming rights over his child. When she is mocked by his family members, she curses the *kulam* (clan) thus re-asserting her power as a Yakshi. However, the process of freeing herself comes at the cost of her life since she realises that she doesn't have a place where she belongs any more. The Yakshi who had left her world to become "a woman of this world" is finally left with neither her world or the human world and has to destroy herself.

In the case of *Yakshi, faithfully yours*, the Yakshi is ready to make tons of sacrifices for her lover Vishnu, such as giving up being a Naga Yakshi and going against the laws of nature, even risking the wrath of the snakes in the process. Yet, it comes with the caveat that Vishnu should be faithful to her. However, Vishnu betrays her trust and takes another wife. The movie is made in the 21st century where monogamy is the norm and cheating on your partner, even if she be an invisible being, is considered as breaking a moral code. Therefore the Yakshi's caveat that her

faithfulness depends on Vishnu's truthfulness to her is not treated as something out of the ordinary by the movie and therefore the Yakshi's act of killing her lover is justified. The Naga Yakshi in the movie does not destroy herself though like in the case of Sauparnika, she too does not have a world to go back to. The Yakshi had predatory tendencies even before, but they were offset by her capability to tame her aggression and be faithful. But after killing Vishnu, she becomes more of a predator as she mercilessly kills all of Vishwa's friends. Whether this is motivated by a desire to kill Vishwa in revenge against his forefather or isolate him born on Aayilyam so that he becomes her partner is something the movie leaves unsaid.

If we draw a trajectory of the three groups of works featuring the Yakshi I discussed in the introduction, then in the case of the first, we see the Yakshi as the *other woman* waiting on the roadside, someone who needs to be subdued by force symbolised by the iron pin. In the second group, the *other woman* leaves her world to enter into the human world, the domestication of her sexuality attempted through what may appear a less forceful means – the power of romantic love. In the third group, we have a reverse journey – of the family woman turning into the dreaded *other woman* as the sexuality of the family woman poses anxieties of going out of bounds. I will discuss this last group of works in the next two chapters.

Notes:

ⁱ The novel even got a Hindi adaptation titled 'Mohini' which was released in 1995.

ⁱⁱ While the two English translations of the folktale use the spelling *Venmani* and *Venmony*, the translation of the play uses the spelling *Venmoni*. I have preferred to use the spelling *Venmoni*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Selections from *Aitihiyamala* have been translated into English by T.C. Narayanan in 2009 as *Lore and Legends of Kerala* where the story in question *Venmoni Namboothirippadanmar* appears as 'The Dilemma of Bigamy'.

^{iv} An example of this is the performance called Mudi yettu. "Mudi yettu is a ritual dance drama from Kerala based on the mythological tale of a battle between the goddess Kali and the demon Darika. It is

a community ritual in which the entire village participates. After the summer crops have been harvested, the villagers reach the temple in the early morning on an appointed day. Mudi yettu performers purify themselves through fasting and prayer, then draw a huge image of goddess Kali, called as kalam, on the temple floor with coloured powders, wherein the spirit of the goddess is invoked” (“Mudi yettu”)

^v Satisfying the goddess through sexual intercourse is part of Tantric rituals and the *Yakshi* is also often worshipped as a goddess in Tantrism. So, while the *Yakshi*’s sexual appetite may not appear congruous with a Vedic Hindu divinity, it is a part of other configurations of divinity (Iyer 107).

^{vi} Brahmins belonging to Kerala

^{vii} One of the major agendas of the Namboothiri social reform movements was the eradication of the practice of polygamy among their men. The Yogakshema Sabha, the reformist organisation among the Namboothiris, worked towards this aim (Kumar 316-317).

^{viii} Historians say that the *Yakshi* was a tree goddess in Kerala much before the advent of the major religions in this region.

^{ix} This is one of the rare *Yakshi* tales where the *Yakshi* is described as possessing the body of a man. It is the *Yakshi*’s counterpart in Kerala’s folklore, the Gandharva, who is often said to possess the bodies of young women.

^x The *Yakshi*’s and Bhattathiri’s relationship resembles a sambandham that the Namboothiris used to have with the Nair, Ambalavasi and Kshatriya women where both the man and the woman had contractual relationships that they could dissolve at will.

^{xi} “The Kapalikas (worshippers of Kapalin, the skull bearer, a name of Shiva)” (“Kapalika and Kalamukha”).

^{xii} As a result, the heir who would carry on the family line was the eldest son, born of parents from his own caste, who had more rights than his brothers. This system was designed to prevent property disputes between siblings as only the eldest son had the right to carry on the family line (Kumar 316-317).

^{xiii} There are stories where the *Yakshi* appears in the form of an *Antarjanam* or a brahmin woman, but these are the exceptions rather than the norm.

^{xiv} In this story, King Marthanda Varma of Venadu is able to conquer Odanadu, another kingdom, after the latter’s guardian deity, a *Yakshi* is bound by a sorcerer (Sethunadhan 32). Stories like these though are not as popular and seem to have been created as part of local tales about particular historical events.

^{xv} I have not been able to access a copy of the play and hence this is purely a textual study based on V.C. Harris’ English translation of the Malayalam play.

^{xvi} Narendra Prasad was one of the most passionate advocates of Modernism in Malayalam literature and theatre. He started off as a “young poet/critic within the folds of the Communist movement” and later parted ways with it to turn into “one of the foremost ideologues of the modernist movement with a large unfinished agenda for the fusion of Marxism and Existentialism” (Harris 2003).

^{xvii} It won awards for best direction, script, actor and actress in the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi drama competition held in 1981 (“Narendra Prasad”).

^{xviii} While the translator of the play V.C. Harris uses the word “fled”, the actual word in the source text literally means “grow distant” indicating just the fact that Sauparnika has grown distant from her own world.

^{xix} Manager or executor who usually belonged to the Nair caste.

^{xx} The play, following the folktale, describes how a painter's life-like drawing results in the Yakshi Sauparnika's manifestation. The painter dies as he cannot satisfy the sexual desire of the Yakshi who then goes around searching for other men to satiate her lust. Finally, women, old and young, beseech the Yakshi to spare their men and moved by their heart-rending pleas, the Yakshi promises to go out to a man only when he comes and asks her. She, hence after, makes her residence in a stone waiting for centuries for a man to come and call her. The man who eventually calls her to come to him is the "idiot" Venmoni.

^{xxi} Sudhir Kakar has tried to understand Tantra and Tantric healing in a rational way using psychoanalysis. He quotes Robert Stoller who opines that masculinity in men is "not a naturally occurring state ... Some rudiment of femininity is there from the start" (Kakar 161). Tantra for Kakar is aimed at an active integration of the feminine in the psyche for "in every man ... there remain traces of the early merger with the mother, a 'primary' identification" with her femaleness and femininity and thus a minimum, irreducible tendency toward bisexuality" (Kakar 161). The Tantric practice aimed at identification with the mother goddess is then about recapturing the femininity lost in the process of acquiring masculinity. As Kakar argues, "as in many other spheres of human fantasy, what in the West is repressed and relegated to the unconscious finds a cultic home in India, where it can be consciously engaged with and ritually acted out" (Kakar 163).

^{xxii} A demi-god, usually considered in folklore as the consort of a Yakshi

^{xxiii} Dasi is a short form for devadasi, one who was renowned in giving bodily pleasure.

^{xxiv} The translator uses the word 'goddess' in place of 'apsara'. But since 'apsara' and 'goddess' are generally completely different in how they are portrayed, the former marked by her overt female sexuality and accessibility to her powerful patrons which are absent in the case of the latter, I would like to retain the word 'apsara' as in the original text. However, the meanings which are evoked when Venmoni calls Sauparnika an 'apsara' are mainly which stress on her beauty, immortality and otherworldliness. But in the way Sauparnika courts sexual partners, the similarity with the apsara is evident. However, it must be remembered that the apsara does not carry some of the identifying markers of the Yakshi, whether it be her thirst for blood or her overpowering sexuality which can end in the death of her partner.

^{xxv} Lord Vadakkunathan is considered to be one of Lord Shiva's forms. The temple dedicated to him is in Trichur where Venmoni goes for his Vedic education.

^{xxvi} Most of the stories dealing with Yakshis and magicians/goddesses also end with the Yakshi being installed as a demigoddess.

^{xxvii} Translation mine.

^{xxviii} Even now, the Yakshi is worshipped in temples as 'Sundara Yakshi'. However, in these ceremonies, she is the benevolent goddess of fertility and prosperity unlike in this folktale where she is as beautiful as she is terrible.

^{xxix} The movie though it generated curiosity for being a new take on the Yakshi myth pre-release failed to impress either the audience or the critics.

^{xxx} In Malayalam nowadays, Yakshi movies in the horror genre are not many. After a surplus of horror movies around 1999-2001 period, mainstream horror movies in Malayalam have decreased in number. The exception is director Vinayan who brings out a Yakshi movie once in a while, his latest being *Yakshiyum Njaanum* (Yakshi and I), which was a failure at the box office.

^{xxxi} The popular horror novel *Kalika* which was adapted into a movie played with the myth of the *Vada Yakshi* in a subplot (Chandran 210-220).

^{xxxii} Some argue that it is the tribe called the Nagas, whose descendants are the Nairs in present day Kerala who brought it to the Malayalam country. Others argue that it was the spread of Jainism which had Tirthankaras flanked by serpents which was responsible for its spread to Kerala. Shashibhooshan is

of the opinion that it must have been a popular system of worship that was assimilated into Jainism (Shashibhooshan “Keralathile Nagaradhana” (Snake worship in Kerala) 85). Translation mine.

^{xxxiii} There is even a 21st century rational interpretation given to this figure within the narrative where one of the characters describes the Yakshi as a myth invented by women forced to live in the patriarchal society of Kerala long back.

^{xxxiv} It must be noted that the signifier Yakshi has carried many signifieds through the centuries. As in the case of Kalliankattu Neeli, who became a Yakshi after being killed by her own husband, there were women who became Yakshis after their unnatural death. Spirits (who had no human connection as against ghosts who were human beings once) who mated with young men and drunk their blood/overpowered them with their sexuality were also called Yakshis as in the Venmoni story. The term Yakshi was also applied to female spirits who possessed women and had to be exorcised out of them. The typical Yakshi, on the other hand, had no tale of origin generally. She was just there, waiting for the traveller to come so that she could lure him into her palm tree and drink his blood and eat his flesh. The common denominator in all these cases was that the Yakshi was marked by her overt and uncontrollable sexuality which was sometimes an end in itself or at other times a ruse to trap men and drink their blood. In most cases, the Yakshis were also marked by their vampirism.

^{xxxv} The only exception to this is her getting attracted towards Vishnu, the protagonist because he was born under the star Ayilyam, a star associated with snakes. But Vishnu is also born in gandharva yamam. The day is divided in to different yamas, the gandharva yamam being a period in the early morning when gandharvas, the male consorts of the Yakshis are supposed to roam about. So, in that sense, Vishnu’s time of birth links him to the snakes as well as to the Yakshi.

^{xxxvi} “In the mundum neriyathum, the most basic traditional piece is the mundu or lower garment which is the ancient form of the saree denoted in Malayalam as ‘Thuni’ (meaning cloth), while the neriyathu forms the upper garment the mundu. The mundum neryathum consists of two pieces of cloth, and could be worn in either the traditional style with the neriyathu tucked inside the blouse, or in the modern style with the neriyathu worn over the left shoulder.” (Boulanger 30)

^{xxxvii} The title song though presents a more romantic picture as a man sings about uniting with his lover in the night as the pala flowers bloom. Pala flowers are an immediate connection to the *Yakshi*.

^{xxxviii} Prophetically enough, the *Yakshi* steps into Vishnu’s home by placing her left foot first, something considered inauspicious.

^{xxxix} Translation mine

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Chapter 4

“This Hideous Face, I Do Not Acknowledge Mineⁱ”

Yakshi as the Monstrous Wife

In this chapter and the next, I look at texts where the Yakshi is located no longer outside the family, but is a part of it. In fact, the texts I study in these two chapters explore anxieties regarding the blurring of the boundaries between the family woman and her dreaded other, the Yakshi. The texts I plan to deal with in these chapters are Malayattoor Ramakrishnan’s psychological thriller *Yakshi* (1967) and its two cinematic versions, *Yakshi* and *Akam; Aakashaganga*, one of the most popular movies in the Yakshi genre in Malayalam; and *Manichitrathazhu*, the popular psychological thriller of Fazil which fawned remakes in multiple Indian languages. While the wife is suspected to be a Yakshi in all the five texts, there are significant difference between *Yakshi* (1967) and its cinematic versions, and *Manichitrathazhu* and *Aakashaganga*. *Manichitrathazhu* and *Aakashaganga* are about the family woman/wife possibly being possessed by a Yakshi and the two movies take the route of psychoanalysis and exorcism respectively to restore the possessed woman to what they project as her true identity – that of the “family woman”. In Malayattoor Ramakrishnan’s *Yakshi*, however, there is no question of the woman being possessed by a Yakshi. The question is a more basic one – is she a woman or a Yakshi? There are other major differences too. *Manichitrathazhu* and *Aakashaganga* are about stripping the family woman of her dangerous *othering* identity, that of the Yakshi. These two movies thus pit the Yakshi against the family woman. Also, they play with the motif of the Yakshi as the avenger. In Malayattoor Ramakrishnan’s novel *Yakshi* (1967), the question is slightly different. *Yakshi* can in fact be regarded as an exploration of the process of “Yakshi-making”, if one may call it that. In a modern

society, how do some women get labelled as Yakshis? Where does the *monstrosity* originate? What happens when within the domestic space, a man suspects his wife to be a Yakshi? However, there is also another interesting angle to the novel. Does the figure of the Yakshi act as the double of the male protagonist, whose monstrosity finds an equivalent in her?

While these two sets of texts thus share common concerns in how they play with the family woman-yakshi duality, since their primary concerns require an independent study, I think it will be more fruitful to explore them separately. Thus, in this chapter, my focus is on the novel *Yakshi* (1967) and its film adaptations *Yakshi* (1968) and *Akam* (2013).

When it comes to the novel *Yakshi*, I will be relying on Prema Jayakumar's 1995 translation. *Yakshi* told in the first person voice of Srinivisan, a Chemistry Professor, is a psychological thriller centred around Srinivasan's suspicion that his wife, the "beautiful" Ragini, is in reality a Yakshi. In Srini's narrative, Ragini is presented as a Yakshi. However, there are enough indications within the text, in Srini's own pauses, silences, revisions (of his statements) and in the statements of the other characters which contradict his own, that Srini's doubts emerge from his insanity, rooted in his intense inferiority complex. In Malayattoor's skilfully constructed narrative, many of the key events in Srini's narrative are presented as open to double interpretations. Srini, the unreliable narrator who often forgets the exact details of some of the events around him, present them as proof of his wife's non-human status. However, to the reader who is given enough clues to read between the lines, a parallel narrative emerges questioning the narrator's version of the events, especially of his wife's true identity.

This novel was adapted into a movie called *Yakshi* soon after its publication in 1968. After four decades, it got another movie version titled *Akam (The inside)* in 2013. Both the movie versions are interesting retellings in the ways they play with the source material, moulding it to meet different ends. The movie versions are also interesting in what they foreground and the techniques they use to achieve their ends.

***Yakshi* (1967)**

There are many things that can be said about Ramakrishnan's well-acclaimed novel *Yakshi*. It can be taken as a study of the anxieties of the masculine self, a domestic tragedy, a psychological thriller, an exploration of the dangers of an overactive imagination etc. However, in my thesis I want to read this novel especially focusing on the figure of the Yakshi. There are two lines of thought that I would like to explore – first, the need for the protagonist to create the figure of the Yakshi to hide his own inadequacies and second, the process by which he projects that figure on to the body of his wife. I would thus like to read the novel focusing on 1) the Yakshi as Srinu's double and 2) the process of Yakshi-making whereby Ragini, Srinu's wife is transformed into a Yakshi in his imagination, lusting for his blood, and interlink these two lines of thought in my final analysis.

First, I will discuss Srinu's narrative style in brief since it will help us understand the context of his suspicions regarding his wife better. The charm of Ramakrishnan's writing is such that while on the surface, a man suspecting his wife to be a Yakshi appears to be nothing but lunacy, Srinu's grasp of logical argumentation where he tries to refute charges of lunacy with references to reputed scholars working on seemingly esoteric subjects lends an air of credence to his arguments.

When the narrative of *Yakshi* begins, Srini is in a mental hospital whose superintendent informs him that he has been admitted there after suffering a severe “mental shock” and that staying there for some days would help him recover. He is often visited by his friend and colleague Chandrasekhar and starts writing his story to “unburden his mind” (Ramakrishnan 87). As the narrative progresses, we come to know that an inspector also often visits Srini, whom Srini suspects to be investigating his wife Ragini’s presumed murder. The inspector too seems to be extremely interested in Srini’s writing of his life’s events. Srini, however, insists throughout that his wife Ragini did not die, but instead turned into “a plume of smoke” (Ramakrishnan 87).

Srini’s narrative is a strange mix of outlandish claims backed up by logical arguments. Thus, to the argument that Srini’s belief of Ragini, a Yakshi, turning into a plume of smoke is just a superstition, he retorts,

Are they not the superstitious ones? Can one deny the details of the subconscious mind that psychology has revealed? If we deny them, we are denying knowledge. Is there any bigger superstition than saying all knowledge, all wisdom, must bow to our laws and our understanding? There might be another world. And that world might have its own laws and its own scientific truths. We have corrected so many of our concepts of space and time! (Ramakrishnan 13)

Srini then talks about reading Jung’s autobiography where he considers dreams as “the flimsy bridges through which the dead reach us” (Ramakrishnan 13). However, since Ragini never appears in his dreams, Srini avers that she is not dead.

This constant movement from a seemingly logical argument to an illogical one is the hallmark of Srini's narrative.

Srini's narrative begins, among other things, with his amazement at the doctor's ability to remain cheerful though surrounded by "mad" men. He ponders as to whether this is due to the doctor's lack of imagination for he says, "Imagination can sometimes become an enemy. In fact, the extremes of imagination can very well be called madness" (Ramakrishnan 2). One has to read this along with Ragini's repeated remarks later in the narrative on Srini having a poet's mind despite being a scientist. Srini himself is posing the question: is it his over-imaginative nature that is responsible for his present condition?

Srini's narrative takes us back to his days as a college lecturer. He was teaching Chemistry in a college where his handsome looks used to elicit admiration and envy, though he states that he never used to boast of them. He was in love with an English Honours student Vijayalakshmi and had dreamt of a future life with her. Everything changed a year and half ago when a flask full of acid exploded in his face while working in the laboratory. He lost half of his face in the accident and was so disfigured that even the doctor who treated him was shocked on removing the bandages. The doctor left him with some consoling words, "Beauty is only skin-deep. It is unimportant – especially for men" (Ramakrishnan 5).

However, Srini's experiences after the disfiguration happened to disprove the doctor's assurances. Srini was unable to come to terms with his own disfiguration, a situation where "all the faces in the world would become my mirrors" expressing shock, sympathy or aversion (Ramakrishnan 7).

Srini's girlfriend Vijayalakshmi deserted him soon after the accident. He also became the butt of ridicule of one of his students, Vanaja, a girl whose advances he had not only rejected earlier when he had been a handsome professor, but who had also been the recipient of his lecture on morality. (Ramakrishnan 8) After his disfigurement, he came to feel that it was the end of his dreams of love and marriage for "who would want to caress a living skull?" (Ramakrishnan 11).

The concept of the mirror is central to understanding Srini's predicament. A mirror is an object in which one sees one's reflection. For Srini, after the accident, the whole world becomes a mirror that reflects his physical deformity. Srini's physical deformity is a lack he is unable to overcome. Though Srini tells us that he tried not to boast of his good looks which used to elicit admiration and envy, the later events prove to us that his good looks were actually a major part of his identity. The doctor might tell Srini that for a man, looks were not important, but for Srini, who seems to have had a narcissistic streak, losing one half of his face is a loss he cannot cope with. None of his other qualities including his skills as a Chemistry Professor are able to make up for that loss.

Srini's strong inferiority complex starts with his physical deformity, which comes at a point when he is completely unprepared for it. Srini, after his disfigurement, develops an interest in the occult, in black magic rites and tales of Yakshis and he even visits places like Chottanikkara and Chamravattam where he meets experts in the field of exorcism. Srini in his narrative states that when he started his work on Yakshis, he never imagined that one would enter his life. However, Srini's friend Chandrasekhar who does not believe that Ragini, Srini's wife is a Yakshi, traces Srini's suspicions regarding her identity to this period in his life. He feels that Srini's overwhelming interest in the research has upset the equilibrium of

his mind. In fact, Chandrasekhar at a later point accuses Srini of uncritically believing in his palm-leaf bundles on black magic instead of investigating them, attributing the beginning of what he considers as Srini's delusions to his research in black magic at a time when he had fully retreated into himself (Ramakrishnan 106, 135).

Srini delving into black magic and tales of Yakshis at that stage of his life where because of his disfigurement, he is shunned by those whom he held dear needs to be explored carefully. In the first place, it can be read as part of his withdrawal from the real world which he finds has no longer any place for him. However, his interest in black magic and Yakshis indicates an interest in esoteric worlds, in beings who are not that benevolent in popular representation. Is he seeking beings similar to his own self? Yakshis, those who move around in the night and drink men's blood, are beings of another world and made of the same darkness that Srini might see as part of himself.

There are other similarities to be drawn between Srini and the figure of the Yakshi. The Yakshi, like Srini, prefers those places which are desolate and sparsely populated. Srini, after his accident, also tries to avoid human company as much as possible. Similarly, Srini was known for his good looks before his disfigurement. The Yakshi is also known for her 'beautiful' outer appearance. Yet, just like the Yakshi's 'beautiful' outer appearance gives way to her monstrous inner self in folktales, Srini's 'handsome' outer appearance gave way to a disfigured face that evoked shock and horror in on-lookers. Hence, perhaps, we ought to start investigating whether even before he meets Ragini, Srini had started a process of identifying himself with the figure of the Yakshi in the monstrosity she represented which he had started seeing as part of himself. It would be fruitful to pursue this line of thought and see whether in some ways, the figure of the Yakshi does act as Srini's double in the novel.

At this point, it is only Srini's face that is "monstrous". However, the events thereafter make him feel more and more alienated from his own self and inadequate as a "man". In fact, certain incidents after his disfigurement lead Srini to start questioning his codes of morality as well as confront his own sexual inadequacy.

Srini's mind starts wandering around images of lust once he leaves the hospital. He starts ruing all the opportunities of sexual intercourse he had missed out on because he had been so prudish and morally upright before the accident. After his disfigurement, his codes of morality no longer hold and he even starts feeling attraction towards Vanaja whom he had despised before.

That incident made me think. Why was it that I who had been so particular about my chastity, wanted to break loose? It had to be because of my certainty that now no woman would ever love me. I was certain that no woman would be able to look at my grotesque face with eyes full of love. No woman would give herself to me for love. Even if one did give it to me, it would be just her body. And I would have to pay cash for it. (Ramakrishnan 17)

These events lead Srinivasan to visit a sex worker's place for the first time in his life where as soon as he kisses the woman's cheek, he starts sweating and losing his strength. He runs out of the room, his virginity intact (Ramakrishnan 18). This makes Srini wonder as to what is wrong with him. He tries to console himself by saying that a man of education and culture like himself would have been repulsed by a transaction that resembled something taking place in a cattle market (Ramakrishnan 19).

But doubts gnawed my mind like worms. Culture! Then why had I gone there in the first place? Lust was a constant problem with me since that accident in the laboratory ... I go to a prostitute and come back pure and chaste. Was I

shutting my eyes to make it dark? Refusing to acknowledge the truth even though I knew it? I felt a severe sense of inferiority. (Ramakrishnan 19)

Later in the novel, Chandrasekhar regards this event as responsible for temporarily or permanently making Srini, a “very moral person, almost a puritan, before the accident” impotent and calls it an event that leaves a “psychic trauma” on Srinivasan (Ramakrishnan 135).

Srini is a twenty seven year old “virgin” when the accident happens to him which changes his fate. It seems likely that his realisation that nobody would desire him because of his disfigurement leads to an obsessive preoccupation with sex, that for a man who has led almost a puritanical life, becomes an obsession that just puts too much pressure on him to perform in areas where he is inexperienced. Along with this, his being almost a “puritan” (as Chandrasekhar calls him) before his disfigurement means that when he steps into unfamiliar territories that are morally suspect, his scruples do leave a mark on him. Thus, Srini’s encounter with the sex worker is one that affects him greatly since it is both an unfamiliar experience to him as well as one which his codes of morality consider as wrong.

This incident is soon followed by a recurring dream and one can see in this dream the piling up of Srini’s inferiority complexes one after the other.

A white staircase would rise to the sky. Young women with lamps and salves in their hands would stand on either side. I would climb the staircase. The women would throw away the salves and extend their hands as if to catch me. I would run up the stairs. Till I could see the top step of the staircase. There, on a soft bed, there would be a beautiful woman. I would go and sit on her bed. Somehow, I would lose my balance and start falling down. I would look

back as I fell. The beautiful woman on the bed would stretch her hands towards me. Her face would show despair. (Ramakrishnan 19)

After his marriage to Ragini, the woman on the bed in his dream starts resembling her. Chandrasekhar, later in the story, interprets Srini's dream as an allegory of his sexual failure. Srini also starts wondering about it after listening to his friend's observations,

If a staircase is a symbol of the sexual act ... then, the stairs themselves are symbols of rising lust. The last step may be the symbol of satisfaction, of fulfilment. So even at the peak of sexual arousal, there is no fulfilment. I fall down. The women on either side of the stairs and the beauty who lies on the last step might be subsidiary symbols connected with this [...] How had this happened to me? [...] Had my sensitive mind been wounded in that house with the wooden rails where flesh was traded? Would that one experience drain away my strength forever? (Ramakrishnan 80-81)

Srini is a man battling many complexes when he meets his future wife, Ragini. His confidence in himself as a man had been shaken up by the visit to the sex worker's place. His lover's rejection of him and the pimp's fear that the prostitute herself would run away on seeing his face all weigh down on him at this point. His mind is full of women, but he feels that all of them "sat with their backs to me" (Ramakrishnan 20). It is at this point that he has a strange meeting with the "beautiful" woman Ragini. Their first meeting that takes place on a deserted road in the night has echoes of the Yakshi tale. The strange woman on the road, who looks around twenty, is more beautiful than Botticelli's Venus and has a voice like a veena, does not get startled on seeing Srini's terrible deformity. She, in fact, asks him to stop.

The woman's appearance in the night all alone on the road puzzles Srini. What puzzles him more is why she picked him especially, a man with half a face.

I wondered why such a beautiful girl should stand in the road at night. Why would she call a passer-by? She must have called all those who had passed by earlier. But they hadn't stopped. I had. ... Could she be a prostitute trying to entice men? No, it could not be ... If all she wanted was to entice men, by now lustful men would have submerged her like a sea. And if all she wanted was a man, why would she pick a man with half a face like me? (Ramakrishnan 21)

Srini's first meeting with Ragini, his future wife, is thus one that resembles the encounter of the Namboothiri with the Yakshi in the tales described in Chapter 2. Srini, later, sitting in the mental hospital, recollecting it, associates it with the famous story of Venmoni and the Yakshi, described in Chapter 3. Srini follows up on this episode with a description of Ragini's last moments where he saw her change into a plume of smoke. According to him, it happened in an old, dilapidated Yakshi temple on whose walls, there was a picture of a Yakshi who resembled Ragini. Srini postulates that either an artist must have seen Ragini's face centuries earlier when she was roaming as a Yakshi or when a perfect picture rose from the imagination of the artist, a Yakshi must have chosen it as her abode (Ramakrishnan 22). He then narrates the tale of Venmoni calling out to the Yakshi in the picture and she becoming his lover. Srini then states, "I did not imagine that I, with my half-face, would have a lover, when I stood at the turning near Town Hall. But that is what happened" (Ramakrishnan 22).

Thus, at a critical point of his life, when Srini had been battling his own inner demons and reeling under a strong inferiority complex that might have made him

doubt his own ‘normalcy’, he meets a woman who seems to come out of the world he had retreated into soon after his disfigurement – the world of black magic and Yakshi tales.

Throughout the narrative, one can see the pull that the corpus of legends and myths on Yakshis exerts on Srini’s imagination. Srini, at various points, compares the events happening in his life with what he has read in different tales about Yakshis, the latter becoming his trusted source of knowledge and belief. Both the tales of malevolent Yakshis and benevolent ones exert a hold on his imagination though one can see the strong influence of the latter in the final story Srini comes up with to explain Ragini’s identity and her disappearance. Thus, Srini’s story of Ragini can also be seen as a retelling of the Venmoni story (which I dealt with in the last chapter) to some extent. It would be interesting to see why Venmoni’s story, among the different tales available to him, becomes the blue print for Srini to weave his own tale about his and Ragini’s relationship. I will come to this later.

Srini does note that Ananthan, his neighbour, holds that Srini’s first meeting with Ragini was not on the road, but on an earlier occasion when he had gone in search of a palm-leaf manuscript and had asked her the way to a Namboothiri illom. Srini, however, avers that he doesn’t recall the incident and categorically states that he met Ragini for the first time near the Town Hall in the night. Thus, within Srini’s narrative, we get clues as to how his belief of Ragini being a Yakshi is built around facts which he chooses to ignore.

On that fateful night when they meet, Ragini informs Srini that she had lost her way while looking for a friend’s house. She wants somebody to accompany her to the railway station where her grandmother is waiting since she is scared to go alone in

the night. She had stopped Srini because she felt he was a good man, as his name and profession were already known to her. To the reader aware of the possibility of Ragini having met Srini earlier, this doesn't seem strange. But to Srini, this later becomes a proof of Ragini being a Yakshi. He also notices that Ragini has long hair that falls well below her knees. Yakshi in popular tales is known for her extremely long hair.

In their conversation, when Srini mocks himself and talks about his horrible deformity, Ragini asks him whether beauty is only of the face. She takes his willingness to help her as the proof of "the beauty of his mind" (Ramakrishan 26). Srinivasan thinks to himself that beauty of the mind is a useless commodity and even feels irritated with Ragini for her statement can also imply that it is the only beauty he possesses.

However, later, Srini traces Ragini's love for him in the sympathy she offered him at their first meeting, linking it again with her identity as a Yakshi.

Ragini showed me sympathy. My face did not shock or frighten her. Why did she show that sympathy? She knew that I was a college lecturer. She even knew my name. Right from the beginning. How did she know all that? Because she was a *Yakshi* of course. Yakshis know everything. (Ramakrishnan 30-31)

The second time they meet, Ragini expresses surprise when she learns about Srini's research on black magic and Yakshis. She asks him if he would recognise a Yakshi if he met one to which he replies, "Oh yes. Her legs would not touch the ground. Her back would be hollow. She would be very beautiful ... like you, Ragini. The only problem is she would drink blood once in a while. She changes her form then" (Ramakrishnan 33).

One wonders if Srini's unconscious association of Ragini with a Yakshi starts right here. Later, at different points in the novel, he feels that Ragini's back is hollow and her feet do not touch the ground. While a hollow back and feet that do not touch the ground are not described as characteristic markers of a Yakshi in the stories in *Aitihyamala*, they often feature in popular tales about Yakshis.

As Srini relates to Ragini the story about his disfigurement, she weeps and they kiss. That moment, Srini feels as if he has got his face back. "How can I express on paper what I felt then! My self-confidence overflowed. I did not just feel that a beautiful woman had kissed me. I felt that I had got my face back. At least one girl found my deformed face acceptable" (Ramakrishnan 34).

Ragini is the first person Srini meets who does not get startled on seeing his face. This is at a time when Srini feels that all the women of the world "sat with their backs to me", i.e. none of them even wanted to look at his face (Ramakrishnan 20). Not only is Ragini not repulsed by Srini's face, she even kisses him passionately. Ragini's face now becomes Srini's self-validating mirror, his "specular otherⁱⁱ", one in which he sees the kind of man he used to be, a man not defined by his physical deformity. It is important to stress how much Ragini's kiss serves to validate Srini's sense of self-worth. Even when Ragini had talked about being impressed by the beauty of Srini's mind, Srini had felt irritated and slighted. He had wondered if Ragini's implication was that it was the only beauty he possessed. Hence, for Srini, his sense of self is rooted in his looks and therefore, only Ragini's passionate kiss which proves to him his own desirability can restore his self-confidence.

However, it must still be noted that in his initial meetings with Ragini, we get to see Srini unconsciously associating Ragini with a Yakshi in the remarks he makes.

It seems probable that his research had so far seeped into his thoughts that everything about Ragini reminded him of a Yakshi with her long hair, her feet and back all forming a pattern in his head. What it also points to is how Srini's unconscious is not quite ready to believe that a "beautiful" woman like Ragini could love him for something other than his face.

However, Srini's logical self is still intact at that point so that these mental excursions do not leave much of an impact on his life, at least for some time. Ragini's love makes Srini forget his disfigurement for some time even to the extent of making him believe that he had got his lost face back. Thus, the monstrosity Srini perhaps unconsciously associates with himself because of his disfigured face, his mind which no longer follows his codes of morality and his unconscious fears about his sexual inadequacy, has been forgotten for the time being because of his relationship with Ragini where she acts as his specular other. The Yakshi, who can stand for Srini's own "monstrous" inner self, has been bound for some time since Ragini, as his specular other, has helped him get back a sense of his self before the accident. However, one can also see that in Srini's unconscious associations of Ragini with the Yakshi at their first meeting, there is a parallel process going on where Srini seeks to find in Ragini a reflection of his own "monstrous" inner self. A number of *uncanny* coincidences further contribute to this process.

One of these coincidences is Ragini's prediction that the *pala* tree (Indian Devil tree) in Srini's yard, which hadn't flowered yet, would flower soon. When Srini asks her how she knows, she laughs aloud saying she knows astrology. That night, Srini has the same dream about the staircase where the woman on the bed now resembles Ragini who weeps as Srini falls down the steps. This is a dream that foreshadows Srini's sexual impotence after his marriage to Ragini and her anguish

about it. It also reveals Srini's anxiety about his sexual failure with the woman he just met and who made him feel desirable. That morning, Srini finds the pala tree in full bloom.

The Pala tree, which is a flowering tree with white sap, has often been portrayed as the haunt of Yakshis in popular stories. Thus Ragini's prediction that the tree would bloom could have started further associations in Srini's mind about her being a Yakshi. However, at that point, Srini may not have looked upon her statement with distrust. Ragini's statement about the blossoming of the tree could have been her way of reassuring Srini about the possibility of spring entering into his life (and hers as well).

The Pala tree can also be read in conjunction with Srini's own sexuality. The tree in Srini's courtyard hasn't flowered yet just like the "virgin" Srini. Ragini's prediction that the tree would blossom might carry for Srini meanings based on his own situation – that Ragini's entering his life might help him become confident about his own sexuality. However, while the tree does flower, Srini's sexuality never reaches a stage of fruition. Srini's dream where he falls down the steps is an indication that even when at the heights of hope about reclaiming his self before his accident, Srini nurses fears about his sexual inadequacy.

The second uncanny incident occurs when Srini and Ragini meet Judy, Ananthan's dog which stops in its track and howls "as though in fear of its life" (Ramakrishnan 35). This is an event that foreshadows Judy's death in Srini's house later in the novel, a death Srini links with Ragini being a Yakshi. After this event, when Srini takes Ragini to Ananthan's house, both his dogs, Judy and Bruno, start howling. While Ananthan says dogs behave like that when they have worms, Ragini

wonders if it is because they can see things which humans cannot. Ananthan laughs at her asking if she believes in Yakshis and gandharvas.

While some of these coincidences can be seen as contributing to Srini's later suspicions regarding his wife's real self, they also need to be read as Srini's anxieties about his future life with Ragini. Srini's dream reveals that he fears a future in which Ragini would be forced to witness his shame in a situation where he cannot sexually perform as her husband. Hence, Srini noting down various incidents in his mind which can later implicate Ragini can perhaps be read as his preparation for the future where he would have to defend his own exposed *monstrous* inner self.

While Srini gets over the inferiority complex about his disfigured face in the company of Ragini who makes him feel *desirable*, a bigger blow awaits him when he is forced to confront his sexual inadequacies.

Srini's sexual failure with Ragini starts on the day he and Ragini go to Ananthan's house to invite them for their wedding. That night, as Srini eagerly tries to make love to her, "Suddenly I recalled the clump of banana trees and that woman from Nedumangad. Why did I remember that just at this moment? The memory weakened me. Would what happened there be repeated? Would I finally be able to slake my thirst? I was unsure" (Ramakrishnan 52).

The memory of visiting the sex worker and his subsequent failure comes to haunt Srini and he returns from the bedroom with "his chastity intact" again (Ramakrishnan 53). While Srini convinces Ragini that he has no time to waste since he has a difficult lecture the next day, in his heart, he finds darkness and starts wondering as to what is wrong with him. When they visit Cape Comorin for their honeymoon, both of them have a conversation about the virgin goddess there who was forced to

remain a virgin since her bridegroom Shiva did not appear at the wedding. When Ragini avers that it is not sympathy, but reverence that she feels for the goddess since her love which makes her wait forever for her bridegroom is eternal, Srini is struck with the similarities between Ragini and the Goddess. “The Goddess had to remain a virgin because her bridegroom could not come before the dawn. Here the bridegroom was present, but incapable” (Ramakrishnan 57).

As Ragini embraces Srini on the beach, he feels that “the atmosphere was redolent with the smell of ‘pala’ flowers” and then he faints (Ramakrishnan 57). One wonders if the “pala flowers” could here stand for Ragini’s own sexuality that Srini sees as overpowering. The smell of pala flowers (associated generally with a Yakshi) that accompanies the moment where Srini comes face to face with his sexual inadequacy could also be read as a precursor to his transference of his *monstrosity* on to the body of his wife where he casts her as a Yakshi.

Once Srini comes back to the hotel, he sees in the mirror that blood has trickled from a corner of his mouth and on to his right cheek “like a thread” (Ramakrishnan 58). Later, he wonders if his fainting spell is the trick his body invents to protect the self-respect of the body. However, that memory remains in his heart and the blood that trickled from his lips is an incident he later links with Ragini, accusing her of trying to drink his blood.

At the hotel room in Cape Comorin, as Srini tries to make love to Ragini, he feels the pressure of needing to succeed that night since his wife will never be able to forgive him if he fails to consummate their marriage (Ramakrishnan 61). However, as he lifts her in his arms, he feels that her back is hollow (Ramakrishnan 61). This is

one time Srini is perfectly aware of the irrationality of his suspicions and tries to drive them away with his reason.

It must have been because she was leaning forward that I felt her back was hollow. Why was my imagination running wild? My research had suffused my brain. I should throw away my palm leaf bundles. My study of vampires had been just a means of passing time. I did not need that now. I had Ragini. (Ramakrishnan 61)

The comparison that Srini makes between his trusted friends, the palm leaf bundles and Ragini is striking. His research into black magic had helped him get rid of the loneliness after the accident as he retreated into himself. However, now that he has got a loving wife, he feels that he needs to replace dead old texts with a living human being. But, this replacement tragically never works out for Srini as he fails again in bed at the most important moment of his married life and faints. His failure in bed is followed by a dream where he sees Ragini kissing him hungrily, her lips blood-red and wet as he lies on the seashore (Ramakrishnan 61). One can see that Srini has unconsciously started building a narrative again to excuse his failure in bed and that his unconscious is looking at the events of the day, including his fainting fit and the blood that spurted from his lips, in a new light, attributing the blame to Ragini.

Ragini doesn't seek any explanations from Srini, but for him, her very silence seems like an accusation. Ragini in fact pretends like nothing is amiss and tries to busy herself by decorating their house. In the entire novel, Ragini confronts Srini about his impotence only once. However, for Srini, however hard Ragini tries to pretend otherwise, her very existence is a rebuke. The "spectral other" Ragini, who had once validated his self-worth and desirability, is now a reminder of his sexual

failure. Ragini's greatest contribution had been in making Srini who had become an "other" to himself feel his "self" again. So when he fails in bed in front of Ragini, it is not just she who becomes an "other" to him. He becomes an "other" to himself and not only that, he is forced to confront his own *monstrous* inner self. This abjected part of his self, which had already sought a double in the figure of the Yakshi, is now projected on to the body of his wife. Thus, in Srini's imagination, the Yakshi and Ragini merge into one as his monstrosity gets transferred on to the body of his wife by transforming her into a Yakshi.

Srini's descent into insanity is not a linear process. While a number of events add up to his suspicions regarding Ragini, there are moments when he is able to critically look at himself and attribute his suspicions to his own failure and strong inferiority complex. However, the more Srini fails in bed, the more his reason vanishes and the more he starts building a world of suspicion in his head. For instance, the death of Judy, his neighbour's ailing dog when Ragini touches her starts a chain of suspicions in Srini's mind regarding his wife's identity. "It must be Ragini that the dogs feared. It was after Ragini had come that Judy had stopped coming into my house... Animals can see things that human beings cannot" (Ramakrishnan 65). The dogs' supposed discomfort with Ragini is to Srini a direct proof of their being able to see her real form, that of the Yakshiⁱⁱⁱ.

Srini's friend Chandrasekhar had in the beginning raised some concerns about their lack of definite knowledge about Ragini's past other than that she had a grandmother. While Chandrasekhar, once he comes to know Ragini, forgets his initial misgivings, Srini takes them forward.

Who or what was Ragini? What did I know about her? Very little ... Was that all one needed to know about one's wife? How had the *pala* tree flowered on the day she had come? Who was her grandmother? ... How could the incidents at Cape Comorin be interpreted? Blood had flowed from my mouth. Besides, and most significantly, why was it that the face that had frightened Vijayalakshmi had not turned Ragini away? How could she bear my face? Ragini's beauty had the power to enslave any man. In spite of that she had sought me out. Me – with my burnt face. Was it only a coincidence that I had met her that night? Had she waited there with the intention of meeting me? (Ramakrishnan 66)

This, in fact, remains the crux of Srini's suspicions regarding Ragini, that a beautiful woman like her could love him when even his lover had rejected him because of his grotesque face. Srini's self-hatred is the crux of his problems. The man who prided himself on his looks can never quite accept his own deformed face. As long as Srini considers himself as a monster, however hard Ragini tries to give him a sense of worth, that self-hatred never goes away. His wife's ethereal beauty perhaps fills him with greater hatred towards his own self, a hatred he tries to negotiate with by projecting it towards his wife by casting her as the monster.

Judy's death becomes another instance for Srini to suspect Ragini. However, when Ragini herself admits that she feels guilty about the dog's death since it seems to have been afraid of her from the beginning, Srini's doubts vanish and he feels ashamed of himself for making himself believe that his wife was a Yakshi. He admits, "It was my mind that was poisoned. I clung to my belief that no woman could love my grotesque face. And so I gave way to doubts when one did" (Ramakrishnan 67)

Soon after this, Srini wonders whether he should confess his failures to Ragini and beg her forgiveness. However, he tells himself, “No, I was a man. What I had to say was shameful. I would not say it” (Ramakrishnan 68). He instead decides to ask her forgiveness by not failing her again. However, that does not work out and Srini becomes more desperate.

Srini’s ego does not permit him to ask Ananthan, his neighbour, for help with his sexual problems. When Ananthan’s wife Kalyani Amma gets pregnant for the first time after many years, Srini wonders if he should ask him whether he also had similar problems in the beginning of his marriage. However, Srini feels that he is not that close with Ananthan who is much older than him and that perhaps he may not have had the same problems as Srini.

Srini has such a complex about discussing his sexual failure with his friends that even when Chandrasekhar, on hearing about his nightmares, interprets them to be symbolic of his sexual weakness, he denies it outright and instead boasts of his sexual prowess. Thus we have a male character who is unable to perform the role that the gender norms of his day consider as *natural* to his sex. While his sexual impotence is an issue that troubles Srini continuously, he is unable to confront it. One assumes that his already fragile sense of self-worth would have collapsed under the double blow. Unlike his scarred face which is visible to all, his sexual weakness is an invisible wound that festers on the inside. One also has to ask the question what his sexual weakness means to Srini. Should one read it in terms of Srini being unable to satisfy *his* desire for a woman’s body since his initial preoccupations had all been about “slaking *his* thirst”? (Ramakrishnan 52) Or does one need to see it less in terms of “sexual desire” and more in terms of Srini seeing his sexual performance as validation of his masculinity? It is important to note that there are indications within the text that

Ragini does not seem to see Srini's sexual weakness as much of a sin as Srini makes it out to be. In fact, it is Srini's closing off of his self from her that seems to hurt her more than any of his failures in bed. Thus, for Srini, his sense of failure is more about him falling in his own eyes than about what it means to his wife, less about giving pleasure to his wife and more about proving his own sexual prowess. It is less about how others perceive it and more about how he perceives it.

Srini's mind starts building a world of its own where his random dreams take on meanings that implicate Ragini. One can read this as Srini's transference of his monstrosity on to the figure of his wife. In "Monster Culture", Jeffrey Jerome Cohen considers monster as the "dialectical Other". "In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond – of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate within" (Cohen 7). After his disfigurement, Srini's face is an object of horror starting with the doctor who removes the bandages to the pimp who tells him that the "prostitute" would run away on seeing his face. Thus, Srini is the monster whose face scares away people. However, in the narrative that he weaves, Ragini is cast as the *monster*. She is the object of fear now as he becomes the object of pity.

Srini's simultaneous identification with and othering of the figure of the Yakshi is indeed fascinating to study. As we have seen, Srini's interest in the field of black magic and Yakshis was possibly a result of his seeking out an area whose beings resembled him in some degree. However, once Ragini comes into Srini's life and Srini's inferiority complex due to his sexual weakness becomes too strong for him to deal with, he transfers the monstrosity completely onto the body of his wife.

In this regard, it is particularly interesting that Srini's random thoughts/suppositions take on new meaning when he feels especially threatened with regard to his sexual prowess. Srini, for instance, has another dream where he sees his neighbour's wife Kalyani Amma sitting in her bath tub covered with blood. He sees another woman also in the bath room sitting on the floor, her skirt and blouse red in colour, soaked in the blood. As the woman turns around, he sees that she is Ragini. This dream, for Srini, is a portent that Kalyani Amma would have a miscarriage and that Ragini would be responsible for it. This leads him to further doubt his wife's identity. "Yakshis do seize pregnant women. I had read in one of the palm leaf manuscripts that the human foetus is a favourite food of Yakshis. I felt that there was some connection between Ragini and blood" (Ramakrishnan 73). While in this dream, there is an attempt to link Ragini and Kalyani Amma's miscarriage, there is no confirmation of Ragini's involvement in it.

However, after Chandrasekhar interprets Srini's dream to be symbolic of his sexual weakness, Srini starts analysing his own dream regarding Kalyani Amma in detail. At this point, he discovers Ragini's diary and reads it. In her diary, Srini finds her version of events which question his version. What makes him irrevocably start suspecting his wife as a Yakshi is his discovery of her diary entries which indicate to him his wife's awareness of and anguish at his impotence on the very day he realizes that his dream about the rising staircase is symbolic of his inability to attain sexual satisfaction. In the dream that he has of Kalyani Amma that night, Srini's unconscious goes one step further in its associations and Ragini is seen as sitting in the bathroom, blood dripping from her lips, her identity now fixed as that of the Yakshi. Once Srini has the dream in which he sees Ragini as the Yakshi, he starts believing that if he sleeps in the same room as his wife, she would drink his blood.

As mentioned earlier, Srini's doubts regarding Ragini do not follow a linear pattern. At times, he has phases of lucidity where he is able to see her for the human being she is. However, in Srini's case, logic or rationality are of no help to him as long as his sexual weakness continues as a problem. The only way for Srini to preserve his own self-respect is to cast his wife as a Yakshi and hence, phases of lucidity or sympathy with Ragini's plight, do not last in his case. Thus, when Ragini behaves as if everything is normal between her and Srini when his former student Vanaja visits his home, Srini is racked with guilt and wants to make up for his mistakes by making love to her. That predictably enough ends in Srini failing again and Ragini's monsterization is taken one step further by Srini. To Srini, his impotence now takes the form of a "protective talisman" (Ramakrishnan 101)

Was it that my body had understood what my brain could not? ... A man who made love to a Yakshi would die. The brain can make mistakes. The mind might take a Yakshi to be just a beautiful woman. But the body is more careful. It protects itself. ... If I behaved like a husband to her, I would die ... That was the reason for my failure in bed. My body had found its own protective talisman (Ramakrishnan 101)

The idea of a protective talisman is one which appears in the stories of Yakshis. Thus in the tale of the Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi, the sacred religious text, *Devi Mahatmyam*, protects Guptan for some time from sure death at the hands of the Yakshi. Later, the wet towel Guptan Namboothiri's guru gives him prevents the Yakshi from coming close to him. Both of these act as protective talismans. Srini's imagination, fed on tales of Yakshis and black magic, now constructs a similar narrative to explain his own sexual failure, casting his body itself as the protective talisman.

Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine* discusses the primitive myth of the “vagina dentata” as per which “women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that the women must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened – usually by a male figure – before intercourse can safely take place” (Creed 2). The Yakshi, as an archetypal figure stands as an embodiment of this fear. Creed, quoting Ernest Jones’ essay “On the nightmare of bloodsucking” considers that the blood of the man which the female vampire was believed to suck can be seen as a metaphor for his semen (Creed 66). Caldwell also makes a similar claim in her essay on “Bhagavati” where she sees the Yakshi’s act of drinking the man’s blood as symbolic of the intaking of semen by the vagina, something that “cools the hot female womb, but weakens and drains the man who gives it” (Caldwell 211).

It is this aspect of the Yakshi myth that comes in most handy to Srini trying to preserve his own self-respect in the face of overwhelming evidence of his impotence. As a deformed man, already his “masculinity” is one considered *undesirable*. His sexual impotence would even take away what is left of his self-respect, especially in front of his friends and neighbours who already pity him.

When, for instance, his friend Chandrasekhar refutes all Srini’s evidences regarding Ragini’s “Yakshiness”, Srini bursts out, “So you are on her side” (Ramakrishnan 106). “Chandrasekhar stood looking at me for some time – as though he was watching some strange creature” (Ramakrishnan 106). Chandrasekhar tries to convince Srini that he is seeking excuses to hide his disability by turning a “flesh-and-blood girl” into a Yakshi and advises him to consult a psychiatrist (Ramakrishnan 107).

For a moment, Srini is troubled by Chandrasekhar's arguments and wonders if there is some truth to them. But then, he soon convinces himself, "The fact, that after all this, I still feel that she may not be a vampire, is in itself strong evidence against her. It is her sorcery that makes me waver" (Ramakrishnan 107).

Srini now finds the *real* meaning of his dream about the staircase, "That last step should not be climbed. You should not sit on that soft silken bed. That is your funeral pyre. Come back! Fall down to earth". (Ramakrishnan 108)

Once Srini starts believing that Ragini is a Yakshi, he goes on amassing what he considers as evidence about her identity. Thus, a newspaper item from fifty years ago about a lame man, Gopala Pillai, who died in unnatural circumstances after marrying a very beautiful woman, a death an astrologer had declared as due to a Yakshi, is taken by Srini as proof of Ragini's earlier history. In the narrative that Srini constructs, he is the innocent man whose physical deformity is exploited by Ragini to achieve her ends. Tellingly, it is Ragini's otherworldly beauty which is dubbed monstrous and not his physical deformity.

Ragini obviously seeks out people with some physical defect. The maimed are unlikely to ask questions. They do not have hopes about love and marriage. So when a beautiful young woman comes from somewhere – and when she smiles at them – they are enslaved. They welcome her with open arms. (Ramakrishnan 113)

The next charge that Srini levels at Ragini is that of infidelity. While Srini had been harbouring the belief that Ragini was a Yakshi, he had never confronted her about it. It is his labelling her as unfaithful that finally brings about this confrontation.

When Srini had a fever some time back, Srini had thought that he had heard a song emanating from the *pala* tree in the night and had seen Ragini listening to it at the window. When he had communicated his doubts, Ragini had called it his imagination since he had been feverish. As his suspicions reach their culmination later, Srini hears the song again and this time, he “sees” Ragini entering into a circle of arms near the *pala* tree. To Srini, his imagination fitting in Ragini’s story with that of a Yakshi, the circle of arms belongs to a Gandharva, whom he considers to be Ragini’s old lover who had come in search of her. Srini starts speculating that Ragini’s world is not subject to the laws of time, a line of thought that later leads him to have a dream about the world of the Yakshis.

After this dream, Srini confronts Ragini and they have an exchange where Ragini refutes Srini’s charges one by one and claims that she can prove the truth of her having had a grandmother. However, Ragini’s proofs are not enough for Srini who considers that as a Yakshi, Ragini may be able to prove anything that she wants as she has a thousand abilities human beings do not possess (Ramakrishnan 120). Ragini avers that she will leave Srini if he wants, but she will go back as a human being and not as a Yakshi (Ramakrishnan 120). Srini finally declares that the reason he stays away from Ragini is because her body is forbidden to him since she is a Yakshi. Ragini gives him a reply that makes him boil with rage. “You are impotent! You are not capable of making any woman your own” (Ramakrishnan 122). That leads to Srini’s first act of violence on his wife as he pulls her by her hair and spins her around upon which she crashes into a wall and falls down with a gash on her head (Ramakrishnan 122).

Ragini is taken to the hospital where she lies about the cause of her injury to protect Srini. Srini comes to know from Ananthan, his neighbour, details about

Ragini's previous history, which Ananthan had got from an old woman who used to know Ragini before. Ragini had been married off to a soldier who had left her believing rumours that she had been unfaithful to him. Ananthan reasons that Ragini's acceptance of Srini, despite his burnt face, could be because of her own sad past. Srini, however, considers this as proof of Ragini's ingenuity in weaving a story "any rationalist could accept without reservations" (Ramakrishnan 130).

Srini's final desperate attempt at proving his masculinity shows the depths to which he has sunken morally. This comes after he overhears a conversation between Chandrasekhar and Ananthan where his friend dissects Srini's behaviour linking it to his impotence. Srini is now no longer sane enough to even entertain that possibility though he wants to disprove it at all costs. "I was strong. I was a first-rate tennis player. My failure in bed was just a protective shield. I would prove that I had nothing wrong with me. If any woman other than Ragini came to me I would possess her" (Ramakrishnan 136).

Srini makes one more visit to the pimp's place where since there are no women available, the old man, the pimp, advises him to come back the next day. Srini repeats agitatedly that he can't wait and wants to spend the night with the old woman, the pimp's wife.

My mind said that the old woman would do. I was just conducting an experiment. If I had strength when confronted by this old woman, there was nothing to be afraid of. I would be able to make all the young women yield – except Ragini. She was a vampire. (Ramakrishnan 139)

Srini, as expected, fails again, as his senses rebel at the thought of making love to a woman who reminds him of “the mummies of Egypt” (Ramakrishnan 139). He runs out of there yet again.

Once Srini’s final experiment to prove his masculinity fails, his thoughts turn towards destroying Ragini. It seems that every time Srini falls in his own eyes, the monstrosity that he must see as part of himself gets transferred to Ragini. It is Srini’s sense of self-worth that gets diminished every time he encounters his sexual weakness. His solution every time seems to be to “other” this part of his self, cast it out onto the body of his wife. His wife, Ragini, then becomes the Yakshi, the abjected part of his own self.

If Srini had the self-awareness he had during his first encounter with the sex-worker, perhaps the incident with the pimp’s wife might have led to extreme forms of self-repulsion. However, Srini seems to have lost his sense of self-awareness at this point. He is no longer troubled by thoughts of his own impotence, but channelizes all his anger and frustration towards his wife.

The method by which he tries to destroy Ragini is first by destroying the pala tree which he sees as embodying her. He tries to set fire to the tree and make a sacrifice of ants in that fire chanting “Ragini must die ... the Yakshi must die ...”, a method he says he has read about in tales about Yakshis (Ramakrishnan 132). He also tries to hack at the tree.

Srini’s hacking at the Pala tree seeing it as embodying Ragini needs to be read carefully. Perhaps, for Srini, the tree stands as a mockery of his own sexual impotence. Perhaps, it also stands for Ragini’s own sexuality which, unlike his, is an active one. In the early parts of Srini’s narrative, Srini feels guilty towards Ragini for

not being able to make love to her and in the comparison he makes between her and the “virgin” goddess of Cape Comorin, the implication is that both are forced to become passive sexual beings because of the unavailability of their male partners. However, once Srini reaches the zenith of his insanity, Ragini is completely transformed into a Yakshi who unlike the virgin goddess refuses to remain as a passive sexual being. The Yakshi instead seeks out her male partner, the Gandharva, for frequent sexual rendezvous. The Yakshi Ragini in Srini’s imagination has her rendezvous with the Gandharva near the Pala tree. In fact, the Gandharva himself comes out of the tree. The non-flowering Pala tree in Srini’s yard which perhaps held initial symbolic meaning for Srini regarding his own condition has completely become the *other*, now standing for Ragini’s and his presumed rival, the Gandharva’s own overpowering sexuality.

When Srini’s plans to destroy the tree don’t succeed, he goes to Ananthan’s house with a nail to drive into Ragini’s head, the way most Yakshis were believed to be tamed in the Yakshi stories.

Srini’s attempt at taking Ragini’s life does not succeed and he is bedridden with fever for some days. His mind is even then trying to construct a fully coherent narrative about Ragini, the Yakshi, as we get to see in the dream he has about the world of the Yakshis. Srini’s dreams are his way to go beyond his textual knowledge of the Yakshis based on the books he has read. In the colourful world of the Yakshis that Srini sees in his dream, a world he says is not there in the manuscripts which proves they are incomplete, the Yakshis float over a carpet made of golden fish scales (Ramakrishnan 144). In this world, the adult Yakshis have to come down to the earth once a year to drink the blood of a man from the earth (Ramakrishnan 144). This is a rule which cannot be broken for if the Yakshis do not drink human blood, their feet

will touch the carpet, proving their unsuitability to belong to that world (Ramakrishnan 144).

Srini's dream is revealing regarding his simultaneous fascination and dread for the figure of the Yakshi which I believe needs to be studied as part of his negotiation of his own monstrosity. I will come to this when I discuss Ragini's confession to Srini about her world which is a continuation of this dream.

After the fever, Srini wakes up to see Chandrasekhar who tries to convince him that Ragini, who has gone to stay in the house of her old uncle, is not a Yakshi. His friend believes that Srini's doubts will vanish once Srini meets Ragini. Both of them go to Ragini's house and bring her back. But when they return, the car breaks down. Srini's next memory is of the Yakshi temple where Ragini tells him her life story. In this life story which Srini narrates to us, Ragini confesses that she is a Yakshi who has been wandering for centuries and drinking men's blood. In Ragini's story, all Srini's doubts and complexes find their answers. Ragini, as in the dream Srini saw, is on one of her yearly trips to the earth when she sees Srini's previous incarnation. Srini, in Ragini's story, is the reincarnation of a poet whose face had been scorched with iron by a Prince for courting a woman he had desired. Ragini, feeling pity for the poet, does not kill him and is thereby cursed to go back to earth and marry 1000 men and drink their blood. If she fails in this task, she would lose her body, become a wisp of smoke and melt into the atmosphere (Ramakrishnan 151). Ragini then confesses that Srini is her one thousandth husband and she had planned on drinking his blood as well. But she had felt sympathy for him since "the horror that had been perpetrated by hot iron centuries back, had been repeated by the acid in the laboratory" (Ramakrishnan 151). That sympathy had grown into love though Ragini confesses that she had tried to drink Srini's blood at Cape Comorin where if he had slept with

her, he would have died (Ramakrishnan 152). Ragini, however, avers that now she is in deep love with Srinu and would rather be loved by Srinu than released from her curse. Srinu pleads with Ragini to drink his blood and release herself from the curse. Ragini, however, tells him that she cannot kill him and wants him to make love to her before her body becomes invisible since her decision not to seek a release from the curse has made her an ordinary mortal woman for some hours. “We can touch each other now, we can make love. We exist on the same plane now” (Ramakrishnan 152).

As Srinu tries to make love to Ragini one final time, the familiar weakness appears and Ragini cries out in despair asking him not to leave her. In Srinu’s version, Ragini transforms into a wisp of smoke soon after.

In Srinu’s narrative, there are many places where he confesses his love for Ragini and his sorrow and guilt at not recognising her love for him and for doubting her. There are places where he even claims that if she had confessed her story to him before, they could have lived happily for a short time at least. However, it is only at the end that Srinu fully expresses his guilt of another kind towards Ragini. His guilt is no longer for doubting her love, but for failing to make love to her ever, a failing which he declared deserves punishment.

Ragini, my love, you did not want my blood, you wanted my maleness. And I could not satisfy you even once ... You lay before me in front of the Yakshi temple, as eager as a young virgin who had never known the touch [sic] a man. Could I not have been strong at least then? I failed then too. Such a terrible failure. If a guilty conscience could kill me, I would have died long ago. (Ramakrishnan 153)

Srini's narrative ends with a dream-like scenario, presumably his dream where he sees a court meeting on a deserted seashore to decide his fate where everybody clamours to have him killed, Vanaja, his student, being one of them. As the judge orders for those who think Srini should not be killed to raise their hands, a pale, slender, beautiful hand rises from the middle of the sea, growing as "high as the tunnel in the sky", a hand whose bangles are centuries old, a hand which is Ragini's (Ramakrishnan 154).

The last scenes of the novel are some of the most ambiguous and take us back to the question discussed earlier – out of all the prototypical tales of Yakshis available, why does Srini pick the Venmoni one where the Yakshi transforms from a bloodthirsty vampire into a devoted lover? The Venmoni story is perhaps meant to elevate Srini's own status, as the man who was capable enough to make even a Yakshi change her ways for him.

Towards the end of the novel, Srini gives us Ragini's confession where his disfigurement, which till then had been the result of a freakish accident, is transformed into the symbol of his tragic love for a woman, elevating it into a badge of honour. Ragini's confession that she would have killed him at Cape Comorin if he had not fainted that day is again a testament to his mental sharpness, his theory of his body being a protective talisman triumphing over the unpalatable one of his impotence.

Srini's choice was also perhaps dictated by his own conflicted feelings about Ragini, his complicated and co-existing feelings of hatred and guilt towards Ragini for being the witness to his sexual failures. As I mentioned before, perhaps, it also needs to be read as Srini's attempt to negotiate his own monstrosity. While Srini's

attempt throughout is to *other* his monstrosity by projecting it on to the figure of his wife, perhaps, there is also an unconscious awareness of it being part of his own *self*. As I have discussed earlier, Srini's fascination with Yakshis right after his accident points to some kind of identification with them. Later, in Srini's imagination, the figure of the Yakshi, the double of his own 'monstrous' inner self and his wife Ragini had merged into one. As a result, Ragini as the Yakshi had come to stand for that part of his self which he wanted to cast out. However, still there seems to be an unconscious awareness of how the Yakshi Ragini is his *dialectical other*. Hence, perhaps, it is no coincidence that Srini's feelings towards Ragini are a simultaneous mixture of fascination and dread. One can see this quite clearly in Srini's dream about the world of the Yakshis. The Yakshis here are not the female monsters of folk tales. They are instead superior beings who are compelled to drink the blood of humans to retain their place in their world. If a Yakshi in the world that Srini dreams of cannot drink the blood of a human, then her feet will touch the carpet, proving her unsuitability to belong to that world. Srini's attempt to find a rationale for the Yakshi's monstrosity needs to be perhaps read along with his attempts to construct a narrative to excuse his own monstrosity. Or Srini's dream about the world of the Yakshis where he casts them as semi-divine beings forced to become predators could be a later construction to assuage his own guilt about murdering Ragini. Even at the end, he is not ready to believe that Ragini was anything other than a Yakshi. But the guilt he has over her murder makes him cast her in the role of a benevolent and noble Yakshi driven by compulsions that came from belonging to another world and yet someone who tried to sacrifice her interests for the sake of her love.

Ragini's confession in the final scene can be seen in two ways: either it was completely constructed by Srini to suit his needs or it could have been Ragini's final

attempt to make Srini love her for once. Ragini might have believed that acquiescing to Srini's version of events and casting herself as a Yakshi would rid Srini of his weakness and pave the way for a breakthrough. Srini talks about how Ragini cries out despairingly asking Srini not to leave her as he, for the last time, fails her.

This is the time when even Srini's narrative of Ragini being a Yakshi to excuse his sexual weakness crumbles down and he, for the first time, is forced to confront his sexual failure. It is also an interesting instance that points to Srini's awareness of his lack and his guilt over it. At the end, Srini is admitting to the fact that he had never been able to satisfy Ragini sexually not because his body was acting as a protective talisman, but because he was incapable of it. However, the moment when he is forced to confront his weakness seems to have been the straw that broke the camel's back. The realization that he was impotent must have been so humiliating for Srini that it made him kill his wife, the witness to his sexual failure. The police inspector suspects Srini of hitting Ragini's head repeatedly with a stone and burning her body using sulphuric acid so as to leave no trace. The plume of smoke Srini tells us as Ragini's final transformation could very well have been the vapours of the acid he used.

Srini admits to his sexual failure only at the end, after murdering Ragini. Perhaps, this admission of his sexual failure is meant to assuage the larger guilt of killing her. In the new narrative that Srini constructs, his guilt lies in only being unable to sexually satisfy his wife. Her disappearance has nothing to do with him. It is the result of her own decision not to drink Srini's blood. Srini's larger guilt is transformed into the more romantic one of not recognising Ragini's love for him. The last scene of the novel where Srini sees Ragini's hand rising up in support of his

innocence points to Srini continuing to build narratives to make peace with his guilty conscience.

Ramakrishnan's *Yakshi* is an interesting case of how in the case of figures like the Yakshi, the dangerous "other" takes root in the self itself. It is Srini's monstrosity, i.e. his physical deformity, his sexual impotence and his attempts to prove his masculinity in the most despicable manner that get projected on to the body of his wife by making her into a Yakshi. Srini's sexual depravity that makes him even pay money to sleep with a woman, old enough to be his grandmother, finds its equivalent in the Yakshi Ragini of his imagination, courting one man after another to kill them. Thus, Srini's construction of a Yakshi tale to explore his relationship with Ragini needs to be read as part of his negotiation with his own monstrosity. The Yakshi Ragini of Srini's imagination is for him a source of simultaneous fear and desire, perhaps pointing to Srini's own uneasy negotiation with the part of his own self that he wants to *abject*.

If we move away from the self-other dynamic that the novel seems to explore, there are other issues to explore. While the narrative seems to take Srini's case as a unique case, tracing his fear of his wife to his own insecurities, it can also be said to throw light on the process by which some women are forced to become the "monstrous feminine" in a patriarchal society as what is inadmissible in the *self* gets projected on to the *other*. As I pointed out before, the novel then can also be read as an exploration of the process whereby Yakshis are created.

In the novel, the Yakshi is none other than the wife. Ragini's murder at the hands of Srini can be read in many ways as an extreme act of domestic violence. Ragini, though she stands up to Srini once, is for the most part, extremely passive.

Even when her husband abuses her physically, she hides his crime. Because of her past experiences with her former husband, she has a victim complex and believes that it is her destiny to suffer. The domestic space of the family thus becomes a battleground where Srini uses Ragini as the scapegoat to hide his insufficiencies. What is frightening about Ragini's murder at the hands of Srini is that nobody in fact makes a critical intervention to save her from her husband^{iv}. While the other male characters in the novel like Chandrasekhar and Ananthan sympathise with Ragini and at different points come to know of Srini's diseased imagination, they do not at any point regard Srini as a serious threat to Ragini's life. In fact, it is Chandrasekhar's attempt to reconcile the couple that turns out to end disastrously for Ragini. This is because neither of them understands that Srini's suspicions of Ragini being a Yakshi are not a misunderstanding that can be cleared up. His suspicions are in fact integral to the assertion of his masculine self.

The true horror of *Yakshi* can in fact be said to stem from the enforced secrecy that pervades the domestic space, a secrecy that has roots in the gender norms of the day. Thus Srini is unable to confront his sexual inadequacy or take help for it since it would amount to admitting his inability to stand up to the normative masculinity of his day. Ragini does not seek help from anyone even when their marital relationship breaks down. She believes in keeping her domestic unhappiness a secret, even when it erupts in violence. She finally pays a heavy price for her silence. Srini's neighbours and friends continue to consider his marriage so sacrosanct and inviolable that even when aware of his insanity and the possible danger it poses to his wife's life, they continue to make attempts to restore normalcy to it.

Thus, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's novel *Yakshi* can be read as a fascinating study of a man's complex negotiation of his anxieties about his own "monstrosity" by

projecting it on the body of his wife. The Yakshi in the novel can be read as Srini's projection of his monstrous inner self which he *abjects* and transfers to the body of his wife. At the same time, it is also a study of how Yakshis are created in a patriarchal society where men weave tales to hide their own inadequacies.

In my analysis of the novel, I have majorly focused on the self-other dynamic behind the figure of the Yakshi and have hinted at how the labelling of Ragini as a Yakshi is the first step in a series of acts that culminate in an extreme act of domestic violence.

Now I go on to the movie re-tellings which I consider as unique narratives in their own right since their choices of what to foreground do give us interesting points of view on how they understand the core concern of the novel.

Movie retellings – *Yakshi* (1968) and *Akam* (2013)

Yakshi^v which released just one year after the publication of the novel is considered as the first psycho-thriller in Malayalam (Vijayakumar). It was directed by the noted director K.S. Sethumadhavan and the screenplay was by the veteran Toppil Bhasi. It starred the superstars of the time Satyan and Sharada in the lead roles of Srinivasan and Ragini. There was a lot of curiosity regarding the movie's interpretation of such a well-loved novel, especially as to whether the actors would be able to do justice to the characters. The movie went on to become a huge hit and is still remembered and celebrated as a Malayalam classic though reviews of the movie at the time found the movie to lack the creative genius of the novel in certain departments^{vi}.

Akam (Inside), another movie adaptation of Malayattoor's *Yakshi* was released in 2013. The movie was Shalini Usha Nair's directorial debut and participated in many International film festivals before getting released in Kerala. As such, the tone of the movie is completely different from that of Sethumadhavan's *Yakshi* (1968). Fahad Fazil, considered to be one of the most promising actors of his generation was chosen to play Srinivasan and Anu Mol, a debutante, played the role of Ragini. The movie was not a commercial hit though the film's critical reviews were generally positive with a reviewer hailing it as "a highly satisfying cinematic experience that comes up with insights of immense significance" (Veeyen). However, there were some negative reviews too that insisted that the re-reading of Malayattoor's novel did not add anything of note to the already existing film adaptation of 1968 ("Akam, it is empty inside").

The crux of the novel *Yakshi* is the mystery surrounding Ragini – is she a human or a Yakshi? However, the subtext of Srini's narrative makes it quite clear to the reader that the monster may not be Ragini, it could very well be Srini. For movies based on the novel which do not use a first person account, the challenge is to let the viewer *look* at Ragini through the eyes of Srinivasan. Yet, it also has to make the viewer *look* into Srini and discover his monstrosity.

Sethumadhavan's *Yakshi* which used familiar tropes of ghost movies and Hitchcockian techniques tried to deal with this double challenge by playing with the horizon of expectations of the viewers by giving conflicting versions of different characters. However, the signal technique that the movie used to uncover the truth of the events around Ragini's disappearance was through the repetition of a scene which was shown from different angles.

The title of the 2013 movie, diverging from the novel and the 1968 adaptation, instead of evoking the images, old and new, associated with the term *Yakshi*, decided to look at the narrative focusing on its *interiority* for *Akam* literally means “the inside”. The word *Akam* is a signifier that carries multiple signifieds. It can refer to how Srini’s suspicions of Ragini are rooted in his self. In fact, in the DVD of *Akam* with the English subtitles, *Akam* gets translated as “Retrospective Journey of the Self” where *Akam* in the title gets interpreted as a journey of the self and that too a *retrospective* journey, where the journey is one that involves a *re-view*. Does it hint at Srini’s retrospective journey into the events of his life or at the viewer’s re-view of Srini’s narrative of his life? However, the title *Akam* may not just be hinting at the movie being an exploration of a man’s psyche. It can also refer to the domestic space, what happens inside the space of the home. In fact, I believe that *Akam* with its close intimate setting and setting up of claustrophobic spaces throws more light on the domestic drama involved than Sethumadhavan’s *Yakshi* (1968) did. I will come to this later.

First of all, I will focus on the narratives of the two movies. One of the biggest differences between the two movies is in their structure. Sethumadhavan’s *Yakshi* is largely linear in its narrative with the exception of the pivotal scene regarding Ragini’s disappearance which is repeated twice. In contrast, Shalini Usha Nair’s movie *Akam* is non-linear using frequent flashbacks that disrupt the linearity of the narrative. Compared to *Akam*, Sethumadhavan’s *Yakshi* is a more literal adaptation of the novel. In *Akam*, unlike the novel and Sethumadhavan’s movie, Srini is an architect instead of a scientist. While the novel and the earlier movie adaptation spend some time exploring Srini’s interest in *Yakshis*, perhaps to explain why he chooses this particular figure to interpret his personal crisis, *Akam* doesn’t find it necessary to do

so. Perhaps Srini's profession in the novel and the 1968 movie has something to do with this – it is harder to understand a scientist believing in the existence of Yakshis than an architect. However, I think it is also due to the fact that being the remake of a popular novel and a movie, the 2013 adaptation works on the premise that the basic plot of the movie is already quite familiar to the audience. Hence, the basic elements of *Yakshi*'s plot such as the husband suspecting his wife to a Yakshi do not need to be overly stated. It is the re-interpretation of a familiar story in a 21st century setting that seems to interest the film maker (and supposedly the audience) more.

In contrast to *Akam*, in the movie *Yakshi* (1968), Srini is already busy in his research on black magic and Yakshis when the accident happens to him. Srini is a scientist who believes in investigating everything, including the belief in black magic and Yakshis, with an open mind. One of the significant ways in which the movie tries to pre-empt the introduction of Ragini is by situating Srini in a house supposedly haunted by a Yakshi right at the beginning. Srini decides to shift to a house which the sorcerer he consults for his research claims to be haunted by a Yakshi so as to further focus on his research. The haunted house had then been a popular motif in Malayalam movies at that time because of the success of the movie *Bhargavinilayam*(1964) which had been about the strange relationship between a man who comes to stay in a haunted house and the ghost haunting it.

The haunted house is an interesting motif since it already has a cinematic history which raises certain expectations in the viewer. There is the supposition that the inmate is making a foolhardy choice by trying to stay in one. The house Srini starts living in has a *pala* tree outside. The house is believed to be haunted by a young girl who committed suicide by burning herself after being jilted in love. Rumours say that till some time ago, the Yakshi there used to invite men to the house, kill them and

throw their body under the *pala* tree (a more modern version of the popular Yakshi tale). According to the neighbour Mr. Ananthan, the sorcerer who had suggested the house to Srini had done an exorcism ritual there to bind the Yakshi, but the ritual had not been a complete success. As a temporary solution, the sorcerer had bound the Yakshi in a painting of a Yakshi temple in the bedroom. The introduction of the haunted house and the build-up devoted to its rumoured dark history is unlike in the novel where though Srini's house is in a deserted corner and has a *pala* tree in the garden, it is not considered to be haunted in any way.

In *Akam*, Srini is a hotshot architect, a favourite with his boss CK (Chandrasekhar in the novel). His girlfriend Tara (Vijayalakshmi in the novel) deserts him after a horrific car accident where he loses half of his face. Srini, whose interest in life plummets down after the accident, observes a beautiful woman standing in the doorway of a deserted building one day. She is Ragini waiting for her grandmother who, happily for him, asks him for a lift. Srini is enraptured by the beautiful woman who seems to walk around on her own, even watching movies in the theatre alone. However, he is unable to find much about her past and when he tries to locate her house on the beach, doesn't succeed. When he confesses to CK his interest in the unknown woman, who smells like "those white flowers" (the *pala* flowers, white in colour) and yet who doesn't seem to have a proper address, CK wonders jokingly if she is a Yakshi. After their marriage and brief honeymoon where Srini turns away from Ragini in mid-embrace and where his lips Ragini seem to have kissed seem to be oozing blood, doubts flood Srini's mind regarding the identity of his wife.

The techniques both movies employ to create an aura of mystery around Ragini are different. Sethumadhavan's *Yakshi*, as pointed out by Indu V.S. in her review, uses the genre of terror more than horror to make its point. Indu V.S. in her

review of the movie differentiates between the genres of “terror” and “horror” originally used in gothic fiction where terror refers to the growing sense of dread that a movie creates without showing any actual object of fear unlike horror where the fear is located in the gruesomeness of the object of fear.

The difference between ‘terror’ and ‘horror’ was first established by Ann Radcliffe in her posthumous essay “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1926) where she suggested that “the great difference between terror and horror” lies in “the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil” (Varma 103). In 1957, Devendra Varma took up Radcliffe’s distinction, stating that “the difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse” (130). She described the first as “an intangible atmosphere of spiritual psychic dread,” and the second as an “exact portrayal of the physically horrible and revolting”. (Roche 154-155)

It is “an intangible atmosphere of dread” that is created in the movie *Yakshi* especially in the scenes where Ragini is introduced.

Ragini’s entry into Srinu’s life is foreshadowed in the conversation between Srinu and his servant Paramu^{vii} on the night she comes into his house. Paramu, who is a believer in the supernatural, warns Srinu that it is a new moon night and that too a Friday, a time when Yakshis are supposed to roam around in popular folklore. He warns Srinu against keeping the painting of the Yakshi temple in his bedroom since the Yakshi in the house, according to their neighbour Ananthan, had been exorcised and installed in the above painting. To make his point clearer, Paramu tells Srinu the story of Venmoni, the Unni Namboothiri (the youngest Namboothiri) of Vayaskara

Illom and the Yakshi. As he tells Srini how Venmoni had invited the Yakshi for the night and how she had later become his lover, Srini jokes that it would be nice to get a Yakshi as his lover. He calls out to the painting, parodying the stereotypical drawl of the Namboothiri speech, “Will you come today?” As soon as he says the line, thunder strikes and Paramu is scared out of his wits while Srini laughs at him.

It is thus on a new moon night, a night where it rains heavily with thunder and lightning, that Ragini arrives for the first time. Srini who is sleeping gets awakened by the bark of dogs. The background music filled with the chimes of bells is suspenseful and ominous as Srini throws open the main door. A woman drenched in rain, in a white sari, is standing all alone at the door.



The conversation that follows is also eerie. Srini asks, his voice sounding a bit scared, “Who is it?” Ragini replies, “I will tell soon. Can I come in? It is raining”. “There is no power”. “Power will come”. (This has echoes of Ragini’s words in the novel, “The Pala tree will flower”) As she enters, she closes the door behind her. Power comes back as can be seen from the bulb lighting up suddenly. As Srini looks

at her from head to toe, she asks, “Are you checking whether my feet touch the ground?” As Srini denies the accusation, she repeats, “Since I am a woman coming at an unearthly hour, you might be suspecting whether I am a Yakshi or something”.

As mentioned earlier, the movie uses a number of tropes from ghost movies as well as Hitchcockian techniques to create an atmosphere of *terror*. As the film reviewer points out, an atmosphere of *terror* is created where one is not sure what exactly is going on. These include Ragini’s appearance and behaviour (a woman in white entering a man’s house alone at night, completely unafraid), the suspenseful background music that follows Ragini as she enters Srini’s house, thunder and lightning which create an atmosphere of disturbance outside as if the natural elements are also in disarray and especially the lighting. The scene is dark for the most part and the low-key lighting creates a tone of mystery and suspense. The movie seems to be borrowing Hitchcockian techniques of creating terror through the use of darkness in the lighting.

Using darkness in visual mediums allows the artist to use many techniques to manipulate the audience’s viewing perspective. Often darkness will be used to set a mood. Where sunlight “epitomizes light and openness,” darkness is “concealing, and has overtones of mystery or treachery” (Millerson 247). The darkness in low-key lighting creates similar tones, conveying a “heavy, tragic quality,” or again tones of mystery and the sinister (239). Dark backgrounds can give a “closed-in effect” (250). Darkness allows the creator to “prevent the audience from seeing the surroundings clearly,” to “hide information” from the audience, “to intrigue,” “to mystify,” “to enhance” certain objects or characters, or to “threaten [or] create surroundings in which danger may lurk” (260, 261). (Driscoll 4)

There is also the horizon of expectations that the movie has already created with the introduction of the motif of the haunted house. Thus, there is the supposition that a woman entering into a house all alone on a stormy night supposedly haunted by a Yakshi could only be one. Not only that, an air of mystery surrounds Ragini. She addresses Srini as if she knows him and when Srini goes to get some dry clothes for her, Ragini is shown gazing intently after him. Ragini has only got a grandmother and one is reminded of the movie *Kadamttathu Kathanar* where the Yakshi played by Srividya tells the namboothiri traveller that she only has a partially blind grandmother. Ragini's body language is again one that emphasizes her sexuality as she moves around completely at ease in the stranger Srini's house and coolly asks Srini for a change of clothing. When Srini gives her his *mundu*, she drapes it over herself like a sari which only goes onto accentuate her charms. One is reminded of the Yakshi in popular tales who also exaggerates her femininity in her meeting with the traveller.



The movie creates moments of suspense which make the viewer feel uncertain about the identity of the strange woman. The viewers are shown Srini handing the strange woman the *mundu* and as he waits around for her to change in the next room,

they hear the woman calling out “Srini”. The viewer as well as Srini is surprised to hear his name being called out by the unknown woman. The background music also adds to the suspense as Srini throws open the door and looks startingly at Ragini. The viewer, who follows Srini’s eyes as he stares startingly in Ragini’s direction, might be expected to entertain the possibility that the woman would have turned into a Yakshi. Instead, Srini gets to see Ragini draped in the *mundu* smiling at him.

In the conversation that follows, Srini wonders how Ragini knows his name to which Ragini replies that she knows everything. It is because she knows Srini that she entered his house at midnight and she asks Srini whether he hasn’t seen her before. Srini is unable to recollect meeting her and asks her name. Srini praises her beauty and Ragini in turn calls Srini a poet and a good human being.



Unlike in the novel, Srini and Ragini’s first meeting itself is romantic in tone with Ragini praising Srini as the most handsome man she has seen since men with good hearts, according to her, are the most handsome. Srini exclaims that he has got his face back and asks Ragini again if her words are sincere. Ragini asks him whether he wants to test the sincerity of her words and comes near him to kiss him. This sequence as Ragini cradles Srini’s face with one of her hands and leans in towards his

neck is accompanied by suspenseful music making one wonder what Ragini is going to do to Srini. Is she going to kiss him? Or drink his blood?

Suddenly there is utter darkness as Srini says, “power is gone” and Ragini murmurs reassuringly, “Power will come”. Power comes back revealing Srini and Ragini as Srini tells her, “You are a goddess, Ragini” to which Ragini replies, “Srini, are you not doing research on Yakshis?”

Srini wonders how Ragini knows so much about him and asks her who she is. She answers, “Yakshi. I am a Yakshi thirsting for a man who will love me” and when Srini presses her to tell him more about her, she refuses to do so as she says that she has already told him enough about her. She makes him promise not to ask anything more about her. This is done in a commanding tone with close up shots of her foreboding expression. Then Ragini turns around and sees the pala tree through the window. She asks, “That is a Yakshi pala. Hasn’t it flowered till now?” “No”, replies Srini. Ragini avers, “Then it will flower”.

The movie, as is obvious from the description of the scene, tries to make overt connections with the woman in white and a Yakshi. Ragini’s behaviour where she acts mysterious at times and at other times flirty matches with that of the popular conception of a Yakshi. Ragini’s face sometimes takes on foreboding expressions. The film also brings in the pala tree, considered to be the haunt of Yakshis, twice in this scene with Srini remarking on the smell of pala flowers which follows Ragini’s entry and Ragini’s own prediction that the pala tree in Srini’s garden will flower soon. The suspenseful background music adds to the tone of mystery. The close up shots of Ragini when she calls herself a Yakshi (though Ragini’s words are supposed to be a joke) and when she persistently asks Srini in a commanding tone to give his promise

are meant to point to perhaps a more unsettling identity of the strange woman. According to the writer and film critic Béla Balázs, “Close-ups are often dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surface of appearances” (Driscoll 19). Here the viewer is also encouraged to take a closer look at the Yakshi and figure out what lies under her mysterious expressions. There is thus a definite attempt to manipulate the viewer into wondering about the true identity of Ragini – is she really joking when she calls herself a Yakshi?



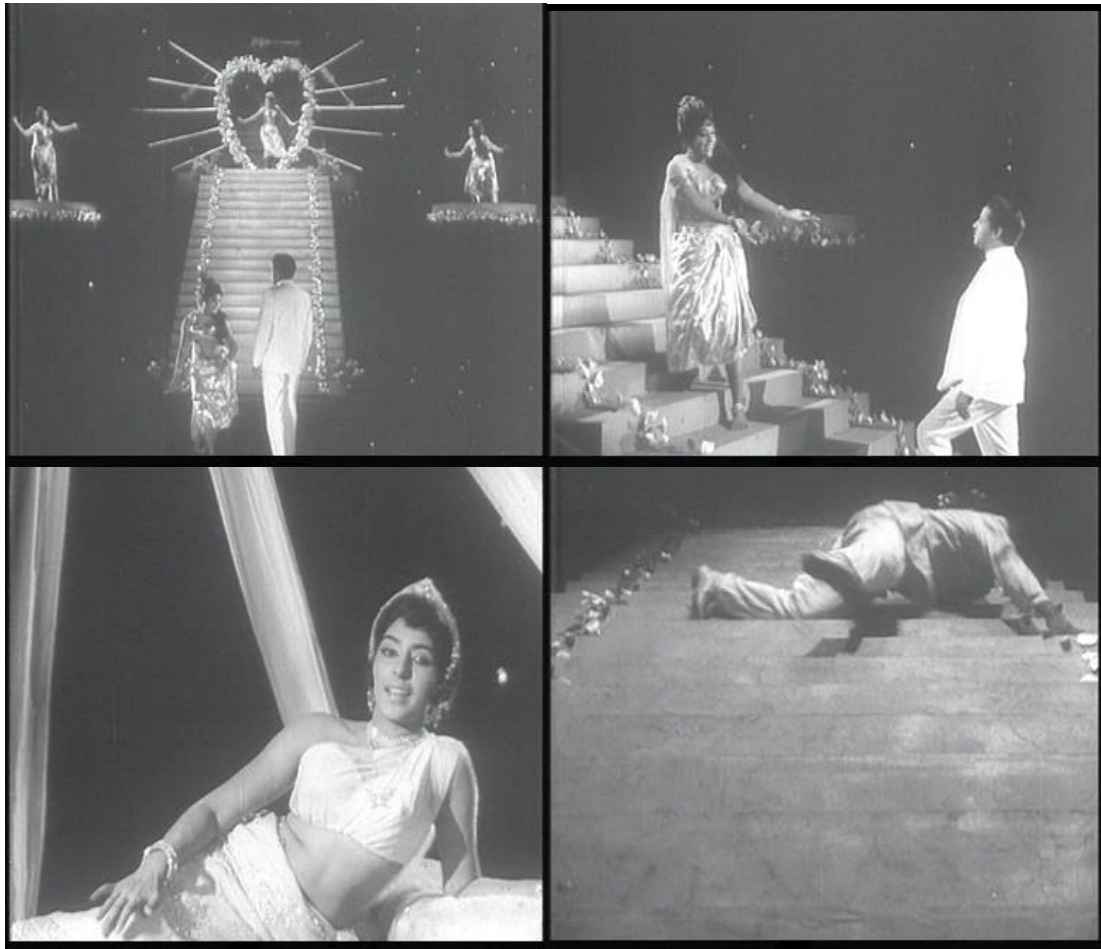
As Srini and Ragini embrace, Srini loses his strength which Ragini attributes to his emotional excess. She asks him to lie down and go to sleep and tells him that she would leave before it dawns. As Ragini moves away from Srini, with her face to the camera and her back to the door, the sudden light from the lightning which flashes outside illuminates her inscrutable face as she stands partly revealed in the darkness, her hair flying in the wind, her body framed against the door. The suspenseful music and the low key lighting add to the eeriness.



Srini's dream that night is the recurrent dream in the novel where he climbs a staircase full of beautiful women and falls down as he tries to reach out to the mysterious woman on the bed at the topmost step. In the movie, this dream is picturised as a song. Srini hears the words of a song starting with 'Pathika' (Traveller). As he opens the door of his room, he enters into a dreamland where his face has been restored to how it used to be. He is in a white suit. In front of him, there is a staircase at the top of which a beautiful woman stands in the middle of a huge garland of flowers which is shaped like a heart. On different sides of the staircase, beautiful women appear to be dancing. The song invites him to climb the staircase and enter the bed room where the traveller is assured all kinds of pleasures. Srini, led on by the dancer, starts climbing the steps of the staircase. After some time, Srini takes off the dancer's hand from his hand and is about to go down the steps when he turns around to see Ragini dressed as a queen lying on the bed at the top of the staircase. His face lights up on seeing her and as he eagerly tries to reach her, Srini falls down the stairs.

Srini's dream represents his wish for romance and sexual fulfilment. In the movie, from the very beginning, Srini's dream identifies Ragini as the woman on the

bed whom he cannot embrace unlike in the novel where the woman on the bed becomes Ragini at a later point. However, Srini's ascent of the stairs which stands for his sexual arousal doesn't reach its climax as symbolised by his fall down the stairs. In *Yakshi*, a commercial movie, Srini's dream is used to create a song and dance situation, especially one that uses a dancer like Radhika known for her "item dances", if one may use that term for a dance sequence in the 1960s.



When we come to *Akam*, the dream is represented in a different way, in tune with the tone of the movie and its target audience. The movie *Akam* begins in medias res with Srini and Ragini during their honeymoon in their neighbour Sita's old home on a beach, a house which she doesn't use any longer. In the scene where Ragini is introduced, Srini is looking through the window as Ragini suddenly hugs him from

behind. Srini's exclamation of surprise is followed by the words, "How come I never hear you? Don't you walk on earth?" Ragini playfully retorts that she doesn't walk on ground, she floats.



Towards the climax of the movie, this question gets repeated in another way as Srini asks Ragini, "Don't you have footprints?" pointing to her dry slippers that leave no mark on the floor after getting wet in the rain outside. Ragini's reply this time is sarcastic as she says, "I am a demon, a ghost who wanders around floating". As Srini watches, Ragini whirls around in a frenzy, her dizzying twirl round the room at once confirming and mocking Srini's suspicions. In the interval between these two scenes, Srini's casual observations deepen into strong suspicions that transform the puzzled Ragini in the earlier scene to a woman who not only understands the true import of her husband's words, but also recognises why she has been cast as the woman without footprints.

After her frenzied twirl, as Srini watches her, Ragini tells him, "I am going to meet Srini's doctor". These seemingly innocuous words threaten Srini so much that he not only enters into a violent confrontation with Ragini, but then casually goes into

the bedroom to bring out the iron and nails he bought on the road with the express purpose of hammering the *Yakshi* his wife has become for him into submission.



As we move from Sethumadhavan's *Yakshi* (1968) to *Akam* (2013), the biggest difference one notes is in the devices employed to create *terror*. If Sethumadhavan's *Yakshi* requires the time-tested motif of the haunted house to situate the *Yakshi*, Usha Nair's *Yakshi* believes in creating an all-pervading atmosphere of unease by making the familiar unfamiliar. Thus the very domestic space of the kitchen turns unfamiliar as it becomes the place where a husband tries to drive an iron nail into his wife's head like how Kadamttathu Kathanar used to (in his boss CK's words) bind the *Yakshi* in the past. The domestic space in *Akam* is thus a place where the hallowed concepts of family and domesticity are turned on their heads.

The narrative of *Akam*, switches back and forth between the past and the present. For instance, one of the early scenes which shows the disfigured Srini and Ragini in their honeymoon gets suddenly disrupted by a flashback, a scene from Srini's past, where he inspects his handsome face in the office washroom mirror, quite satisfied with his looks. Unlike Sethumadhavan's *Yakshi* where Srini's sexual failure gets depicted often with there being multiple scenes of his taking Ragini in his arms and turning away after breaking out in sweat, in Usha Nair's *Akam*, there is just enough to let the viewer reach her/his own conclusions. Thus, in the honeymoon scene in the hotel, we see Srini turning away from Ragini as they are hugging. Ragini looks at his face half-accusingly, half-curiously as he moves away from her. This scene then gets revisited after the flashback with Srini waking up in bed after a nightmare.

Srini's dream or nightmare in *Akam* is more suited to his profession since he is dreaming about climbing the stairs of a lighthouse. It makes sense for Srini, the architect, to dream about a high rise building. In this dream, Srini climbs the stairs over and over to reach the top where a woman stands with her back to him, clad in a black sari. Srini's panting voice merges with the disturbing background music as we get to see torturous circles of steps going up and up. Next we see the top of the lighthouse as the background voices fall silent and the camera takes us slowly through a winding balcony to reveal a woman in black with her back to the camera, seemingly surveying the seashore dotted with trees. As the camera zooms in on the woman's back profile, Srini's panting voice makes a comeback, at a crescendo. Later, Srini confesses to his boss CK (Chandrasekhar in the novel) that in his dream, he had seen the scariest woman at the top of the lighthouse and that when she had turned to face him, he had found out that she was Ragini.



However, the first time Srini has the nightmare, he doesn't see/the viewers are not shown the face of the woman though the immediate scene following the woman whose back profile is visible is that of Ragini in Sita's old house staring back (at the camera) from her position near the window. Srini is shown waking up from his nightmare, staring apprehensively at Ragini who comes and tries to cuddle close to him. Srini removes her hands from his and informs her of his decision of cutting their honeymoon short since his boss wants him back in his workplace. As Ragini turns away from him in disappointment, he hugs her apologising for "these things" which are not specified. It could be his workplace commitment or his difficulty to make love to her. She replies him in a consoling tone that she understands him. Srini's sexual weakness is thus hinted at in this scene.

Unlike in the novel, however, neither of the two movies tries to locate Srini's impotence in any disastrous early sexual experience. As one may recall, in the novel, it is this incident where Srini runs out of the sex-worker's house feeling suddenly weakened on touching her that comes to haunt him as a fearful memory whenever he tries to make love to Ragini in the novel. Chandrasekhar also attributes Srini's

impotence to the trauma of this incident. The movie *Yakshi* chooses to omit this incident altogether, probably to present the hero in a more moralistic light. Thus Srini's impotence starts here only after meeting Ragini.

While *Akam* like *Yakshi* (1968) does not locate Srini's impotence in any disastrous early sexual experiences like in the novel, it does show Srini's attempts to prove his masculinity by hiring a sex-worker. The sex-worker, who on Srini's query, informs him that she is the mother of two kids, has to make sense of Srini's disinterest as he sits on the sofa, with his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep.

Akam chooses to dwell on the silences that creep in between Ragini and Srini, the gazes they throw at each other, of puzzlement, fear and accusation to reveal their domestic equation. As the movie is mostly from Srini's perspective, the camera mostly reveals Srini *looking* at Ragini though there are significant exceptions. The first time Srini meets Ragini, he, who is an architect in the movie, looks down from a high rise building. He stares at the woman standing on the ground floor of the opposite building. She stands at the doorway clad in a white sari. This scene where Srini stands at the top looking down at Ragini who is standing far below him can be read in contrast with the scene involving his dream and in parallel with the last scene of the movie. In Srini's nightmare, their positions are reversed with Ragini being the one occupying Srini's earlier position – she is the woman who stands at the top of the building whose steps Srini has such a difficulty climbing. In the last scene of the movie, Srini sits on a flight of steps looking down at Ragini as she slowly moves further into deeper waters in the pond.



Srini gives Ragini a lift in his car and on his invitation, she visits his home. Throughout their meeting, while she sits in the car and later when she goes around his drawing room, checking out his library and collectibles, Srini keeps on looking at her, unable to believe that a beautiful woman has entered his life.



There is a moment in the movie when Srini watches Ragini through a glass partition. Ragini, stationed on the other side, returns his gaze, her way of reaching out to him. It perfectly captures what I discussed in my analysis of the novel *Yakshi*. The glass partition in this shot can be considered as a mirror in which Srini sees his

‘specular other’, Ragini, a woman whose “loving gaze” validates for him his own desirability.



However, Srinivas cannot make sense of Ragini’s core mystery and it always seems as if something eludes his gaze. Thus even his first dream date ends with her leaving him on the beach alone to go to her grandmother’s house, a house he cannot see. He asks her if he can accompany her to her grandmother’s place. She at first refuses his offer in a casual tone, but when he repeats his request, says in a foreboding tone, “No”. Srinivas spends the next night on the beach trying to find her, but is unable to. Her mystery haunts even his honeymoon as they get into a fight on their way back as he wonders who it was she was waiting for on the day they met. He doesn’t trust her when she says she was waiting for her grandmother that day and when he feigns disbelief at the existence of a grandmother, she asks him reproachfully, “What is this, Srinivas? You don’t trust me?” As Srinivas’s suspicions grow in intensity, he keeps on following her every movement, Ragini’s figure always within his line of sight.

Compared to *Akam*, Sethumadhavan’s *Yakshi* uses more obvious techniques to hint at the mystery surrounding Ragini. For instance, the day after Ragini enters

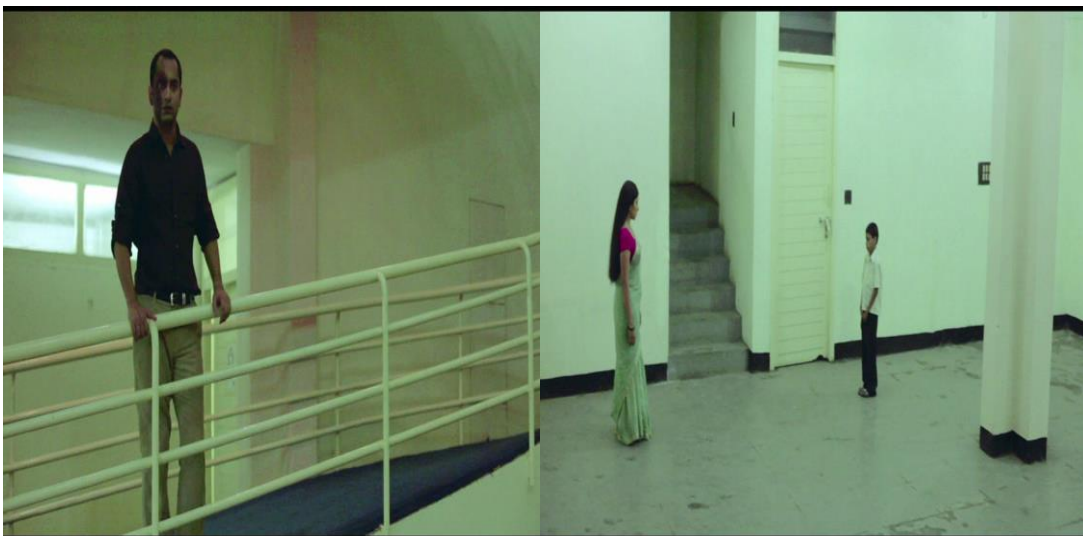
Srini's home on a stormy night, Srini's neighbour remarks that the previous night, he had seen a woman in white going out of Srini's house and she looked as if she was gliding on the ground. Another character's appraisal of the strange woman's identity is thus supposed to further confuse the viewer.

Yakshi follows the novel more literally compared to *Akam* in how Srini finds the pala tree in full bloom the next day. However, Sethumadhavan's *Yakshi* tries to maintain the atmosphere of terror by adding other elements. Thus unlike in the novel, the flowering of the pala tree is followed by the discovery of Srini's servant Paramu's dead body. Thus, the viewer is encouraged to believe in Ragini's otherworldly identity.

Since *Yakshi* unlike *Akam* uses a linear narrative to tell its tale, for some time, the viewer is also expected to side with Srini regarding his suspicions towards Ragini and look upon his version of events as reliable. However, at certain points, the viewer does get hints that point to Srini not being that trustworthy. For instance, the conversation Srini has with his friend Chandrasekhar and his wife after his first meeting with Ragini introduces the theme of Srini's inferiority complex and the dangers it can lead to. When Chandrasekhar's wife asks Srini jokingly as to whether he has found a Yakshi yet, Srini replies that he has found one, but hasn't made her his own. When Chandrasekhar expresses surprise at Srini's strange wish, Srini confesses half-seriously, half-jokingly that since no normal woman would love him because of his face, even if the Yakshi would finally drink his blood, he would be happy if she loves him. Chandrasekhar, in reply, warns Srini against the dangers of developing such an inferiority complex. Thus the viewer is encouraged to look at Srini's version of events critically.

The movie *Yakshi*, however, largely continues to create an atmosphere of mystery surrounding Ragini for some more time. Particular scenes, Ragini's dialogues all seem to invite the viewers to read a more sinister subtext into the scenes they are watching. Ragini's statement to Srini where she expresses her *thirst* to kiss Srini's half-burnt face, the song she sings with the lyrics, "You called, I answered; Beat, My heart beat; You hugged me, I woke up thirsty; Forgot, I forgot myself^{viii}" are used to further raise suspicions regarding her identity.

There are particular scenes in both the movies which are supposed to further raise suspicions about Ragini's identity. *Akam* uses an eerie incident at the cinema described in the novel (which Sethumadhavan's *Yakshi* doesn't use) to raise suspicions about Ragini. At the movie theatre where Srini and Ragini go with their neighbours, Srini follows her when she leaves him to go to the washroom. He sees her standing in front of a young boy, seemingly staring at him.



Coincidentally, the balcony in the theatre collapses just after the interval exactly at the place where their seats were. During the interval, while leaving for the washroom with her neighbour, Ragini had admonished Srini and the neighbour's

husband not to enter the theatre without them. Srini and the neighbour hence had waited for their wives outside and thus did not get involved in the accident in the theatre. When Srini sees the boy he had seen with Ragini lying grievously injured inside the theatre, suspicions about their miraculous escape and the boy's injury storm his mind. Srini asks Ragini how she knew the accident was going to happen, attributing her agency to the boy's injury and their fortunate escape.

Srini's surveillance of Ragini continues especially when he learns from CK that Sita (Kalyani Amma in the novel) is in the hospital and that Ragini is with her. Srini peeps into Sita's hospital room; his eyes are on Ragini sitting across the room.



Srini's constant surveillance of Ragini's movements, consciously or unconsciously, is part of his strategy to *monsterise* her. One has to read this along with how others *look* at Srini. In the opening scene, the local guy who brings them their meals strikes up a conversation with Srini, whose side profile does not reveal the scarred portions of his face. As Srini turns around to give the man his money, he sees Srini's scarred face and his expression turns into one of disgust. Srini tells Tara, his ex-girlfriend, that he cannot remember her face when she rejected him, possibly a

moment his conscious memory has blocked since it must have caused a great deal of shock to Srinu to have the love of his life look at him with fear and disgust. After the accident, as Srinu stares at Savy, the colleague he had rejected earlier, with interest, she admonishes him not to look at her like that, the disgust she feels apparent on her face. In the elevators, people keep on looking at Srinu's scarred face. Srinu is thus looked upon by the people around him, even people whom he used to be close to, with disgust. They fear to look at him and when they do, their faces reveal that they see him as a monster.

When their marital life begins, Srinu soon realises that he cannot keep up with his enthusiastic healthy wife. There is a scene at the beach during their honeymoon when Ragini climbs up a rock in glee calling out to Srinu. Srinu, however, huffs and pants as he climbs up the rock, his slight limp making it harder for him. Srinu gets angry with Ragini for not caring for the hassle she has just put him through, but her words of endearment cool him down for the moment. However, as Ragini makes him lie down in her lap and tries to kiss him, Srinu faints and falls down from the rock. Later, the blood on his lips which he discovers in the hotel raises the demon of doubt in his mind for the first time. Thus, Srinu's honeymoon where he fails to match up to Ragini's energy, sexual and otherwise, adds up to the discomfort with his own self. The nightmare starts during his honeymoon as the eyes of Srinu's unconscious transform Ragini into the scary woman on the lighthouse rooftop. Thereafter, he is always watching her, his eyes trying to unmask her secret which he believes is her monstrosity.

Shalini Usha Nair, the director of *Akam*, also comments on how Ragini always seems "slightly out of context" as far as Srinu is concerned and points to how her difference, which is at first her charm, later becomes a cause for "alarm and fear"

when he fails to understand her (Sathyendran). It finally leads to a situation where “her mystery becomes a threat to his very existence, a threat that he needs to overcome” (Sathyendran).

Unlike Sethumadhavan’s *Yakshi* which takes a more direct approach in how it presents Srini’s suspicions regarding Ragini, especially those involving Ragini’s hand in her neighbour Kalyani Amma’s abortion, *Akam* tries to present them as Srini’s dreams. It is important to note how even in Srini’s dreams, the act of looking and who holds the gaze become important. Thus when Srini hears that Anil has sought Ragini’s help to take care of his wife, he has a dream. In the dream, one sees two black silhouettes walking in front of the viewer, one that of Ragini and the other that of Sita (Kalyani Amma in the novel and the movie). Ragini is revealed to be holding Sita by the shoulder, leading her on. The space they traverse is the hospital corridor which turns eerie in the neon light of the night. Suddenly, Ragini turns her face and *looks* back.

When Srini falls unconscious and is admitted to the same hospital as Sita, he confesses to CK all his suspicions regarding Ragini. He then overhears a conversation between CK and Anil who think Srini is sleeping. CK informs Anil that Srini is suffering from post-traumatic disorder after the accident. Srini’s face doesn’t betray any emotion, but when Anil tells CK that Ragini is taking care of Sita, Srini’s eyes flicker, his face suddenly expressing his interest in the information. The next dream starts there, taking off from the previous one. The scene now shifts to a hospital room where a woman lies on the floor, one leg stretched out. It is Sita lying near the bathroom. Ragini is sitting near the door of the bathroom swallowing something, her face hidden to the viewer, who is presumably Srini. As the invisible viewer’s gaze zooms in on Ragini, it seems as if she is drinking something. Ragini then turns her

face towards the invisible viewer. Blood is seeping from her mouth, drenching her sari. Ragini, the Yakshi, is caught feeding on Sita's foetus in Srini's dream, her true face revealed to the world. Thus, all Srini's dreams/nightmares are engaged in casting/unmasking Ragini as the monster. To Srini, Ragini is the Yakshi, the monster in disguise, whose each movement needs to be scrutinised for they must reveal her well-hidden monstrosity. Her monstrosity needs to be discovered for it is enough to offset his own terrible deformity.

In *Yakshi*, Srini's suspicions regarding Ragini are presented as part of a conversation between Srini and his friend Chandrasekhar. Chandrasekhar gets alarmed on hearing Srini's claims that Ragini is going to kill him and that she wants to eat Kalyani Amma's child. He tells Srini that he urgently needs psychiatric help since to hide his sexual weakness, he, in his mind, is casting a flesh and blood woman as a Yakshi. Chandrasekhar's refutations of Srini's claims help to establish the counter point to Srini's own, where Srini's suspicions get presented as those of a diseased mind.

I would like to compare two scenes in *Yakshi* and *Akam* which both present Srini shrinking away in fear from his wife Ragini. Both the scenes take place in the bedroom, a place where Srini especially feels his powerlessness as a man because of his sexual weakness. It is no wonder that it is here that Ragini transforms into the Yakshi whose very presence is enough to intimidate Srini.

Ragini in *Akam* is a woman whose body language is confident. Thus, whenever she finds Srini looking at her, she returns his gaze, her gaze often expressing her resentment. Thus, when Srini stares accusingly at Ragini as she takes care of Sita in the hospital, she holds his gaze, her eyes accusing him for doubting her.

In this particular scene, however, Ragini is not only responding to Srini's gaze, but she is actively *looking* at him.

In this scene, the viewer gets to see a paranoid Srini leaving his bedroom to sleep in another room. When Ragini knocks on the door repeatedly, Srini sits on his bed, staring with alarm at the door that separates him from his wife. Ragini then opens the door slightly and stares at Srini. Srini recoils in fear. Ragini comes and lies near him. Ragini turns towards Srini, her sharp gaze trying to penetrate into his secrets, but he does not hold her gaze and instead turns away from her, his face expressing his terror.



Thus, for Srini, his power lies in surveying Ragini, the Yakshi-in-disguise, in secret since the moment she returns his gaze, he is rendered powerless.

In *Yakshi*, this happens in the scene where Ragini tells Srini about the world of the Yakshis. In the novel, this world is part of Srini's imagination. The attribution of this tale to Ragini in the movie, instead of it being presented a dream of Srini, has interesting implications. Presenting it as Srini's dream might have made the viewer strongly doubt Srini's sanity at this point, which the movie does not want. Instead, attributing the strange tale to Ragini makes her appear to be the sinister one.

After their disastrous honeymoon trip, Ragini sees Srini scribbling things like "Yakshis always drink blood". Later, in their bedroom, Ragini tells Srini that what he wrote is absurd. She instead claims to know all about the world of Yakshis and says that Yakshis drink blood only once a year. The viewers are then treated to a close up shot of Ragini's hands with their long fingers reaching over to Srini's shoulders. Srini is shown to shudder as Ragini says, "I will tell you about it". The background music is ominous.



When Srini turns to look at Ragini, her facial expression becomes foreboding. At the same time, the suspenseful background music reaches a crescendo. There is an interplay of light and darkness on Ragini, the lighting making her face appear strange

as she tells Srinu about the world of the Yakshis in detail, about how they come down to the earth once a year to drink man's blood. As Ragini says this and stretches her hand towards Srinu, he jumps away from the bed in alarm. He asks her trembling, "How do you know all this?" She laughingly replies, "My grandma told me."



Srinu tells her he is not well and asks her to sleep in the next room. Ragini who goes to the other room, turns around and then stands framed against the door, her hands stretched out like claws in front, as Srinu lies face down on the bed, trembling.

After this incident, Srinu is shown visiting the library poring over books trying to understand his dream. The death of Ananthan's dog, Judy, further raises his suspicions about Ragini. In fact, Srinu's suspicions first burst forth in speech after the death of Judy. While the movie had played with the viewer's horizon of expectations portraying two sides of Ragini until this point, from here, Ragini is presented in a more human light. The choice of the actress Sharada renowned for her roles of the suffering female lead to play Ragini helps in this transformation. Ragini asks Srinu why he keeps on being rude to her, blaming her for Judy's death and wonders why her

body is forbidden to her husband. Srini pushes her aside and walks out of the room. Ragini is shown as crying alone.

I had mentioned as to how the movie had tried to manipulate the viewer into trusting Srini's version of events by replacing Srini's dream about Yakshis with Ragini's narration of it as a tale passed on to her by her grandmother. However, at this point, now that a counter point to Srini's version has been established, the movie consciously goes on to present Srini's "fantastical" imagination.



This especially comes out in a song sequence where Srini, sleeping outside his room, away from the "Yakshi" Ragini, "witnesses" her meeting with her Gandharva lover. While this is not presented as a dream, there is an ethereal quality to it and one gets the feeling that what we get to witness is not the 'real', rather Srini's diseased imagination. There are things to confuse the viewer such as the silhouette of a Gandharva like figure emerging out of a tree that lights up on its own and Ragini emerging out of a wall to meet her lover. However, the presence of Srini in the scene, wrapping the blanket around his face, trembling in fear, with his body breaking out in

sweat gives the viewer the perspective that what we witness is mediated through Srini's gaze which is now revealed to be unreliable.

The confrontation that Srini has with Ragini the next day where he lists out a number of charges against her, calling her a Yakshi, further cements the viewer's suspicions regarding Srini's own sanity. Srini's accusations sound difficult to believe as he rails against Ragini, "The pala tree flowered at your behest. At Kanyakumari, you tried to drink my blood. You killed Paramu and Judy. Under the pala tree, you met your lover the gandharva. You ate Kalyani Amma's embryo". Ragini replies that he can say whatever he wants as she has been fated to cry all her life. But she wants to go from there as a human being. Srini avers that she is a Yakshi and that Yakshi and a human are not meant to mate and that is why her body is forbidden to him. Ragini bursts out in defiance, her tone sarcastic "That is not the reason. I had decided not to tell you this. Srini doesn't have the ability for that. To make a woman happy, that ability, Srini doesn't have". Srini drags her by the hair and pushes her down after which he kicks and hits her (The viewer gets to see Srini's shadow bending down and then kicking someone along with Ragini's screams). Chandrasekhar enters (the door is open) and is shown coming to Ragini's rescue.

This is a scene where Srini's insanity and his propensity for violence to cover up his own complex come out. The movie, while it started out trying to confuse the viewer regarding Ragini's identity, often giving the viewer Srini's view point regarding the events, has revealed by this time that the monster is not Ragini, but Srini. Srini's insane outburst listing out all his proofs, Ragini's dignified response to his charges and then Srini's fit of rage where he drags his wife by the hair and whirls her around, all contribute to destroy Srini's narrative of Ragini's monstrosity.

The movie then further plays upon the lead actress Sharada's reputation as the suffering heroine by presenting her as the loving wife who even then tries to shield her husband by lying about the injury. While this has much in common with how Ragini is presented in the novel, the movie goes one step further. Ragini in the movie who goes to her uncle's house after the injury then writes a letter to Chandrasekhar where she states that it is better to die by her husband's hand than live like that in her uncle's house. When Srini and Chandrasekhar come to take her home, she even touches Srini's feet. Ragini of the movie is thus the ultimate embodiment of the self-sacrificing wife. While she does stand up for her rights twice, once asking Srini why her body is forbidden to her husband and at another time boldly declaring Srini's impotence, she is passive for the most part.

If *Yakshi* tries to play with the viewer's horizon of expectations by first presenting Ragini as mysterious and frightening only to later present her as the self-sacrificing wife, in *Akam*, which mainly presents the tale through the eyes of Srini, we have scenes where Srini's expectations regarding Ragini are rudely shaken by what he sees. Thus, in one of the scenes as Srini comes back from his job, he hears a commotion in his bedroom. Srini finds out that Ragini is trying to let out a pigeon which had entered their bedroom by accident. Ragini's shrieks of alarm when the bird flies around confusedly are a far cry from the image of the *Yakshi* Srini has in his head. After Srini lets out the pigeon, Ragini hugs him in relief. Srini's doubts vanish for a moment to come back as soon as Anil barges in asking Ragini to come and help Sita.

The other scene happens when Srini and CK visit Ragini's house towards the end of the movie. Ragini lives in an old, unpainted house. When Ragini sees Srini, she goes inside. Srini follows her into the room upstairs. Ragini sits on the bed, her

“humanness” very much evident in her humble surroundings. Ragini stares accusingly at Srini who embraces her. However, this moment of understanding is also short-lived.

Now, I come to the pivotal scenes in the two movies involving Ragini’s disappearance/murder. *Akam* leaves the interpretation of the scene involving Ragini’s disappearance to the viewers while Sethumadhavan’s *Yakshi* gives them two versions of the same event, going on to present the second one as the “real” one.

In *Yakshi*, the scene involving Ragini’s disappearance is repeated twice. It is a full moon day and Srini and Ragini are trying to restart their marital life. As he listens to Ragini taking bath, Srini feels aroused. He taps on the bathroom door and despite Ragini’s pleas to put her down, he carries her in his arms and takes her to the bedroom. We are shown just his legs as he moves through the drawing room to the bedroom. We also hear Ragini’s voice as she chides Srini. This is a scene that has been noted by various film reviewers as arousing suspicion in the viewer as to whether Ragini is human or not as she is invisible. Indu V.S writes as to how this scene makes use of the possibilities of *terror* as a genre.

After reconciling with Ragini, there is a scene where Srini driven by extreme passion, takes Ragini to the bedroom. There, the focus is on his legs. We get to hear Ragini’s voice. But of the two people walking, the viewers get to see only one pair of legs. It is when Srini later describes the scene that it becomes clear that it is so not because Ragini is a Yakshi, but because Srini is walking holding her in his arms. (“Yakshi”)

We only get to hear the sounds from the other room as the happy mood suddenly goes sombre as Srini’s weakness reasserts itself and Ragini calls out his

name enquiring him where he is going off to. We are then shown Srini sitting alone in the drawing room after his sexual failure, distraught and frustrated. Then, there is a disruption in the narrative. Concentric circles fill the screen (pointing to the narrative now being Srini's). The background music turns suspenseful. As Srini turns his head towards the bed room, we are shown smoke filtering out of it followed by Ragini coming out of it. She is smiling as she comes towards Srini. Ragini tells Srini that she is not a woman filled with lust. The only thing she thirsts for is Srini's love. She invites him to sit under the pala tree as it is a full moon night.

Ragini's story to Srini is narrated under the pala tree. Ragini prefaces her narrative with the words that she won't hide anything from Srini any longer. She tells him that she is a Yakshi and that the reason Srini fails everytime he tries to make love to her is because of that. Her coming down to the earth is because of her being cursed by the queen of the Yakshis. She will get reprieve from her curse only if she drinks Srini's blood. But she doesn't want reprieve from her curse as she has fallen for Srini and wants to live with him as a human woman. Srini asks her not to do that and instead entreats her to drink his blood so that she can get reprieve from the curse and go back to her world. Ragini asks Srini to kiss her.



The camera then shows us Srini's back profile as Ragini is shown embracing him (her arms can be seen around his shoulders). He shudders and we see him turning away from Ragini, his weakness appearing again. Ragini beseeches him not to forsake her to which Srini retorts by calling her a Yakshi and asking her to go. Ragini then transforms into a plume of smoke right before Srini. Srini feels enraged at the gandharva in the pala tree whom he now holds responsible for taking away Ragini. He tries to hack at the pala tree with an axe.



There is no trace of Ragini after this day and Ananthan and Chandrasekhar question Srini repeatedly about his wife's disappearance. Srini maintains that Ragini disappeared into a plume of smoke. Srini is arrested by the police and later taken to a Psychiatrist. The Psychiatrist plays a word game with Srini as per which Srini has to give the first word that comes to his mind whenever the Psychiatrist gives him a word. In this word game, as the Psychiatrist gives him the word failure, he gives its antonym victory which in Malayalam is "vijayam", and then corrects himself with the word "vijaya", which is the name of his former lover. One can see that for Srini, his personal failure starts with the loss of his former lover. In the psychiatric discourse that the movie offers, this is supposed to start the process of self-awareness within Srini where he is forced to confront his own past and his complexes.

The Psychiatrist keeps a life-size cut out of Ragini in Srini's room which for some time, Srini mistakenly considers to be Ragini. Srini is overjoyed on seeing the cut out which he thinks is Ragini and runs towards her. Once he realises that it is a cut out, he becomes despondent and looks guilty. As the Psychiatrist, police officer and his friend Chandrasekhar crowd around him, Srini finally gives the true version of the events that happened on the night Ragini disappeared.

The scene where Srini knocks on the bathroom door and takes Ragini (wrapped in a sari) in his arms is played again. Srini fails in making love to Ragini again and gets up humiliated. Ragini then embraces him. Srini is shown turning around, his face now livid with anger. Ragini, at first, cannot understand the change that has taken place in Srini. Srini tries to wring her neck as she falls back into the bed.



The scene where Srini's fingers are shown coming near to wring Ragini's neck can be contrasted with the earlier scene where Ragini's fingers are shown reaching over to Srini as she tells him the story about the world of the *Yakshis*. The contrast between the two scenes is powerful. The woman who was supposed to be the victimiser of the hapless Srini in that scene has transformed into the victim who cannot believe that her husband is trying to kill her.



As Ragini tries to move away from Srini realising the danger, he drags her by her sari which he then wraps around her neck suffocating her to death. Ragini tries to free herself by pulling at his hair, but to no avail. The scene where Ragini's long fingers, portrayed in the earlier portions as markers of her "*Yakshi-self*", pull

desperately at Srini's hair and finally lose their grip as she gets choked to death is a powerful one.



The movie's scheme of serving justice has Srini confessing to Ragini's murder though he admits that he was insane at the time. Srini confesses that he, the madman

that he was, hacked Ragini to pieces, burnt her with kerosene and buried her body in the house. The police inspector is shown leading Srini away as the movie ends on the cut out of Ragini smiling happily in Kanyakumari, an ironic reminder of happier times.

While a contemporary reviewer of the movie in the 1960s like Kozhikodan may have been unhappy with the literal depiction of the murder since he felt that it should have been left to the imagination of the viewer, one has to point out that the repetition of the murder scene where Srini's insane version is contrasted with a sane version does help to highlight the duplicity of Srini's narrative regarding Ragini. The real tragedy of *Yakshi* is that Srini's own complexes make him displace what he perceives as his monstrosity on to Ragini's body so as to transform him and the woman he cannot possess into the victim and the victimiser at a single stroke.

In *Akam*, as mentioned earlier, the scene involving Ragini's disappearance is left to the viewer to make sense of. In the most enigmatic scene of the movie which come towards the end, Srini follows Ragini as she takes him to a sacred grove which has a Yakshi temple. Ragini's voice is heard as she confirms that Srini's suspicions are true. Srini's voice is heard pleading with her not to go. In this scene, the viewer does not get to *see* what is happening. The viewer only gets to overhear disjointed statements that do not make complete sense without their context explained or their speakers revealed in the process of performing some action. The director perhaps chooses to present the pivotal conversation between Srini and Ragini in this way in order to keep the suspense – was Ragini confessing about her being a Yakshi to Srini? Or was she talking about something else?

What the viewer gets to see after this mysterious conversation is Ragini staring at Srini who watches her from the top of a flight of stairs leading to a pond. Ragini is clad in a white set sari. She is then shown entering the water, moving farther and farther into its depths until her head also gets submerged. The camera then cuts to Srini sitting on the steps of the pond, water dripping from his body. Does Srini's location as the voyeur (who watches Ragini as she drowns herself) in this scene indicate that what we witnessed is his version of the events?

CK runs in and asks Srini where Ragini is and what he did to her. Srini looks back at him dispassionately. The camera follows the movements in the pond for some time, the life thriving in its depths - water insects, dragon flies etc. After some time, Ragini's body appears floating on the water, her eyes open to the sky, dead to the world. The camera zooms out slowly showing Ragini floating in her white set sari on the surface of the pond, her body still.

Is the water on Srini's clothes proof of his guilt? Did he drown her in the pond? Indu V.S, comparing the two movies, compares Ragini's death in *Akam* to Ophelia's in *Hamlet* where Ophelia committed suicide after hearing Hamlet's taunts accusing her of being a whore ("Yakshi"). Ragini is here accused of being a Yakshi who eats foetus and who is after Srini's blood. Is her end in the pond her tragic attempt to prove her humanness? The movie leaves the question unanswered though it seems more probable that Srini had a hand in her death.

When we compare the two movies, what becomes clear is the role Ragini's active sexuality has in her 'Yakshi-ness'. This is something the director of *Akam*, Shalini Usha Nair also pointed out in an interview. For her, who stayed outside Kerala

for around a decade, “the novel seemed to capture the oxymoron that is Kerala, where there is a tendency to demonise female sexuality” (Sathyendran).

Indu V.S., in her review of *Yakshi* also points to how Ragini’s active sexuality is one of the reasons she gets cast as the Yakshi. She asks us to read Ragini along with Vijayalakshmi, Srini’s first lover to understand this process.

Viji [Vijayalakshmi] who stands blushing with shame in front of her man. Ragini, who doesn’t hide her desires and takes the initiative to get close to her man. While Vijayalakshmi requires the medium of a poem to express the desire in her heart, Ragini openly voices her desires. Despite losing Viji, in his [Srini’s] dream, she remains as the innocent lover. However, the dream that takes him to Ragini up the stairs mercilessly pushes him down. To Chandran who accuses him of making Ragini a Yakshi in order to hide his own weakness, he tells firmly, “My weakness is because she is a *Yakshi*.” It is quite natural that abnormality gets attributed to her who is secretive in nature, not divulging everything about herself, who likes to roam around all alone, who doesn’t fit into Srini’s views that a woman should be modest.

The markers that Indu V.S sees as constitutive of Srini’s labelling of Ragini as a Yakshi need to be studied in detail. Ragini who desired Srini while she was a student in his college continues to harbour a liking for him, even after his accident. She doesn’t have any fear or shame to enter into his house all alone at night. She has no hesitation in asking Srini for a change in clothing and boldly declares that she finds him attractive. She is ready to even kiss him to prove the sincerity of her words. To the puritanical Srini, used to the much more conventional Vijayalakshmi, while Ragini’s boldness appeals at first since she is the one who takes the initiative to start a

relationship which would have been impossible for him in his position of self-loathing, once he cannot match up to Ragini's sexual energy, she becomes abnormal. While the movie, in line with the novel, only subtly hints at Ragini's sexuality as constitutive of her "Yakshi-ness", instead deciding to dwell on the popular, more overt markers of her monstrosity, a close reading of the movie makes it clear that Ragini's active sexuality is an important constituent of her monstrosity.

Sethumadhavan's *Yakshi* thus tries to re-create the suspense of the novel by creating an atmosphere of terror around Ragini and manipulating the viewer into regarding it as the truth of her self up to almost the middle of the movie. The way the movie tries to construct the "Yakshi-ness" of Ragini is through the use of familiar cinematic devices which have been discussed in detail in this section. Yet, as Indu V.S. points out, one should not ignore how much the emphasis on Ragini's active sexuality in the early scenes of the movie contribute to her depiction as the Yakshi. In fact, in contrast to the Ragini of the first half of the movie, confident of her body and commanding in tone, the Ragini of the second half is generally marked by her passivity and submissiveness. It doesn't need to be said that it is the differing body language of the heroine which helps in creating this contrast – between Yakshiness and normative femininity. The movie *Yakshi*, hence, becomes an exploration of how and where the cinematic medium locates the 'Yakshi-ness' of a woman – in her active sexuality.

When we compare the two movies, *Akam*, free of the conventional devices of terror that *Yakshi* uses, instead creates the atmosphere of dread by turning the familiar into the unfamiliar. *Akam* offers a more intimate look at Srini's world as the camera follows Srini as he rides an elevator where a man stares at his scarred face or when he glances at the C-grade cinema posters full of titillating scenes.

Akam does not rely on many of the specific markers of the Yakshi myth to create the halo of mystery around Ragini. While Ragini dresses in white set sari at times, in the nightmare, she wears a black sari. Nor is there any Gandharva in the movie to vie for her affections. The markers of Ragini's "Yakshi-ness" instead lie in her long hair which she leaves open almost all the time, the smell of *pala* flowers which follows her, her rumoured way of walking as if gliding on the ground, her slippers which do not seem to leave any footprints and above all her defiance when she just refuses to reveal herself and returns Srini's accusing gaze with one of her own.

Ragini's sexuality is an important aspect of her "Yakshi-ness" in *Akam* as well.

In the movies that I discuss in the next chapter, *Aakashaganga* and *Manichitrathazhu*, the wife is suspected to be a Yakshi like in *Yakshi* and its movie adaptations. However, compared to *Yakshi*, where the term stands for a female spirit from another world, here the term is used for the ghost of a murdered woman. As I mentioned in the introduction, the signifier Yakshi has many signifieds. If in the novel *Yakshi* and its film adaptations, it is the Yakshi's overpowering sexuality that is the centre of focus, in *Aakashaganga* and *Manichitrathazhu*, it is her signified as the avenger that is the focus.

Notes:

ⁱ A play on Prospero's words on Caliban: "This thing of darkness I Acknowledge mine". In this chapter, I explore the process of monster-making through the story of Srini, the man with "half a face" who believes that the true monster, the Yakshi, is his wife. The title is meant to highlight the link between Srini's own inferiority complex and the monsterising of his wife which is explored in detail in the chapter.

ⁱⁱ A term Lacan uses while describing the mirror stage. It refers to the subject's own image in the mirror (Rossolatos and Hogg 10).

ⁱⁱⁱ While the classic Yakshi tales do not usually feature dogs or talk about their ability to detect the presence of Yakshis, ghost or pretam movies in Malayalam make use of this trope. So, this could be a derivation from the ghost literature and movies in Malayalam.

^{iv} The only exception is Kalyani Amma's distant relative Kartyayani Amma, who enters their house like a whirlwind as soon as she hears Ragini's screams. It is she who ministers to the injured Ragini and who calls Srimi a demon.

^v "The film was producer M.O. Joseph's debut film, made under the banner 'Manjilas'. Directed by K. S. Sethumadhavan and shot at Vikram and Newton studios, the film was noted for its excellent cinematography by Mehli Irani. Music composed by Devarajan was a highlight of this "all-time musical hit" ("Yakshi").

^{vi} Kozhikodan, a noted film critic of the time, in his regular film review column "Chitrasala" in the weekly magazine *Mathrubhumi Azhchapathippu*, rued how the film in trying to concretise the implied events in the novel like Ragini's murder destroyed the creativity of Ramakrishnan's narrative which smartly hinted at the events instead of showing them in detail.

^{vii} While the novel does not have a character called Paramu, the movie gave Srimi a servant, the scaredy cat Paramu. This was in line with the popular ghost movie *Bhargavinilayam* which had used the hero – scaredy cat servant dynamic for comic effect. In the movie, Paramu acts as a repository of the popular knowledge about Yakshis. Unfortunately, he dies of fright the day Ragini enters Srimi's house and Srimi later blames Ragini for his death as well.

^{viii} Translation mine.

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Chapter 5

When Iron Locks Hold not, Nor iron nails

Yakshi as the Avenger-Wife

The texts in this chapter, like those in Chapter 4, explore the blurring of the boundaries between the family woman and the Yakshi. However, the specific concerns in the texts discussed here are different. If in *Yakshi* and its movie adaptations, the focus is on the process of Yakshi-making in a modern society, in the two movies discussed in this chapter, *Manichitrathazhu* (1993) and *Aakashaganga* (1999), the focus is on the Yakshi as the avenger coming back as the family woman to avenge her death at the hands of her husband's ancestors. If in *Aakashaganga*, the husband is one among the many men the Yakshi wants to murder, in *Manichitrathazhu*, he is her only target. However, there are significant differences between the two movies. For instance, in *Aakashaganga*, if the wife's desire to murder her husband is traced to her being possessed by the Yakshi Ganga, in *Manichitrathazhu*, it is traced to the wife having a dissociative identity disorder where she identifies herself with Nagavalli, the Yakshi of a popular Yakshi tale.

The title of this chapter uses the metaphors of the lock not holding and the iron nail losing its power to explore the scenario where the bound Yakshi gets out of her binding and appears to take her revenge on her murderers. It is what Cohen calls "the uncanny Freudian-Lacanian return of the repressed" (Cohen 20). As discussed in the earlier chapters, in folktales, the Yakshi was bound by sorcerers by nailing her on to a *kanjiram* (snakewood) tree. The Yakshi could come out of her imprisonment if somebody plucked out the nail from the tree or if the magic that had bound her via the nail lost its power in course of time. In the movie *Aakashaganga*, this literally happens since the Yakshi Mayaganga bound to a banyan tree is able to possess the

Christian girl Daisy when she, while on a picnic, plucks out the nail which had bound her. In *Manichitrathazhu*, the trope of binding is explored literally and metaphorically. In this movie, the Yakshi Nagavalli is bound in one of the rooms of the ancient mansion, Madampally Meda. When Ganga, the female protagonist, unlocks the room by breaking open the lock, the binding of Nagavalli is supposed to be undone which allegedly leads to her possessing one of the residents of the Meda. There is also a metaphorical angle to this binding since Ganga's opening the forbidden room is supposed to open up her own forbidden desires and feelings. Hence, the title is meant to foreground this aspect of the two texts where the iron nail coming loose or the iron lock breaking open also stand for the desires of the female protagonists considered illegitimate in the social set ups they belong to finding expression in course of their revenge narratives.

The two movies discussed in this chapter are also about the entry of the abject as the Yakshi into hierarchical systems based on feudal and caste codes, the disruption of order that follows and then the casting out whereby the abject is excluded either through the process of exorcism or through psychoanalysis. In *Aakashaganga*, the order of the social set up lies in holding on to feudal and caste rules which forbid relationships beyond the casually sexual between the upper caste men of the Kovilakam and the lower caste women who serve them – any claims or attempts to legitimise such relationships end with those lower in the hierarchy paying the price. Thus, the lower-caste woman Mayaganga is burnt alive when pregnant with the child of her upper caste lover for daring to question the rules of the system she is part of. The movie is about Mayaganga's revenge on the family responsible for her murder when she enters as a Yakshi, the monstrous feminine, the abject that threatens social order.

In the case of *Manichitrathazhu*, the social orders that get disrupted are of two kinds. One belongs to the past and is of a feudal society in which the Karanavar or the head of the upper caste family of Madampally Meda, a feudal lord, has sexual control over women lower in the hierarchy. This woman is represented by Nagavalli, the Tamil dancer, brought to stay in his mansion or Meda as his concubine. Nagavalli is murdered by the Karanavar for falling in love with a fellow Tamil dancer. *Manichitrathazhu* is not a Yakshi movie and hence Nagavalli's revenge on the Karanavar is presented in the movie as hearsay rather than as something "real" like in the case of *Aakashaganga*. In the tale of Nagavalli's revenge that is passed on from generation to generation among the descendants of the Karanavar, she arrives as a Raktayakshi (blood-thirsty Yakshi), the monstrous feminine, the abject, to wreak her revenge on the Karanavar. However, in the temporal present of the movie, that feudal order is no longer there; yet it is still a patriarchal space and the memories of Nagavalli's rebellion remain fresh though she is rumoured to be bound in one of the rooms of the Meda. In this order, the chains that bind the daughter-in-law Ganga are of a different kind. Though they are only hinted at in the movie, it is clear that Ganga is sexually dissatisfied. Ganga's empathetic identification with Nagavalli and her subsequent attempts to murder her husband and love another man have to be read as the second entry of the abject and this time the order that gets disrupted is of a heterosexual marriage in a patriarchal family unit.

The two movies end with the casting out of the abject. If in *Aakashaganga*, a Hindu and Christian sorcerer work together to exorcise the Yakshi out of the family woman, in *Manichitrathazhu*, a Psychiatrist and a Hindu sorcerer work together to cast out the family woman's dangerous 'other self'. We have two interesting movies which deal with a similar theme and yet are of two different genres – one is a horror-

comedy and the other is a psychological thriller. Thus, there are similarities and differences that emerge on a close study of the two movies. In this chapter, I would like to study the two movies together to explore where they converge and diverge while dealing with a similar theme. However, since the two movies have their own unique issues, I believe that they also at times need to be treated as independent units and studied separately from one another.

Before going into a discussion of the two movies, it would be worthwhile to explore their role in the history of Malayalam cinema.

***Aakashaganga*ⁱ (1999) and *Manichitrathazhu*ⁱⁱ (1993)**

Aakashaganga (1999) can be called one of the most popular movies in the Yakshi genre, which, in its success in linking the genres of horror and comedy, was able to create its own niche among similar movies. *Manichitrathazhu* (1993), on the other hand, can be said to be a path-breaker in its success in re-writing the rules of popular horror by presenting a psychological thriller in the garb of a horror movie. I would like to discuss the two movies in detail, especially where they broke new ground in cinematic history.

Manichitrathazhu (The ornate lock) (1993) worked on familiar tropes of the horror movie – haunted mansion, supernatural occurrences, eerie music, sightings of the ghostly woman and exorcism. Yet where it differed from the horror movies it resembled was that for the first time, the horror came not from the outside but from within. Here, Ganga, the “sweet and affectionate” woman’s transformation into Nagavalli, the blood thirsty Yakshi, murderous in her rage, was not a case of her being possessed by the latter, but one of a psychic disorder where the latter became a projection of the repressed self of the former. Yet, the new psychology did not

dissociate itself completely from the older discourse of possession. The climax of the movie where the modern psychiatrist Sunny Joseph works with the exorcist Brahmadattan Namboothiripad to rid Ganga of Nagavalli presented a happy combination of these two methods, one new and the other old, to treat the disease that both had built their reputations on – “madness” of the woman.

The narrative of the film *Manichitrathazhu* is in fact built on the trope of madness. The cinematic tradition of Kerala which had often used the trope of madness for comic effect continues to operate in *Manichitrathazhu* as well. The psychiatrist Sunny Joseph who behaves like a “mad man”, along with a host of side characters whose sanity gets doubted for their “perverse” actions, all are cast in this tradition. However, the movie also works within a cinematic tradition of perceiving madness as “dangerous”. What made *Manichitrathazhu* a pathbreaking movie within the cinematic tradition of Kerala was its exploration of the link between “madness” and “possession”.

It is in the rational psychoanalytic interpretation it gave to “possession”, in which a person was traditionally believed to be ‘possessed’ by a spirit, a Yakshi, a Gandharvan or a ghost, that *Manichitrathazhu* reworked the tropes of the ghost movies. There is a demystification of the phenomenon of “possession” where it is stripped of its supernatural dimensions. The break this movie marked in the horror tradition is noteworthy. *Manichitrathazhu* is not a ghost movie. Yet it is firmly located within the horror tradition. The object of horror is no longer the “possessed woman” as was the case with many of the traditional horror movies including *Aakashaganga*, but the “mad woman”.

This shift is one in which the movie consciously participates as Sunny Joseph, the psychiatrist, goes on to demystify the supernatural occurrences in Madampalli Meda, tracing them to Ganga's own alter ego, the Tamil dancer Nagavalli. The older "system of belief" where a woman's "abnormality" was located within a discourse of "possession" gets replaced by a new "system of belief" where it gets located within a discourse of "madness".

When we trace these two movies in time, *Aakashaganga*, coming six years after *Manichitrathazhu*, can be considered as making a return to the roots of the horror movie. It stands as one of the most successful horror movies in Malayalam and its place in reviving the Yakshi genre cannot be overstated. Director Vinayan's *Aakashaganga* (1999), touted as a horror-comedy, was such a success that a spate of Yakshi movies came out soon after such as *Indriyam* (2000), *Meghasandesham* (2001) and *Agninakshatram* (2004). As a popular horror movie which brought the figure of the Yakshi back to the silver screen, *Aakashaganga* had a huge role to play in how the figure of the Yakshi was re-packaged for a modern day audience. Though advertised as a Yakshi movie, it was quite apparent that the Yakshi in *Aakashaganga* was in many ways similar to the *pretam* or female ghost of movies like the old classic *Lisa* (1978) which had also employed the motif of the avenging ghost. However, the success of a movie like *Manichitrathazhu* which had taken a scientific approach to "possession" also meant that it had to grapple with the challenge of re-presenting "possession" and had to find a new vocabulary to present it to a modern day audience. Yet, as a horror-comedy, *Aakashaganga* had its own cinematic grammar which made it different from the genres of the ghost movie as well as the psychological thriller.

However, while *Aakashaganga* had the novelty factor associated with it and did a reasonably good job mixing the genres of horror and comedy, it also started the

process of standardising the Yakshi as a figure. The sub-standard Yakshi movies that followed *Aakashaganga* did not help the matter either. In 2010, when Vinayan made his third Yakshi movie *Yakshiyum Njaanum* (Yakshi and I), there was some curiosity as to whether he would be able to revive the genre. However, the movie was a disappointment at the box-office and the critics too were unimpressed with some calling it as clearly “meant for the front-benchers who guarantee to fill the theatres to watch skimpily clad heroines and enjoy some crass humour” (Palicha). While a movie like *Akam* coming in 2013 has helped in re-reading the figure of the *Yakshi* to some extent, in popular horror movies, the *Yakshi* as a figure has become quite standardised and clichéd. Among the most popular horror movies featuring a *Yakshi* in Malayalam stands *Aakashaganga* and hence it deserves to be studied for what it has done to the genre of the *Yakshi* movie.

After discussing the importance of the two movies in Malayalam film history, I would like to take up *Aakashaganga* and outline how the motif of the *Yakshi* comes to play here. *Aakashaganga* is about the horrifying murder of a young servant woman Mayaganga by a member of the royal family of Manikyasseri and follows her re-entry as a *Yakshi* where she possesses the young woman Daisy to avenge her death. Unlike the *Yakshi* in Kathanar’s story where she is treated as a female monster or the *Yakshi* in Venmani’s story where she is treated as a semi-divine being, the *Yakshi* here is the ghost of a dead woman. While the term *Yakshi* is also often used for ghosts of dead women as in the famous *Yakshi* story of Kalliankattu Neeliⁱⁱⁱ, it still deserves to be asked why Ganga is identified as a *Yakshi* when there have been earlier ghost movies like *Lisa*^{iv}, *Veendum Lisa* and *Karimpoocha*. This is a question that requires an investigation into the different markers of the *Yakshi* myth that movies pick and choose, depending on their themes.

In the case of *Aakashaganga*, while it can always be argued that the writer wanted to repackage the old ghost story in the garb of a Yakshi tale, it seems to me that the movie uses the figure of the Yakshi rather than the female *pretam* (ghost) since it wants to make use of some of the implicit signifiers connected with the Yakshi myth. The movie doesn't use the more explicit signifiers connected with the Yakshi myth like the pala tree (the Indian Devil tree) as the Yakshi's abode or the conversation on the wayside where the Yakshi asks the traveller for some lime to have her paan. What it does instead is to borrow other implied signifiers in the Yakshi myth, one of which is the ancient nature of the Yakshi.

The figure of the Yakshi is quite old^v and harks back to a remote past compared to a figure like the *pretam* or ghost. While the ghost movie or *pretam* movie is about the spirit of a woman who was wrongfully murdered in the recent past returning to take her revenge (*Bhargavinilayam*, *Lisa*), *Aakashaganga* which talks about a woman who was murdered in a time period around three generations earlier from that of the hero's perhaps required a more potent term to convey the ancient nature of the ghost. However, more than that, I believe that the term Yakshi has been invoked to introduce one of the central motifs of the story – the Yakshi's curse. In the folktales, the Yakshi's curse is supposed to affect the progeny. Thus in the tale of Venmoni and the Yakshi, her earlier status as a goddess of fertility comes out in the Yakshi's curse where her curse affects the future generations of the *kulam* (clan) in that from the third generation, it does not get any male heirs to carry on the lineage. Similarly, in the movie version of the Goddess of Chottanikkara, Guptan's guru refuses to come to Guptan's rescue beyond a point since he is afraid of the Yakshi's curse which can affect the progeny. In the movie *Aakashaganga* as well, there is the curse associated with the Yakshi. The murdered Ganga, who turns into a Yakshi, has

cursed the family, especially its male descendants that if they enter into sexual relationships, they will be killed. Ganga's wrath at being horrifyingly murdered for falling in love with a man of the family and for desiring to marry him might have come out in the curse which ensures that none of the men of the family can fall in love and start the family that was denied to her. Ganga was murdered when she was pregnant with her lover's child. Her curse upon the male descendants also ensures that the lineage is not carried forward by the men of the family. Thus, Ganga's curse which affects the male descendants of the family consciously or unconsciously links her to the figure of the Yakshi, especially in her status as an earlier goddess of fertility.

Thus, there is a reason why *Aakashaganga* specifically uses the figure of the Yakshi to weave its tale of murder and revenge. When we come to *Manichitrathazhu*, the Yakshi motif gets played out in two significant ways in the movie— one in the tale of Nagavalli's revenge which reads like a typical tale about Yakshi as the avenger and the other in the trope of binding. Before I discuss the second aspect in detail, I would like to focus on the first aspect.

Like I mentioned earlier, Nagavalli, the Tamil dancer, brought to stay in the mansion or Meda of the feudal lord Sankaran Tampi, the Karanavar or the head of the household, as his concubine, has to pay a heavy price for going against the dictates of the society he is part of. Nagavalli's falling in love with a fellow dancer ends in her gruesome murder as she is hacked to death in her own room in the Meda.

If in *Manichitrathazhu*, it is the rules of a feudal order which Nagavalli, the Tamil dancer, questions by falling in love with a man of her class (and caste) against the wishes of the feudal lord, in *Aakashaganga*, Mayaganga challenges the rules of an

upper caste and feudal society by falling in love with the son of the Tamburan or the ruler of the land.

The index of caste comes into the picture in a big way in *Aakashaganga* in the flashback scenes where Ganga, the lower-caste woman, is killed for daring to love a member of the upper-caste royal family. In the social order Ganga is part of, she can only be the concubine of the member of the royal family, not his wife. This comes out clearly in the scene where the Tamburan chides his son Devan for insisting on marrying Ganga. According to the Tamburan, the right way for Devan is to opt like other members of his family to have just sexual relations with a lower caste woman. Devan, in reply, points out the hypocrisy of his family members who forego caste rules of pollution just to have sexual relations with lower caste women and conveniently remember them after making use of their bodies.

In this order, the Tamburan or the head of the royal family has power over the life and death of his subjects. This comes out in the scene where one of the Tamburan's servants informs him that Ganga's mother wants to see her daughter's face before her last rites are performed. The Tamburan shouts angrily, "What's there to see in a dead person's face?" and gives the command for her body to be burnt immediately.

In both the movies, one gets to see women who are outsiders to the family being killed by the heads of the family for going against the rules they set forth regarding their sexual conduct. The two women are punished for their transgressive sexuality. It is not much of a surprise then that the two women, after their death, transform into Yakshis, the embodiment of transgressive female sexuality, and seek to avenge their murder. While Mayaganga is able to kill the Tamburan, responsible for her murder,

Nagavalli is unable to do so. Yet even in *Aakashaganga*, Mayaganga's revenge on the men who had wronged her remains an unfinished project. For instance, the Karyastan (care-taker) of the Tamburan who had helped him in murdering her is left alive when the Yakshi Mayaganga is bound by sorcerers. However, for the Yakshi Mayaganga, it is not just the men directly responsible for her murder who are the objects of her revenge; all the male members of the family fall under it.

Nagavalli's revenge, in comparison to Mayaganga's, is even less of a success compared to Mayaganga's. In the story, the murdered Nagavalli comes back as the monstrous feminine, the abject, the Yakshi, to wreak vengeance on the man who murdered her. However, her revenge is unsuccessful since the Karanavar not only escapes the attempt on his life, but he is also able to bind her in her room with the help of Tantrics who perform exorcist rituals that last for days. Though the Karanavar later commits suicide by taking poison, with his spirit getting bound in the adjacent room, it is not by Nagavalli's hands that he dies and hence her revenge remains unfinished.

In *Manichitrathazhu*, Nagavalli remains as the Yakshi bound in one of the rooms of the Meda, a figure of horror to the descendants of the Karanavar who fear to disturb the silence of the house that binds her. Though there is no curse per se affecting any of the family members, their behaviour towards the bound room in the Meda is one directed by the fear that an unbound Nagavalli may harm them. Yet, it is in this figure that the new daughter-in-law, Ganga, finds the double of her own self.

Before I explore the second way in which the figure of the Yakshi is used in *Manichitrathazhu*, it would be better to discuss how the figure of the Yakshi as the avenger is employed in *Aakashaganga*. This is because to understand where

Manichitrathazhu diverges from the generic Yakshi movie where she is cast as the avenger, it is important to understand what this kind of a movie represents. Since *Aakashaganga* is one such movie, I think it would be better to explore it first.

In *Aakashaganga*, the Yakshi Mayaganga stands as the avenger. In order to understand the significance of this aspect of the figure, we need to know how rare the avenging female is on Malayalam screen. In Malayalam movies, women characters who seek vengeance for a crime committed against them are few and far between. Deedi Damodaran's study on the "real-reel dichotomy of rape" lists out Yakshis as "the only feminine agency that actively avenges her disgrace" (Damodaran 187). While Ganga's revenge is of her murder and not her rape, what Damodaran says about the agency that a Yakshi possesses when compared with other female characters on the Malayalam screen is worthy of note.

Though found co-opting male strength, one can decipher a combination of radical and eco-feminism that marks her attempts to break from the dominant strictures of conservative masculinity. She does not assume the macho codes of behaviour or dress. Instead, she opts for subversion from within the modes of gender containment. Clad in a white sari with long hair and red lips, she overplays the role of seductress – a guilt imposed upon her for depriving her of a desired life. The Yakshi enjoys the privilege of being mobile and autonomous enough to decide, act or even laugh. She embraces nature to fight society's artificial constraints. Whirling winds and roaring rains are at her beck and all. Her autonomy is therefore checked^{vi}, linking her with abjection, disfigurement, chaos and excessiveness. She is brought under control by male rituals and spirituality while the analogous part of her in the possessed woman is cured of 'abnormality' by male psychiatry. (Damodaran 187)

In her last line, Damodaran has touched upon the casting out of the abject that happens in a generic Yakshi movie as well as a psychologocial thriller like *Manichitrathazhu*. I will be dealing with the this aspect of *Manichitrathazhu* later. At the moment, I want to focus on the significance of the Yakshi as the avenger in a Yakshi movie like *Aakashaganga* and how, as Damodaran puts it, she embraces “nature to fight society’s artificial constraints” (Damodaran 187). However when we talk about the Yakshi’s control over the forces of nature, one cannot but be reminded of the Hindu goddesses also famed for similar powers. Hence this also calls for an exploration of the Yakshi’s ambivalent relationship with the divine which I had explored in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 2, I had discussed folktales featuring the Yakshi where it becomes difficult to pinpoint where she stands – in the divine end of the spectrum or the monstrous. For instance, in the tale of Sooryakaladi and the Yakshi, the sorcerer Sooryakaladi is punished by the gods for destroying a Yakshi who had killed his father. Yet, in other tales, the Goddess intervenes on behalf of her devotees to destroy the Yakshi. When we come to contemporary movies featuring the Yakshi and sorcerers, how is she depicted? This is an issue that requires careful study since the Yakshi as I have mentioned in the introduction is a spirit-deity who straddles both divinity and monstrosity and is a Derridean *supplement* in the true sense of the term.

The divinity that the Yakshi stands for is not of the benevolent mother goddess variety. As discussed in the introduction, historians consider her as once having been a fierce mother goddess who required blood sacrifices to propitiate her. She thus resembles the fierce mother goddesses worshipped even today. It is no wonder then that the Yakshi in both the movies is compared with two fierce goddesses – Goddess Durga in *Manichitrathazhu* and Goddess Kannaki in *Aakashaganga*.

In *Manichitrathazhu*, this comparison is indirect than a direct one. Thus there are slight religious overtones to Nagavalli's unsuccessful revenge since once she becomes a Raktayakshi (a blood thirsty Yakshi), it is on the eighth day after her death, on the day of Durgashtami, that she tries to avenge herself. Durgashtami in Hindu religious discourse marks the culmination of Navaratri, a festival celebrated to commemorate Goddess Durga's slaying of the demon Mahishasura. Nagavalli's revenge is thus indirectly presented as "righteous" and almost "holy".

In *Aakashaganga*, the Yakshi gets compared with Goddess Kannaki in the scene where she hunts down Panikkar, the care-taker of the Kovilakam who had assisted the Tamburan in murdering her. She does this to the accompaniment of a *Tiruvatira* dance commemorating the victory of Kannaki over the King of Madurai. Kannaki, the heroine of the Tamil classic, *Shilappatikaram*, is worshipped in Kerala as the Bhagavati of Kodungalloor, a place of worship in Central Kerala.

In these examples, we see the Yakshi indirectly being compared with a popular goddess figure. Like the goddess in popular lore, the Yakshi in *Aakashaganga* is also presented as having control over the forces of nature as well as the plant and animal kingdom. However, it must be noted that these are also powers generally attributed to supernatural beings and hence cannot be identified as solely belonging to divine beings. As Damodaran suggests, the Yakshi can be compared with the chaotic forces of nature, those which resist manmade forces of control.

In *Aakashaganga*, the first time the Yakshi Mayganga makes her appearance is on a night full of thunder and lightning. The Yakshi makes her appearance in a white sari and is shown walking through a desolate hilltop with a palm tree, another symbol connected with the Yakshi. Close up shots of an owl, a cat, a snake and a

barking dog all point to the woman being non-human and dangerous. The winds that blow point to nature being in disarray and the Yakshi's presence is indicated by the fog that filters into the surroundings of the Kovilakam.



One of the ways in which the movie projects Ganga's supernatural power as the Yakshi is through a shot where she grows in size, looming large over the Kovilakam, even reaching up to the sky. From the helpless servant girl Ganga, she has now become a being of immense power who can dwarf even the Kovilakam, the symbol of the Tamburan's power and splendour.

The whole sequence where the Yakshi hunts down the Tamburan casts her in the role of the predator. When the Yakshi enters the house, the Tamburan is shown sitting on a swinging cot nervously surveying his surroundings as dogs howl in the

distance. He turns around as he hears the sound of a woman's laughter. The Yakshi is invisible in the whole scene and that adds to the horror that she casts on the Tamburan. He turns back to see who it is, but suddenly the cot he sits on seems to move on its own and it swings in his direction trying to attack him. He falls down and is shown crouching on one side fearfully, unable to see his enemy. The Tamburan runs from there and tries to climb up a flight of stairs to reach the next floor, but invisible hands drag him down. The Yakshi keeps on laughing more and more hysterically as the Tamburan makes futile attempts to escape her clutches.



The Tamburan finally falls into a whirlpool in a river nearby his house and drowns. As he drowns, the whirlpool gets filled with blood and Ganga's lips also are smeared with blood, indicating that the drowning man has been sucked dry by the Yakshi.

Three generations later, when Raman, the Tamburan's grandson takes bath in the family pond, his sacred thread falls into the water and the Yakshi makes her appearance in the disguise of a servant girl. When the Yakshi reveals her identity to Raman, the waters of the pond become so turbulent that they almost drown Raman. Both these scenes seem to indicate the Yakshi's control over water bodies.

The Yakshi is not only able to control water bodies. Ganga, when she comes back to the Kovilakam after possessing Maya, Unni's wife, hunts down Panikkar, the servant responsible for setting fire to her pyre. The way he is killed is an indication of her control over the plant and animal world as well. The scene also reveals powers specific to the Yakshi, the power to create illusions to hunt her victims. The fact that the name of the Yakshi's ideal daughter-in-law avatar is "Maya" or illusion can be read along with this.

This power is a characteristic of the Yakshi figure even in Buddhist Jatakas where she is credited with the power to make palaces appear in the middle of the road. In the movie, the Yakshi's powers of illusion come out in the scene where Panikkar, who had been watching the Tiruvatira dance in which Maya also dances, goes searching for his missing sacred thread. At the door of the courtyard, he sees Maya staring him down with a sarcastic smile. Taken aback, he turns back to take a look at the Tiruvatira group and sees Maya continuing to dance as part of the Tiruvatira group.



Soon after, Maya's identity becomes clearer to him when he gets to see her dancing in tandem with the Yakshi Ganga in the Tiruvatira group. Ganga, who first dances in a white sari, later changes to the Tiruvatira attire, *set and mundu*, which makes her frightening similarity with Maya all the more apparent to Panikkar.



The whole sequence ends with Maya finally dancing alone, her movements forming a parallel to the song being sung about the angry Kannaki. The power of the Yakshi to create an illusion is something already present in the traveller's tale where the Yakshi's abode, the palm tree, appears as a mansion to the unsuspecting traveller.

Here, Ganga's ability to appear at two places at the same time is because of this power.



Panikkar runs away from Maya/Ganga and takes refuge in a forest. The winds cease and Panikkar mutters in gratitude the name of Bhagavati, the Goddess, thinking that he is out of danger. Suddenly, a cat transforms into the Yakshi Ganga and the branches of a nearby tree reach out to Panikkar and they wrap themselves around Panikkar's legs, hands and body. He is lifted upside down, his whole body wrapped by branches. Under Maya/Ganga's command, a snake starts crawling towards where Panikkar is. As the Yakshi stands laughing hysterically, the snake bites Panikkar on his head.

After Panikkar's death, the Kovilakam members wonder as to how the snake of their sacred grove could harm a human being since it has never harmed a human before and that too when Panikkar was known as a devotee of the snake god. The Yakshi in making a snake of the snake grove of the Kovilakam obey her command shows off her control over the animal world, especially over those considered to belong to the night or are otherwise associated with the spirit world. It also marks her

divinity since snakes are worshipped as divine among the Hindus in Kerala. The branches of the tree wrapping themselves over Panikkar at the Yakshi's command indicates her control over the plant world as well^{vii}.

However, like I mentioned earlier, the Yakshi occupies the ambiguous territory between the divine and the monstrous. The Yakshi may have divine aspects, but she is also not the typical goddess. There are specific markers to her Yakshi-ness which are not those of a goddess. In *Aakashaganga*, the Yakshi is marked by one of these - her hysterical laughter. In various points of the movie, we see the Yakshi's hysterical laughter getting linked up with her supernatural powers. This comes out especially in the scene where Mayaganga comes back as the Yakshi Ganga to take revenge on the Tamburan.

The last time the Tamburan saw Ganga, she was shrieking with pain as she was being burnt alive. In place of her shrieks is now her laughter that mocks the Tamburan as it lays bare his puniness in front of her immense power. The "unfeminine" laughter of the Yakshi places her beyond the pale of received notions of womanhood as it at once signals her contempt at the men who try to vainly escape from her as well as her defiance at men who try to discipline her. For instance, whenever Raman and Krishnan, the grandson and great grandson respectively of the Tamburan try to escape the clutches of the Yakshi Ganga, she laughs at them, mocking their powerlessness.

There is a scene in the movie where the Yakshi's laughter get linked to her powers. In this scene, Krishnan tries to take refuge from the Yakshi in a dilapidated Shiva temple. As he hugs the Shiva linga, a divine light emanates from it blinding the

Yakshi for some time. Once the Yakshi recognises the power of the Siva linga, she smiles and then starts laughing hysterically.



As if in response to the Yakshi's laughter, strong winds blow making the tiles from the roof of the temple fall over Krishnan. The Yakshi could be laughing at Krishnan's powerlessness to save himself; but coincidentally or not, it is her laughter which precedes the unleashing of the powers of nature at her enemy.



Later in the movie, when Maya/Daisy is discovered as the Yakshi, she is locked up in her room. When Meppadan, the sorcerer, sends his servants to bring her to the exorcism site by force, she sits on the bed and starts laughing. As she laughs,

strong winds blow and the men are thrown off their feet. Even Meppadan is unable to stand straight.

As in the folktales, the Yakshi's ambivalent relationship with the divine comes out most clearly in her confrontation with the sorcerer, who stands as the agent of the goddess. The Yakshi Ganga is allowed to play the role of the goddess only as far as her revenge on the men responsible for her murder is concerned. Once she "oversteps" the boundaries set to her by preying on the descendants of the family, the sorcerer/shaman who stands as the representative of the Goddess steps in.

The sorcerer in the movie is a Shaktic Tantric called Meppadan. He is presented as a worshipper of Goddess Shakti. He chants the mantras of Durga and Kali and the black magic rites that he performs at the end are generally seen as the preserve of non-brahminical traditions of magic. As a Shaktic priest, he stands as the representative of the Goddess against the Yakshi in what seems to be an echo of the famous tale of the Goddess of Chottanikkara and the Yakshi. Though not specifically mentioned as a Namboothiri tantric here, he can stand for the Namboothiri tantrics of old like Kumaramangalath.

However, Meppadan is not the only sorcerer in the movie. There is also the Christian Priest, Father Mikhael, who is presented as a descendant of another famous exorcist of old, Kadamattathu Kathanar.

It doesn't need to be said that in its overall theme, the movie thus follows the typical Yakshi tale in having a sorcerer enter as the rival to the Yakshi. Yet, there are differences too. For instance, the rivalry that exists between the Hindu sorcerer Potti and the Christian Priest Kathanar in folktales is significantly absent in the relationship between the Hindu sorcerer and the Christian Priest of this movie. In fact, it is on the

persuasion of Meppadan, the Hindu sorcerer, that the members of the Kovilakam, who do not even allow people of other religions to enter its precincts, visit the abode of the the Christian Priest, Father Mikhael, to consult him regarding Maya/Daisy's possession. Meppadan thus is presented as an enlightened man who considers the Christian Priest as a competent authority to work with him on the matter of exorcising Ganga.

This is in contrast to Hindi movies like 1920 where *Hanuman Chalisa* (Hinduism) can do what the *Lord's Prayer* (Christianity) cannot, i.e exorcise the evil spirit (Mubarki 40). In *Aakshaganga*, both Hinduism and Christianity are effective in exorcising the Yakshi out of Daisy's body. One reason for this could be that Christianity in Kerala has been part of the lore about Yakshis and their binding. As mentioned, Father Mikhael is referred to in the movie as a descendant of the famous Christian sorcerer, Kadamattathu Kathanar.

Though the movie sets up the Yakshi-sorcerer rivalry of old, it still needs to *present* itself as *modern* in its take on the Yakshi tale. So, Father Mikhael, the descendant of Kathanar, is presented in the movie as an adept at psychology as well as exorcism. The influence of *Manichitrathazhu* which looked at *possession* through the eyes of psychoanalysis is most evident when Father Mikhael tells Daisy's family that her condition can be interpreted in different ways. The Priest says that while for the believers, this is a case of possession, in medical science, one can call it Dissociative neurosis/Multiple Personality. He points to another disease as well known as Conversion reaction/Possessive reaction and concludes that all three are versions of hysteria.

Though both the Hindu sorcerer and the Christian Priest co-operate to bind the Yakshi, it is the Hindu sorcerer who takes the lead. This is because the Christian Priest is presented as too old to directly assist him in binding the Yakshi. Father Mikhael, the Christian Priest, does have an assistant in the Junior Priest Father Vettukuzhi.



However, he is presented in a comic light and is portrayed as lacking the spiritual rigour of his senior. The religion he represents though is powerful since when he wields the cross in front of the Yakshi, she gets bound and follows him where he goes. However, once he loses hold over his cross, the Yakshi assumes her full power and makes him rise up in the air.

In the movie, while both Hinduism and Christianity are presented as potent enough to combat the the Yakshi, it also presents the Yakshi as one able to withstand the powers of these religions to some extent. For instance, without the cross, Father Vettukuzhi is no match for the Yakshi. Similarly, while the Shiva linga provides a temporary refuge against the Yakshi's power, it is unable to completely save the Hindu devotee. This comes out in the previously mentioned scene where the Yakshi chases the Tamburan's great-grandson, Krishnan.

Trying to escape from the Yakshi, Krishnan goes into a dilapidated Shiva temple which has its Siva linga still intact. When Krishnan hugs the Shiva linga, the Yakshi cannot do anything but stand outside the temple. But while the Yakshi cannot enter the temple, she can do enough to harm Krishnan by unleashing the forces of nature. In the strong winds that blow, he almost loses his grip on the linga and flies around its radius.



While the Shiva linga or Hanuman Chalisa may be good replacements of the Hindu divine in Hindi popular horror movies, in Malayalam horror movies featuring the Yakshi, the sorcerer/tantric with the associations he brings up with familiar figures in folktales is the final solution to the problem.

Unlike Father Mikhael, Meppadan, the Tantric, does not offer any medical views on the subject of Maya/Daisy's condition and seems to hold it as a matter of possession by the Yakshi Ganga. Though Father Mikhael tries to describe Daisy's condition using medical parlance as well, in the final reckoning, he too seems to treat it as a matter of possession. Thus he is all encouragement when Meppadan tells him that he needs to perform a harsh black magic rite to exorcise Ganga out of Daisy's body. The references to multiple personality disorder seem to be there to present the movie as *modern* in its awareness of the scientific way of looking at possession, perhaps a necessity at that time because of the tremendous impact a movie like *Manichitrathazhu* had on the psyche of the average movie-goer. Anyway, while some terms like hysteria and multiple personality disorder are thrown about, for all purposes, the movie's narrative logic locates Daisy's condition as one of possession by the Yakshi Ganga.



Meppadan uses sorcery to counter the Yakshi's threat. It is his sacred triadic stick which he uses to subdue the Yakshi in Maya/Daisy. Meppadan's stick here stands as a phallic instrument much like the iron nail of the sorcerers of folk tales.

As mentioned earlier, the influence of *Manichitrathazhu* on *Aakashaganga* is clearly visible. The climactic scene of the movie also shows this influence. If in *Manichitrathazhu*, it is the Psychiatrist and the exorcist who work together to restore Ganga to normalcy, in *Aakashaganga*, the Hindu exorcist and the Christian Priest come together to restore Daisy to normalcy. Even in the method they adopt to achieve this end, there are similarities. The method in both the movies calls for a re-enactment of the moment of crime. In *Aakashaganga*, Ganga is finally forced to leave the body of Daisy when there is an attempt to burn alive the host Daisy's body. While Meppadan, in another instance of fimic folklore where black magic is re-invented for popular consumption, refers to this as *dahana homam*, for all practical purposes, the point is to remind Ganga of the moment of her terrible death and scare her into leaving Daisy's body.

The rationale behind this terrible way of getting rid of the Yakshi is provided by Meppadan when he tells the Yakshi that she has already avenged the men who had wronged her and that she doesn't have any claims on the current generation. What happens here is that the crime against Ganga gets labelled one performed by certain individuals which is then presented as divorced from that of the set up they are part of. The caste system of the day, whose traces can still be observed in the rituals of purity that the modern generation follows, recedes into the background as the crime done to Ganga is presented as the vestige of a feudal past centering around a heartless Tamburan. It is also an interesting instance of limiting the powers of the Yakshi as a

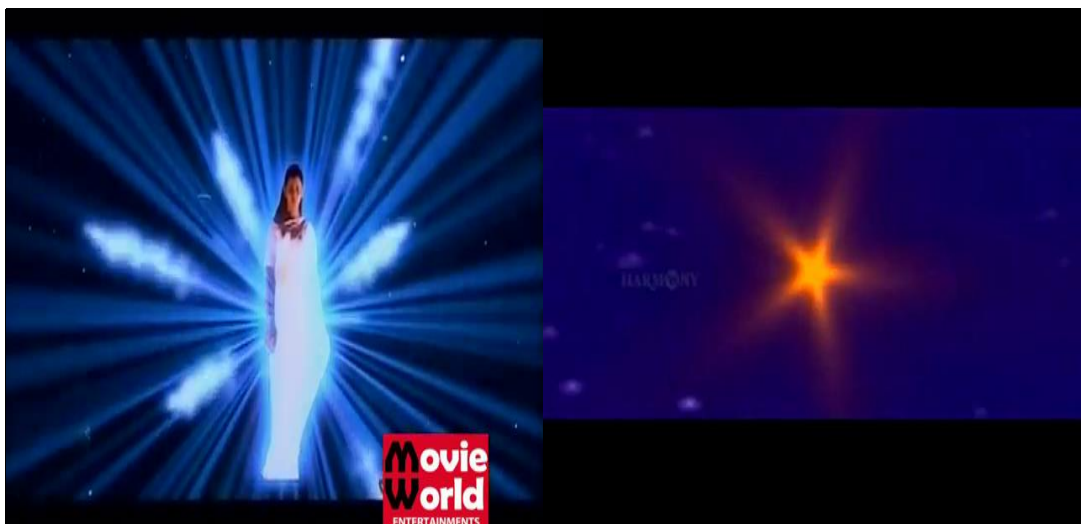
fertility goddess since the Yakshi's curse is no longer held to be legitimate enough to affect the descendants of the *kulam*.

When Meppadan and his servants set fire to the pyre containing Daisy's body, Daisy's body is thrown off the pyre and Ganga, the Yakshi, emerges out of the host's body. The movie does not give any explanation for this event. Was it the powerful magic of the *dahana homam* that forced the Yakshi to come out or was it the act of being burnt alive again? Or did the Yakshi leave Daisy's body since she didn't want another woman to go through what she did?



As the members of the Kovilakam and Meppadan watch with bated breath, the Yakshi hovers in the sky for some time, divine light surrounding her on all sides and then she breaks up into particles of light to transform into a star. Hindu mantras echo in the background as the Yakshi presumably gets *moksha*. Thus, though the movie has a Christian Priest who helps the Hindu sorcerer with emotional support and guidance, for all purposes, it is the Hindu sorcerer and the religion he represents which become the movie's dominant voice when it comes to the resolution of the problem posed by the Yakshi. However, unlike in most Yakshi narratives we are familiar with, here the resolution of the problem calls for the Yakshi to attain eternal *moksha* – she transforms into a star in the sky. This could be because binding the Yakshi can no

longer be the solution – it can always come undone as happened when Daisy plucked out the iron nail that had bound the Yakshi earlier. The Yakshi's transformation into a deity to be worshipped thereafter in a nearby temple is also not a solution the movie considers as reasonable – after all, the narrative of the movie has all along seen the Yakshi as a malevolent force. It would be hard now for the audience to understand her transformation into a deity. However, it is also because the Yakshi here is the ghost of a murdered woman and hence cannot be placed in the divine spectrum that easily. While it has to be admitted that the movie *Aakashaganga* is not a religious movie and that hence placing the Yakshi within the confines of a temple will not make sense in its overall narrative, this particular resolution in a movie which otherwise follows the trajectory of the religious tale with its sorcerer-yakshi confrontation, also tells us about tropes that can no longer work in a modern setting. It makes better cinematic sense in the new scheme of things for the Yakshi to turn into a star, where her semi-divinity is inscribed in her new identity and yet one where her new identity keeps her away from the concerns of the human world.



The Yakshi is thus allowed to avenge her death, but only within the limits prescribed for her. However to read Mayaganga's revenge as just one involving the destruction of the men responsible for her murder would be to miss out on its subversive subtext.

Mayaganga, while she had been alive, had been the daughter of the servant woman of the Kovilakam, whose lower caste and class identity had made her an unsuitable candidate for the position of the daughter-in-law of the Kovilakam in the eyes of its casteist and classist members. Thus when the Tamburan realises that Ganga is pregnant with his son's child, his taunt is at her daring to aspire to the position of the wife of the young Tamburan, the future Tamburatti. The Tamburan even chides his son Devan on the need to marry Ganga since he can always opt like other members of his family to have just sexual relations with her. As clear from the Tamburan's taunt, it is quite clear that for him and his family, Ganga is the *other woman*, considered unfit to become the *family woman*.

When Ganga becomes a Yakshi and possesses Daisy and in her new avatar as Maya makes the young Tamburan, Unni, fall in love with her, she is able to do what was once denied to her as the servant woman, Ganga – enter the Kovilakam as the wife. As the Yakshi, she is able to recreate a proper family for herself with an old grandfather, thanks to her powers of illusion.

Even though the movie presents the Kovilakam as a much more liberal space than it had been during the time of the Tamburan, a close reading reveals that it is still quite an *elite* space. People of other religions are not even allowed to enter the Kovilakam. The family still has many servants including Panikkar and when the younger Tamburans take bath in the family pond, they do keep an eye on the servant

women bathing nearby. It is into this space that Ganga, the *other woman* enters now as the *wife*, made possible through her being a *Yakshi*. The irony of Ganga, who in her lifetime was burnt alive for daring to become the wife of the young Tamburan, entering into the Kovilakam now as Maya, the legally wedded wife of the current young Tamburan, Unni, is striking.

As Maya sets her foot in the Kovilakam holding the lamp of prosperity signalling her status as the new *gruha lakshmi*, nature erupts in fury. We get to see shots of the land being cleaved in half, of the lamp in Maya's hand going out on its own and of trees almost being blown away in the strong wind. The wind is so strong that the guests are unable to stand straight. Unni's grandmother, the Tamburatti, who little knows the truth, wonders if the disturbances are because of their breaking the rules by letting Unni, who should remain a Brahmachari as per the Yakshi's curse, get married.



Thus, as the Yakshi, Ganga is able to bring out an ironic reversal of her earlier situation. She is now not only able to enter into spaces she had been denied entry

before but is able to use those very spaces to wage her battle. The last person the members of the Kovilakam expect danger from is the loving family woman, Maya. As the daughter in law, she is listened to by the members of her husband's family which she uses to her advantage. Thus when the family members wonder as to how Panikkar, a devotee, could have been bitten by a snake and want to call for Meppadan, the sorcerer, Maya states that one should just see it as fate and asks them if they are sure about Panikkar being an innocent man. Unni's mother then reminds everybody about Panikkar's hand in a servant woman's death in the past. As Unni's wife, nobody suspects her even when she causes his uncle Raman's hand to get paralysed. Though Raman tries his best to let the others know of her identity as the Yakshi, the rest of the family cannot make sense of his intentions. Thus, posing as Unni's wife, Ganga, the Yakshi, is able to wreak her revenge on the family from a safe position since nobody suspects the family woman to be a Yakshi. Ganga as Maya, Unni's wife, also knows what to say and do to make him play into her hands. Thus, one time, she makes fun of Unni for being superstitious which makes him take off his sacred thread which in turn makes him vulnerable to her attack. The Yakshi is able to cleverly manipulate her position as the family woman of Manikyasseri Kovilakam to wreak her revenge on its members for once cruelly denying her that position.

In the case of *Aakashaganga*, we have to say that Deedi Damodaran's earlier formulation that "the Yakshi overplays the role of seductress – a guilt imposed upon her for depriving her of a desired life" does not apply. Ganga is deprived of a desired life by imposing the title of a seductress on her. But in her comeback as the Yakshi, she does not overplay the role of the seductress. In fact, it is by (over)playing the role of the devoted lover/wife who keeps her sexuality in check (in front of the members of the Kovilakam) so as to help her husband preserve his brahmacharya that she

manipulates the situation to her advantage. Again, while Ganga as Maya does operate for the most part within the modes of gender containment which she skilfully subverts, her hysterical laughter as the Yakshi is less subversion and more a breaking out of those codes.

Maya/Daisy's possession also forces the Kovilakam to forego some of its elitist rules. For instance, the first time Daisy's family members come to the Kovilakam, they are not even allowed to enter the house since they belong to a different religion and hence considered as not *pure* enough to enter it. But once it becomes clear to the members of the Kovilakam that the daughter-in-law Maya is in fact possessed by Ganga, they are forced to co-operate with the host Daisy's relatives. The Tamburatti and other members, on Meppadan's persuasion, even visit Father Mikhael's residence to find out more about the possession of Daisy. Thus, their daughter-in-law's possession forces them, who do not even allow Christians to enter into their Kovilakam, to visit the residence of a Christian Priest and seek his counsel. The Yakshi Mayaganga's entry thus directly as well as inadvertently force the hierarchical system that sustains the Kovilakam to undergo some much-needed changes.

The Yakshi is not the only character who challenges the codes of purity that frame the everyday life of the Kovilakam. There is Tresya, a Christian fisherwoman forced to assume the disguise of a Hindu Guru on the instructions of her husband Krishnan. Tresya, disguised as Swami Aveshananda, is considered as a spiritual counsellor by the members of the Kovilakam. Tresya is an interesting case of how active sexuality in women gets often foisted on to the bodies of the comic female characters in Malayalam movies. For instance, Tresya is presented as "uncouth" and "sexually aggressive" and there are references in the movie which present her

marriage to Krishnan as one orchestrated by her. Yet her character also has subversive potential since she is one of the rare characters in the movie who openly criticises the ways of the Kovilakam. Tresya's angry outbursts at the ludicrousness of the family's customs such as eating only vegetarian food and holding weird rituals help in presenting the Kovilakam's *elite* way of life in a comic light. Tresya's disguise as Swami Aveshananda, an embodiment of Hindu spirituality, can be read in parallel with the Yakshi's disguise as Maya, the ideal Hindu daughter-in-law. The fact that the members of the Kovilakam are taken in by their disguises point to their being out of touch with the reality.

To some extent, the fact that both the men of the youngest generation, Krishnan and Unni, marry Christian women whom the family is forced to accept at the end, signifies the breaking down of the tradition of having only women from their own caste and religion marry into the family. When one looks at Ganga's case, the ending of the movie, in an ironic way, can be considered as a symbolic victory for her cause. If Mayaganga, the outsider, the lower-caste woman, had been murdered in the past for becoming pregnant with Devan's child, Daisy, another outsider, the Christian woman, is now warmly welcomed when it is revealed that she is pregnant with Unni's child. Thus, Mayaganga's entry as the Yakshi does help in legitimising what was once regarded as illegitimate.

In fact, *Aakashaganga* can also be read along with the tale of Venmoni and the Yakshi and its re-tellings. Unlike the latter where the Yakshi's longing for being recognised as Venmani's legitimate partner ends in her suicide, in *Aakashaganga*, the Yakshi is successful to some extent. For instance, it needs to be asked how willing the members of the Kovilakam would have been if Unni had wanted to marry a Christian girl instead of a Hindu girl in the beginning. If the Yakshi had retained the name of

her host Daisy and had not made up the credentials of belonging to a noble Hindu taravad in decline, would the members of the Kovilakam have accepted her as their daughter-in-law? It seems unlikely in case of a family whose grounds were not even allowed to be touched by the feet of those belonging to another religion.

The Yakshi, when she enters as the ideal woman Ganga, takes a pledge in front of his family members that she would not destroy the brahmacharya of her husband. Unni's brahmacharya, in the scheme of things, is supposed to give him the sacrality required to withstand the Yakshi's curse. Yet the Yakshi actively uses her sexuality to make Unni give up his brahmacharya. The Yakshi's plan may have been to make Unni vulnerable to her attack; yet the purpose it serves in the end is to make a Christian woman become the mother of Unni's child, consciously or unconsciously messing up the "pure" bloodline of the members of the Kovilakam. Hence, Unni's child will also have the blood of an outsider, a woman belonging to another religion. This can be seen as the Yakshi's revenge on the Kovilakam.

However, despite such a development, one cannot be sure as to how much of a change the upper-caste and upper class structure of the Kovilakam will undergo in the final reckoning since the new daughters-in-law will be expected to transform into what the Kovilakam considers as the ideal. While Tresya, for instance, has her angry outbursts against the Kovilakam and its rules, she is presented as a "loving wife" who is ready to undergo any sacrifice for her husband. Hence, though her religion, community and upbringing do give her a rebellious side, she is for the most part presented as a naïve character who would mould herself to suit the ways of her husband. In the case of Daisy, the situation is more tragic. After the exorcism, Daisy, who has no recollection of any of the events that happened when she was possessed by Ganga, is supposed to go back to the family as Maya. While the logic the movie

offers for Daisy's decision is of her being moved by Unni's love for Maya, it is pretty clear that it is prompted by her pregnancy.

When the Yakshi is finally bound, the person who suffers the most is the host, Daisy. In fact, the person whose identity gets the least explored in the movie is also hers. Daisy, at the end, is forced to transform herself into the ideal daughter-in-law Maya, a fake identity created by the Yakshi Ganga. Daisy neither remembers Unni nor any of his family members. In fact, almost the same can be said about Unni's knowledge of Daisy's personality since the Maya he loved was never this Daisy. Yet, neither Unni nor the members of the Kovilakam or for that matter, even her family members, consider the transformation into the strange identity of Maya that much of an impossible feat for Daisy. In the narrative logic of the movie, Daisy's pregnancy, for which she is completely irresponsible, is enough of a reason for her to change her identity and become Unni's wife, Maya of Manikyasseri Kovilakam.

In fact, the ending of *Aakashaganga* where Daisy is forced to assume the role of the ideal Hindu daughter-in-law Maya is one that can be considered as the starting point for the next movie we are going to discuss – *Manichitrathazhu* (The ornate lock). In course of time, would Daisy have developed into the Ganga of *Manichitrathazhu*, a woman with unconscious longings and a self that had to be suppressed or bound to play the official role of the wife?

This takes us to the major way in which the figure of the Yakshi appears in the movie *Manichitrathazhu* – through the trope of binding. As mentioned earlier, like *Aakashaganga*, *Manichitrathazhu* does use the generic story of the Yakshi – the wrongful murder of a woman and her transformation into a Yakshi after her death.

However, this story is used to set the stage to explore the major theme of the movie – Ganga’s dissociative identity disorder.

At the beginning of the movie *Manichitrathazhu*, we come to know that as per the rumours and tales surrounding the Meda, Nagavalli, the Yakshi, has been bound in a room in the Southern part of the Taravad for at least a century. While the Karanavar’s spirit has also been bound in an adjacent room, it is the bound Nagavalli that is the source of fear. When we look at Ganga’s own dissociative identity disorder and the treatment that she receives from the Psychiatrist Sunny, one can say that metaphorically, Ganga’s alter self Nagavalli has also been bound within her by the end of the movie. If we go for such a reading of the movie, then it is imperative to go beyond the explanation that the movie offers and ask why Nagavalli is Ganga’s alter self that needs to be bound. It then becomes clear that Nagavalli stands as the *object* and in order to understand how Ganga comes to have this alter self, one needs to look at Ganga, the female protagonist, closely.

Ganga, on the surface, cuts quite a different figure from Nagavalli. Nagavalli was a dancer who spoke a different language and came from a different culture who lived generations apart from Ganga. Her troubles were also different – in the feudal set up she was part of, the control over her sexuality was not in her hands. She had to pay a heavy price for trying to wrest it from the hands of the feudal lord, Sankaran Thampi. However, Ganga, the young woman, living in the 20th century, educated and brought up for the most part in an Indian city like Calcutta and “happily married” to Nakulan seems a far cry from the Yakshi Nagavalli. And yet, Ganga comes to identify with Nagavalli to the point of *becoming* her. What are the points of this strange identification? The movie’s dominant narrative tries to locate it in Ganga’s childhood.

Sunny's diagnosis of Ganga's ailment only takes note of her lonely childhood and the forced separation of the child from her roots and her grandmother in her 16th year. Sunny, in his investigation into Ganga's background, comes to know that Ganga was left as a three year old child by her parents to be raised by her grandmother as they busied themselves with their careers in Calcutta. As a child, Ganga waited every day for her parents to come back. She spent her childhood listening to stories about Yakshis from her grandmother as well as observing exorcism rituals. Sunny calls her childhood one where "dark" colours have been spilled, their intense darkness symbolising their remove from reality. Ganga, despite the longing for her parents that characterized her early years, had adjusted well with her surroundings and life and had become a bright student. But in her 16th year while she was busy preparing for her 10th exams, her parents returned with the intention of taking her to Calcutta to be transplanted in its soil. The young Ganga could not bear the idea of the forced separation from her roots and her transplantation into an alien soil. That was the first instance of her psychic disorder. Her parents got her treated by a Psychiatrist who, for the time, buried the memory in her heart. It is this memory which, according to Sunny, resurfaced when years later, the adult Ganga entered Madampally Meda as Nakulan's wife.

In Sunny's explanation, Madampally Meda, full of grandmother tales about Yakshis and spirits, is supposed to have re-awakened in Ganga her childhood self. The movie sees Ganga's identification with Nagavalli as occasioned by her empathy for a woman who was suppressed in ways tangentially similar to her own childhood self.

The scene where Nakulan's aunt Bhasura tells her the story of Nagavalli and the Karanavar is interesting in how it reveals the beginning of Ganga's process of

identifying with Nagavalli. In the story, the Karanavar escapes even when Nagavalli comes as a *Raktayakshi* (blood-thirsty Yakshi). As Ganga listens to the story, the injustice meted out to Nagavalli seems to produce in her a moment of sadness. But at this point, the story of Nagavalli haunting the house still makes her look around in apprehension.



In the story, Nagavalli transformed into a Yakshi to avenge her murder, but her rebellion was crushed when the Karanavar took the help of exorcists to bind her. The listener of the tale, Ganga, also shared a similar fate. Ganga, in her 16th year, didn't want to leave her grandmother and her home and her psychic disorder was her rebellion against her parents who were forcing her to go with them. Yet, Ganga's rebellion didn't succeed and she had to leave with her parents to Calcutta. Madampally Meda, in Sunny's diagnosis, thus stands as the setting for Ganga to replay the "rebel" role of her adolescence, this time in the guise of Nagavalli, who had a century ago rebelled against the machinations of the 'Karanavar' of the Meda.

Sunny assumes that Nagavalli's story might have awakened in Ganga memories of her own childhood. It also may have reminded her of the Yakshi tales she had heard from her grandmother. There have been tales about Yakshis like

“Kalliankattu Neeli” where women who have been wrongfully murdered take the form of Yakshis to avenge their murder. Perhaps the stories that Ganga heard from her grandmother were similar stories where Yakshis were cast as avengers. Hence, one can speculate that for Ganga, Nagavalli, the Yakshi, may not have been as much of a scary figure since she could have empathised with her plight.



Thus, one way to understand Ganga’s identification with Nagavalli is to see them both as women whose rebellions were crushed by those above them. This is the logic that the movie offers trying to locate Ganga’s fascination for Nagavalli in her childhood. However, if we focus on the aspect of transgression that is part of Ganga’s rebellion, we get to see a clearer picture.

If we look at the character Ganga who is the main protagonist of the movie, it becomes apparent that once she comes to the Meda, she becomes a transgressor at many levels. As Sanjeev points out in his short study of the movie, Madampally Meda, as Nakulan’s uncle Thampi warns the couple, is not supposed to be lived in by women who have been married from other families, i.e originally outsiders to it (Sanjeev 167). Nakulan’s uncle here seems to be referring to the danger from the Yakshi Nagavalli who had been similarly an outsider to the Meda. Hence, from the

very beginning, in the reference that Nakulan's uncle makes to Ganga's outsider status, there is an unconscious invitation for Ganga to identify with Nagavalli.

For Nagavalli, the outsider, the Meda must have been a place of unfreedom where there was an attempt to chain her to a rigamarole of rules and regulations centering around her sexuality. For Ganga too, coming to the Meda more than a century after Nagavalli's murder, the Meda is a place where her freedom of movement is restricted. Nakulan's uncle warns her against using certain rooms in the Southern part of the Meda (the Tekkini) and when she goes against his order and gets them opened, she is rebuked for her transgression.

Ganga's second act of transgression which leads to her entering the territory of the abject is to open the forbidden room of the Meda – Nagavalli's supposed haunt. Despite repeated warnings from the current Karanavar, Nakulan's uncle, and others, she not only opens the room but continues using it. This transgression is one which her husband Nakulan approves of since he considers Yakshis and haunted rooms as superstition. However, the opening of the forbidden room coincides with the awakening of Ganga's own latent desires which find expression in her alternate self of Nagavalli. This is a self that threatens her socially legitimate self of the "devoted wife" Ganga. It is important to note how central Ganga's married self is to her identity or her "normal self" in the diegesis of the movie as one gets to see in one of the last scenes where Sunny is convinced of Ganga's normalcy and declares her fully cured only after she gives her full name as "Ganga Nakulan".

As Ganga *becomes* Nagavalli more and more, she comes to occupy the position of the abject. For Kristeva, "The abject threatens life; it must be 'radically excluded' (Kristeva, 1982, 2) from the place of the living subject, propelled away

from the body and deposited on the other side of the imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self” (Creed 9).

As the “mad” Ganga who desires the blood of her own husband in her alter ego of Nagavalli, Ganga comes to occupy the realm of abject things, “those that highlight the ‘fragility of the law’ and that exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction” (Creed 10). The fragility of what is considered by many as the most sacred institution “marriage” occurs when Ganga, the “devoted” wife of Nakulan, a “kind” and “loving” man in all respects, tries to kill her husband while at the same time desiring another man. Ganga’s alter ego Nagavalli thus stands as a threat to “borders, positions, rules” (Creed 8). The abject Nagavalli respects neither the rules prescribed for “feminine behaviour” nor the institution of “marriage”. In Ganga’s assuming the identity of Nagavalli harbouring adulterous desires and disrupting the system of “ordered” feminine behaviour, we have the second entry of the abject in the movie.

When Ganga becomes her alter ego “Nagavalli”, she is consumed by a murderous desire for revenge. She lusts for the blood of the Karanavar and vows to drink his blood before the coming Durgashtami. However, what makes Ganga’s transformation into Nagavalli most “horrifying” is that in her alter ego as Nagavalli, she identifies her own husband Nakulan as the “Karanavar” and it is his murder that she wants to commit, his blood that she madly desires to drink. It is this aspect of Ganga’s transformation that is projected by the narrative of the film as the zenith of her madness for Ganga’s husband Nakulan is the epitome of the devoted husband. Nakulan is one of the gentlest husbands seen on Malayalam screen. He is always ready to comply with all his wife’s requests and demands. Nakulan is so much the devoted husband that when Sunny asks him to say “no” to one of his wife’s demands

as part of his experiment to make Ganga understand her own illness, he refuses at first saying he has never stood against any of his wife's wishes.

The movie, on the surface, refuses to locate Ganga's malaise in her married life. Sunny and, through Sunny, the dominant narrative of the movie see Ganga's desire for Mahadevan, the college lecturer Alli is engaged to get married to, as just a part of her "psychic problem". The narrative stresses that it is Nagavalli who desires Mahadevan/Ramanathan, not Ganga. The cause for this desire is also made clear: Mahadevan, by virtue of his staying in the house Nagavalli's lover Ramanathan used to live in, becomes her lover in Ganga's imagination. However, in order to understand Ganga's using Nagavalli as her alter ego to transgress the norms that bind her as a married woman, we need to go beyond the rationale provided by the movie's dominant narrative and explore what is the 'self' that has been bound in Ganga.

In the movie, one can in fact note other factors behind Ganga's fascination for Mahadevan. He is her favourite poet and she loves reading one of his poems in which she finds her childhood desires and sorrows reflected as if in a mirror. The lines of the poem go thus: "I will come back'/ I know well everyone departed saying so / Yet as a habit, my door, for what I know not, I keep half-shut/ That someone dear is yet to come, I keep hoping without a reason^{viii}".

In fact, the scenes showing Ganga's acclimatisation to the Meda show her reading Mahadevan's poetry. When Alli, Nakulan's cousin, tells Ganga that the poet Mahadevan is her teacher and her fiancée and points Mahadevan's house to Ganga, we see Ganga looking at his house with a strange longing and admiration.



The poem about waiting that Mahadevan pens and Ganga recites talks of intense and hopeless waiting for someone who never comes. The lines in Madhu Muttom's script of *Manichitrathazhu* introduce the poem scenes thus:

Ganga's inner loneliness. Her childhood with her grandmother in the village taravad.

Fragments of memories of the days she used to roam around alone in the fields and the compound. Waiting for her parents. The long paths that always remained untrodden. Adolescence in the boarding school [...] Waiting for something unnamable... Paths that keep growing longer unpeopled... The notice from Calcutta announcing the impending loss of her village life arriving during her exam days... Some moments where she lost control... The secure loneliness of her wifehood in her present days and nights with Nakulan... Mechanicalness. The repetition of joys of the same note... Nights ruled by her husband... Even then an untrodden path that kept longing for the footsteps of one who would never come... A waiting for something unknown, but still dear. The primeval departures of those who had come in mistaking the

way...Still the endless loneliness that lingers like ambrosia...In it, the filling in of the puzzle of an old folktale halted midway^{ix}. (Muttom)

This is one of the instances when something which the script highlights gets rather understated within the movie. For instance, it remains a question how much the mechanicalness of Ganga's life in Madampally meda and her inner loneliness come out in the picturisation of the song in the movie. The song opens a window to Ganga's past, is nostalgic in its tone and is on the surface about the child Ganga's endless waiting for her parents. The fact that Ganga's waiting still continues is only hinted at unlike in the script where it is emphasized. The script strongly hints at the boredom of her life as Nakulan's wife and also her sexual dissatisfaction that come out in the words "nights ruled by her husband". The young Ganga's waiting for something unnamable continues well into her adulthood and even her marriage with Nakulan does not satisfy the longing within her.

Some critics have tried to trace the discontentment of Ganga within her married life to the workaholic nature of her husband who is busy with work most of the time (Nakulan in fact comes to stay in Madampally Meda as part of his work which had brought him to Kerala). This is hinted at in the movie in the scene where Ganga is reading Mahadevan's poetry. Nakulan is working and though he replies to Ganga's questions, he seems to be more preoccupied with his work.

Whatever be the cause, be it Nakulan's workaholic nature or something else, Ganga's inner longing continues and it is not coincidental that the object of her affections becomes Mahadevan^x, the man whose poetry is in tune with her inner world which seems to be one inaccessible to her husband. In fact, one can even argue that the first role that Ganga's alter ego assumes is that of the lover longing to see her man

rather than that of the blood-thirsty woman seeking revenge, pointing to how central Ganga's sexual discontent is to her adopting the self of Nagavalli. The first time Ganga opens Nagavalli's room, one hears the snatch of a Tamil song whose lyrics translate as "Come and see (me) once. Won't you seek the gate (door)? Let me get a glance of you today. Please fulfil my longing to see you.". Some reviewers of the movie consider the song as Ganga's auditory hallucination, but what is of interest to us is the fact that the lyrics are about intense longing and endless waiting that is the theme of Mahadevan's poem too ("The psychological analysis", "Ganga psychoanalysed").



When "manichitrathazhu" or the ornate lock to Nagavalli's room is opened, it is also Ganga's subconscious desires and frustration that get an outlet. Critics have also noted the stolen pleasure of the "gaze" that Ganga partakes of once she gets access to this forbidden room and link it up with the suffocation of the middle class woman's domestic life. Nikhila H. writes,

Opening the doors of the 'ghost' Nagavalli's room allows for Ganga moments of stolen pleasure, as she watches from the window the poet, whom she admiringly reads and who is now the resident of the house that was formerly

occupied by Nagavalli's lover in the story. Anyone thwarting these pleasurable moments of Ganga is immediately frightened away by the 'ghost'. As in Freudian psychology, the isolation and loneliness of the bourgeois woman pushed into the domestic sphere, is given a sexual connotation as frigidity (as being locked up), and her longings also are sexualized as generalized desire, which seeks out and attaches itself to an object/person. (Nikhila 16)

Premchand also makes a similar point in his study of the movie. "In the movie, we see Ganga's leisure time opening the window of her gaze from her subconscious and taking it to the poet in her neighbourhood. Her possession takes place after this" (Premchand 164).

If one may recollect the lines of the poem that Ganga loves, they talk about the narrator leaving his/her door half-open for that person who never comes. One can read this along with Ganga opening the door of the forbidden room fully, an act that leads her to the discovery of the painting of Nagavalli. It is her alter-ego of Nagavalli that helps Ganga indulge in the forbidden passion of loving another man. Thus, the poem that Ganga reads of Mahadevan seems to anticipate the awakening of her alter self. In fact, one can even say that it is Mahadevan's poetry which first awakens old memories and latent longings within Ganga. Perhaps it reminds Ganga that her longing for someone dear has not yet found fulfilment.

In one of the early scenes of the movie, much before her possession, Ganga looks on from the window of Nagavalli's room which coincidentally opens on to Ramanathan/Mahadevan's house and spots Mahadevan as he comes out of his house. She looks on entranced and soon after, we have a song picturisation where Ganga is

shown walking around in the Meda mostly alone^{xi} as Mahadevan's poem is sung in the background. It is soon after this song that Ganga assumes the alter self Nagavalli.



The longing for the unnamable finds expression through “Nagavalli” and it seems that as Nagavalli, that longing finds an object in Mahadevan. As the ‘Tamil dancer’ Nagavalli, Ganga moves away from the linguistic and other bounds of her identity as Ganga. Here, it is interesting to note the linguistic markers that characterise Ganga’s abjection. The Nair woman Ganga’s madness, as Jenny Rowena points out, “speaks the language of Tamil” (Rowena 63). Ganga’s *xenoglossy*, when she assumes the self of Nagavalli, can also be seen as simultaneously helping Ganga to articulate her desires and yet keep them from being comprehensible to others. Jenny Rowena though is interested in the other markers of this *otherness* than just that provided by

another language. Thus she finds it fascinating that for the Nair woman Ganga who grew up in the cities, the “other” is someone who can be read as “the symbol of the subaltern Dravidian culture” (Rowena 63). She locates the otherness of Nagavalli also in her profession as a “dancer”, which came to be seen as the realm of “overt sexuality” and “freedom” during the building of Indian modernity (Rowena 63).

However, while it is true that Ganga grew up in the cities, it is her rural upbringing, one where her imagination has been fed by tales about Yakshis narrated to her by her grandmother, that is projected by the movie as the source of her malaise. Similarly, while it is important to recognise the connotations of “overt sexuality” that may be evoked by Nagavalli’s profession as a dancer, one also needs to recognise that Nagavalli’s “overt sexuality” is already firmly located within the traditional discourse on Yakshis, in which the ghosts of dead women used their sexuality to avenge their oppressors.

The role that Nagavalli’s “Tamilness” and hence her “foreignness” plays in making the Malayalam-speaking “normal” woman Ganga’s “abnormality” frightening is worthy of note. In the traditional scheme of things, a Yakshi with the added “otherness” of a different cultural and linguistic location, would have been doubly terrifying. In *Manichitrathazhu*, the horror is made manifold by the revelation that the “other” is located within the self. However, for the Nair woman Ganga to “perform” her desire as an upper caste woman, she still needs the voice of a Yakshi and that too a Tamilian Yakshi.

Sudhir Kakar has discussed real life cases which have parallels to Ganga’s situation. For instance, pointing to cases where Hindu patients have complained of being possessed by Muslim spirits, he discusses how “the Muslim seems to be the

symbolic representation of the alien in the Hindu unconscious” (Kakar 87). To Kakar, this is indicative of something larger. “Possession by a Muslim bhuta reflects the patient’s desperate efforts to convince himself and others that his hungers for forbidden foods, tumultuous sexuality and uncontrollable rage belong to the Muslim destroyer of taboos and are farthest away from his ‘good’ Hindu self” (Kakar 87).

Kakar quotes another case history where a young daughter-in-law in a Rajput community was possessed by a spirit who was filled with rage against her in-laws and her husband and discusses possession as a socially legitimate way of expressing feelings and emotions that are not socially approved.

In a Rajput village community, where the young daughter-in-law is expected to be completely subservient and not even think angry thoughts about her husband’s family and especially about her “lord and master”, possession by spirits who behave otherwise seems to be one way for a young girl to express and yet not acknowledge the resentment against the powerlessness of her condition. Anger against ‘superior’ family members seems to be particularly difficult to express. Even “she hates me” ... is not easy to acknowledge, while one has to be terribly ill and possessed by all manners of spirits to be able to express ‘I hate him [or her]’. The coin that depicts the Bharatiya Nari – the ‘Indian woman’ – in all her sentimentalized chasteness and calm fortitude on one side, shows the same woman engaged in a desperate struggle with her inner demons on the other”. (Kakar 79-80)

It is no surprise that the Nair woman Ganga requires a Tamilian Yakshi to “perform” her desire as an upper caste woman for in the household she is part of, normalcy for a young woman is contingent on her following certain codes of female

conduct. Sridevi, for instance, is an interesting case of what makes a woman get labelled as possessed. Sridevi is a manglik and like Ragini in *Yakshi* was abandoned by her husband soon after her marriage (since the information was withheld from him). In the traditional scheme of things, she is already thus “inauspicious”. Add to that, her lonely existence in her household after her return. It is Nakulan who first casts aspersions on Sridevi though he terms her problem as that of a mental illness. Probably, his reasoning is based on sexist notions that a woman without a husband tends to feel unfulfilled and frustrated. However, it is Unnithan, Nakulan’s uncle, who first suspects her to be possessed by Nagavalli when he sees her angrily scolding the servant women. In Unnithan’s eyes, Sridevi’s anger makes him see her as abnormal and “possessed” by Nagavalli. Thus, one can see that in the control structures within the Meda, a woman is considered as abnormal if she appears frustrated or angry since the figure of Nagavalli/Yakshi is considered as the *other* to the sweet family woman.

However, it is this figure that Ganga uses to rebel against a thousand frustrations bottled up deep inside her – the injustice of being separated from her grandmother in her 16th year, her frustration at her married life which left her longing for something unnameable. Her frustrations take the shape of the Yakshi, the femme fatale in the Yakshi stories she listened to in her treasured childhood days, murderous in her rage and blood-thirsty, the ultimate antithesis of the “good woman”. Through the “Yakshi”, she is staging a late rebellion against her parents and their control over her as well as the control structures within Nakulan’s taravad. For Ganga to empathise with a dancer who was trapped in a forced relation with the “Karanavar” while she longed for another man, it stands to reason that her marital relationship with Nakulan presented similar problems for her.

The “Yakshi” is also an interesting image because of the duality at its core. She is the beautiful woman on the outside and the female monster on the inside and it is not hard to see how Ganga/Nagavalli corresponds to the image of the Yakshi. Ganga is the “soft-spoken” beautiful woman on the outside. Her “self” as Ganga is so much in the mould of the “ideal woman” that other than Sunny, nobody in the Meda suspects her to be Nagavalli. However, within this self, lies the horrifying self of Nagavalli, “Yakshi-like” in her thirst for blood, defined by “illegitimate desires” and “unnameable longings”.

If in *Aakashaganga*, the identity of the daughter-in-law helps the Yakshi to accomplish what would not have been possible otherwise, in the case of *Manichitrathazhu*, the self of the Yakshi Nagavalli helps the daughter-in-law to express what she would not have been able to otherwise. While much of this is her romantic longing and rage against her husband, there are also other aspects to her Yakshi self.

In order to understand this, we have to read Sunny’s statement about Ganga’s childhood closely. He calls it one where “dark colours have been spilled”, indicating that the passion of Nagavalli is rooted in the passionate child self of Ganga. In contrast to the child self of Ganga stands the older Ganga, who is rather sedate. The only indication of the secret inner life of Ganga comes out in the parts where she reads Mahadevan’s poetry and looks longingly out of the window in the direction of his house. However, Ganga’s alter self, the Yakshi Nagavalli, is marked by her passions whether it be her desire for Mahadevan or her rage against Nakulan.

As Nagavalli, Ganga is also able to get out of the temporal and spatial constraints imposed on her as a married woman. Nagavalli, in the majority of the

scenes in the movie, awakens in Ganga in the night, a time when Yakshis are also supposed to roam around. As Nagavalli, Ganga roams through the courtyard of Mahadevan's house and through the whole Meda. In the night, she sings songs in Tamil about her desires.

The Yakshi Nagavalli's self is also one that lets Ganga indulge in 'play'. As Nikhila H. notes, it is those who thwart the pleasurable moments of Ganga who get frightened away by Nagavalli (Nikhila 16). In the room of Nagavalli, Ganga dresses up as the dancer and sings and dances on her own. Nagavalli's self can also be thus read as a continuation of Ganga's child self which loved to play games. The Yakshi can then be read as the inner self of the child Ganga, her passionate self which she had suppressed to become the adult Ganga. When one reads this aspect of the movie along with a short story like "Little Earthquakes" discussed in the next chapter where the Yakshi stands as the double of the child protagonist Janakikutty, one wonders whether the figure of the Yakshi can stand for the suppressed part of the child selves of these women.

The movie's attempt, through Sunny, though, is to project Nagavalli as the parasitic self that eats away the real self which is that of the good woman Ganga. This self, what Kristeva calls the "abject", stands as a threat to the social order. The crisis occasioned by the abject Nagavalli is one which the movie resolves through what Kristeva calls the "purification of the abject". According to her, this was traditionally the function of religion and what she says about the role of ritual is especially striking within the context of a movie like *Manichitrathazhu*. According to her, "ritual became a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Through ritual, the demarcation lines between the human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for

that process” (Creed 8). Exorcism was traditionally the ritual whereby the demarcation line between the human and the non-human, whether it be Yakshi or Gandharvan, was firmly re-drawn. This was necessary because “possession” by a spirit signified a breakdown between human and non-human, the self and the other.

Kristeva’s argument that in the modern world, with the disintegration of the historical forms of religion, the work of purification is now being performed by “that catharsis ‘par excellence’ called art” is taken up and extended to the particular genre of horror films by Barbara Creed (Creed 14). Creed in fact locates the “purification of the abject through a ‘descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct’ “as the “central ideological project of the popular horror film” (Creed 14). Like ritual in traditional societies, “the horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous feminine) in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human” (Creed 14).

Horror movies usually contain (though not necessarily) a scene where a religious ritual is performed that marks the literal purification of the abject. In the movie *Manichitrathazhu* as well, the ritual of exorcism that marks the climax of the movie is one such purification.

In *Manichitrathazhu* like in *Aakashaganga*, the sorcerer Brahmadattan Namboothiripad (who is played by Tilakan, the same actor who played Meppadan) is presented as a “modern” man, aware of the latest discoveries in Science regarding psychological problems. He is also a well-respected figure even in the academic circles of Psychology since he talks about a conference on Parapsychology he attended on the invitation of a world famous Psychiatrist. In both the movies, we thus get to see the sorcerer presented in a modern light as someone who understands that “possession”

by spirits is a psychic problem rather than a supernatural one and yet who consciously uses the traditional method of exorcism to treat it. While the Christian priest in *Aakashaganga* uses scientific vocabulary to lend credence to his views on possession, in *Manichitrathazhu*, the Psychiatrist Sunny Joseph borrows the language of exorcism from these rituals to aid in his psychological experiment that culminates in Nagavalli's revenge and Ganga's embrace of her "normal" self. The abject Nagavalli is thus cast out and Ganga is restored to "normalcy".



In the movie, as Ganga slowly wakes from her hypnotic sleep, Sunny, the Psychiatrist, asks her to tell him her name. Sunny is not satisfied when she replies

“Ganga”. He prods her to give her “full name”. As she whispers “Ganga Nakulan”, Sunny looks relieved. Ganga’s normalcy is no longer in doubt for she has recognised/been forced to recognise how integral her status as Nakulan’s wife is to her core identity. When Ganga declares her wish to lead her future life as “Nakulan’s Ganga alone”, she has recognised that her “normality” is contingent on her fidelity as a wife. The movie thus seems to end with the purification of the abject successfully accomplished.

There have been interesting readings of the ending of the movie. Nikhila talks about the anxieties of a “matrilineal past” that the movie grapples with and tries to exorcise out of its “modern” present. She looks at the taravad as the “site for the manifestation of the woman’s repressed past- her ‘childish’, ‘primitive’ desires and longings that are out of tune with her present” (Nikhila 65). Nikhila writes,

The lurkings and lingerings of that past have to be fully exorcized for the woman to get integrated into the modern marital relationship. In the Kerala context, it is the polyandrous desires, remnants of a femininity schooled in matriliney and sanbandham that have to be removed for the modern bourgeois marital relation to succeed. (Nikhila 65)

Nikhila also talks about how in the new order, the “masculinity symbolized by the karanavar, whose social and economic position invested him with tremendous power over women in the past”, also needs to be destroyed at the hands of the woman, pointing to the exorcism scene in the movie (Nikhila 65). This is because “that masculinity too is out of tune with modern marital relation” (Nikhila 65). In fact, it is only with the decimation of both the pre-modern femininity and masculinity can the new bourgeois relations between man and woman be established (Nikhila 65).

C.R. Rajagopalan points out how the dominant narrative of the movie tries to silence Ganga's claim that she is Nagavalli or that she is also Nagavalli. The movie, according to him, shows us why Ganga can never be Nagavalli and points to the hypnotism scene at the end where the identity of Nagavalli is completely destroyed within Ganga and she is forced to become a "modern woman" by accepting her marital status as integral to her identity.

However, if one looks closely at the movie, a covert narrative emerges where Ganga's sexual discontent also gets indirectly addressed through the act of exorcism. If Ganga's discontent is due to the unavailability of her husband Nakulan to fulfil her sexual and emotional needs, then Nakulan willing to get killed at her hands even symbolically can be seen as an act of repentance. Ganga's self as Nagavalli who desires another man is a self that forces her husband Nakulan to be more aware of his wife's needs and to give her the attention he has not been giving her. Thus, unlike in the Tamil and Telugu remakes of *Manichitrathazhu*, Nakulan's assuming the role of the Karanavar in the exorcism ritual and undergoing symbolic murder at the hands of his wife is perhaps an act of appeasement.

Yet, the question remains: has Ganga been completely cured of her discontent? Thus one needs to question what seems to be the closed ending of the movie. Is the abject completely purified? Is there no possibility of Ganga's inner self "Nagavalli" coming back again? Sunny, at the end of his hypnotic session, is confident that Nagavalli has been permanently cast out and tells the couple they can roam around in the "Tekkini" as much as they want. But the couple decides to leave Madampally Meda and return to Calcutta where Ganga vows to lead the rest of her life there as "Nakulan's own Ganga". Thus though Ganga's normalcy is now no longer in doubt, the anxiety about the precariousness of it still remains as well as the

question: is there a core self? If there is, which is the core self of this woman – Ganga or Nagavalli? The movie, to borrow partly from Nikhila’s argument, fixes the ending as one where Ganga, now that the symbol of an oppressive past, “the Karanavar” has been seemingly laid to rest, needs no “Nagavalli” to speak her desires and frustration. But to accept such an ending also means to fall into the dominant narrative of the movie which fixes Ganga’s discontentment firmly within the “past”. Is Ganga’s rebellion truly one against her “past” mirrored in the figures she chooses to create her myth of revenge, the Karanavar and Nagavalli, the “Yakshi”, or is it against her present?

The Yakshi in the folk stories was bound by nailing her on to a kanjiram tree whereafter she was harmless. The “Yakshi” in Ganga has also been bound for the time being. Her rage was given an object in the “Karanavar” and Ganga was made to believe that her battle was with her past and not the present. In the hypnosis session, Sunny convinces Ganga that she is now fully happy and hence one can say has no reason for any discontentment. It is after this that he asks her to embrace normalcy by embracing her “wifedom”. But if Ganga’s battle is with the present as much as her past, one wonders as to how long she can remain the “contented” housewife. Was her sexual discontent only due to the inaccessibility of her husband? Or is it due to Nakulan being unable to understand her emotional world, something only another man can? While in the first half of the movie, we are given plenty of clues regarding Ganga’s fascination for Mahadevan (his poetry), in the second half, when Sunny explains Ganga’s disease to Nakulan, he mentions it as completely based on Mahadevan residing in Ramanathan’s house. Thus, by the end, the movie’s dominant narrative tries to convince the viewer that Ganga’s interest in Mahadevan has come to an end once she has been stripped of her alter self as Nagavalli. We can read Ganga’s

declaration to live thereafter as “Nakulan’s Ganga alone” is an indirect confirmation of the fact that she is at present not Nakulan’s.

Thus the ending of *Manichitrathazhu* leaves us with more questions than answers despite its apparently closed ending. Nagavalli, Ganga’s “dangerous” alter self has been bound for the time being. But has the Yakshi been bound for ever or does the possibility of a future rebellion when the nail loses its power remain as a latent possibility even at the ending?

When we compare the two movies *Aakashaganga* and *Manichitrathazhu*, a number of convergences and divergences emerge. In both the movies, one gets to see the familiar narrative of the wrongfully murdered woman becoming a Yakshi and getting bound by the sorcerers after her successful/unsuccessful attempt at revenge. Thus, the Yakshi as the avenger is a motif both the movies use. Unlike *Aakashaganga* where the Yakshi is bound elsewhere, in *Manichitrathazhu*, the house, *Madampally Meda*, continues to be a living site of the dark history of its ancestor since the Yakshi Nagavalli is supposed to have been bound in one of the rooms in its Southern part. In this, *Manichitrathazhu*, just like Sethumadhavan’s *Yakshi*, can be said to use the motif of the haunted house.

In *Manichitrathazhu*, the female protagonist is called Ganga while in *Aakashaganga*, the Yakshi’s name is Ganga. In both the movies, the murdered woman is marked by her ‘outsider’ status. If in *Aakashaganga*, she is a lower-caste woman, in *Manichitrathazhu*, she is a Tamilian dancer. In both the movies, the women die at the hands of the male heads of the family in the remote past. Thus, in *Manichitrathazhu*, if it is the Karanavar or the male head who is responsible for Nagavalli’s murder, in *Aakashaganga*, it is the Tamburan or the head of the royal

family who is responsible for Ganga's murder. Both the women are killed for falling in love with the "wrong man". Thus, if the Tamilian dancer Nagavalli in *Manichitrathazhu* is murdered for loving another man against the Karanavar's wishes, Ganga, the lower caste woman, in *Aakashaganga* is murdered for loving the Tamburan's son. In both cases, the Yakshi's revenge is not just against an individual, but also against the family that he represents.

In both the movies, the space of the family home is a restricted area. If in *Aakashaganga*, it is an elite space where people belonging to other religions except Hinduism are not welcomed, in the case of *Manichitrathazhu*, it is a space that is not supposed to be a safe place for women who have married into their family, i.e those who are originally outsiders, to stay.

In both the movies, their roles as the "perfect" family women help Mayaganga and Ganga in hiding their real identities and help them in accomplishing things which their real or imagined Yakshi selves would have found it hard to accomplish otherwise. Just like how Mayaganga is able to use Maya's identity as Unni's wife to wage her battle against the members of the family, in *Manichitrathazhu*, Ganga's identity as the sweet-tempered wife of Nakulan makes it hard for anybody to suspect her to be the woman behind the strange happenings in the Meda. Thus when Ganga, who believes herself to be Nagavalli, tries once to poison her husband Nakulan, nobody suspects her except for the Psychiatrist Sunny Joseph.

However, it must be said that some of the similarities between the two movies are not coincidental. *Manichitrathazhu* was such a cult hit that it was a huge influence on the genre of horror movies in Malayalam thereafter. It is no wonder then that *Aakashaganga* releasing six years after the former shows visible signs of its influence.

Where they diverge though is in the genre. If *Aakashaganga* though a horror-comedy is traditional in its “horror” in that despite its attempts to use scientific vocabulary, it finally needs to present Maya’s condition as a matter of possession by a Yakshi, *Manichitrathazhu* is a psychological thriller which, despite its attempts not to blatantly disrespect traditional sorcerers, finally needs to present Ganga’s condition as a psychological disorder. However, on a close reading, certain similarities emerge even between the figure of the sorcerer and the Psychiatrist.

In order to explore this aspect, I would like to focus on the trope of binding in both movies. If in *Aakashaganga*, the sorcerer binds the Yakshi by nailing her on to a banyan tree, in *Manichitrathazhu*, she is bound by locking her in a room sealed with a lock secured with sacred threads. It is this lock which is referred to by the title of the movie which roughly translates as “the ornate lock”.

If in the Yakshi tale, it is the nail which stands for the bound Yakshi, in *Manichitrathazhu*, it is the lock. One of Sunny’s random statements thus takes on added meaning when we look at Ganga’s alter self Nagavalli getting bound at the end of the movie. When Sunny arrives in the Meda, someone sets his bag on fire and he suspects it to be the person behind the strange happenings in the Meda, the one he suspects to have the mental problem. Taking a Hindu God’s name^{xii}, he then declares that he wouldn’t rest without locking up the person responsible for the act. Ganga’s hypnosis can be read as a process of binding her alter self by locking it up.

While Sunny does lock Ganga in her room towards the end of the movie (from where she escapes assuming the self of Nagavalli), the female character who gets locked up most of the time in the movie is Sreedevi. To fool Ganga into believing that he hasn’t discovered her other identity, Sunny casts Sridevi, whom most in the Meda

already regard as “possessed”, as the patient. Once when Sridevi asks him repeatedly whether he believes she is “mad”, he enters her room forcibly and locks the door from the inside. Her parents and other family members cannot intervene and can only look on helplessly. Later, Sunny reveals to the family that at that time, he had confessed Ganga’s illness to Sridevi and that she had agreed to play the mad woman to let Sunny “save” Ganga. The movie ends with Sunny requesting for Sridevi’s hand in marriage. While the movie thus treats Sunny’s indirect “violence” on Sridevi as part of his larger project of “saving” Ganga and even regards it as part of a process through which Sunny develops feelings for Sridevi which seem to be reciprocated at the end of the movie, it needs to be pointed out that the modern Psychiatrist in the movie is vested with powers much like that of the sorcerer in the traditional Yakshi movie. If the sorcerer in the Yakshi tale can beat up the possessed woman to exorcise the Yakshi out of her, the Psychiatrist in *Manichitrathazhu* can lock up the “mad woman” as and when he needs to, in the name of treating her illness.

The two movies thus seem to share a lot of similarities even when they seem to look at the matter of possession by a Yakshi from different angles. In my analysis of the two movies, I have mainly tried to focus on the trope of the Yakshi as the avenger and the trope of binding which figure in both the movies in varying degrees.

Notes:

ⁱ Ganga, the daughter of the servant woman in Manikaysseri Kovilakam is in love with the son of the family, Devan, when their love affair is discovered by the Tamburan. The Tamburan, Devan’s father, is enraged on discovering that Ganga is pregnant with his son’s child. Devan is dragged away by the Tamburan’s men and locked up while the Tamburan kicks Ganga in the stomach. As she falls down, she hits her head against the pillar and the Tamburan’s main servant, Panikkar, informs him that Ganga is dead. The Tamburan then orders her body to be cremated and while the cremation rituals are going on, Ganga suddenly wakes up. The Tamburan decides to continue with the cremation and he and Panikkar set fire to the pyre and watches as Ganga dies a horrific death, being burnt alive. Ganga’s spirit, as a Yakshi, comes back to haunt the family soon after and the Tamburan is hunted down by the Yakshi until he sinks in a whirlpool in the nearby river. Her lover, Devan, commits suicide. The Yakshi Ganga is then bound by a sorcerer Meppadan on to a banyan tree in front of a Kali temple. However,

the Yakshi's curse still haunts the family even after two generations and the male members are expected to remain celibate their entire lives. If they break their vow of brahmacharya, death is the result. Hence the Tamburan's grandson, Raman, despite being middle-aged is still a brahmachari. The members of the family also have to wear sacred threads that Meppadan has given them to protect themselves from the Yakshi. However, the male members of the youngest generation find it difficult to remain celibate. Thus, when the story begins, Krishnan, the hero Unni's cousin, without the knowledge of his family, has already married a Christian woman belonging to the fisherfolk community and she is currently staying in the Kovilakam disguised as a saint, Aaveshananda Swamikal. Krishnan, however, continues to remain celibate despite his marriage. The difficulty the younger men of the family have in remaining brahmacharis comes up as a serious problem only when Unni, the youngest son, falls in love with a girl Maya. After a lot of persuasion, Unni's grandmother, on the advice of Meppadan, the sorcerer, gives consent to the marriage on the condition that Unni continues to remain celibate even after his marriage. Unni and Maya finally get married, but after marriage, a Christian family comes forward claiming that Maya is actually the daughter of the family, Daisy, who had gone missing. It is soon revealed that Maya is actually Daisy who has been possessed by the Yakshi Ganga. Panikkar, the servant, who had assisted in burning Ganga alive, is still living and Ganga, as Maya, kills him. Ganga also paralyzes Unni's uncle Raman's hands and legs, when he realises her identity. Meppadan is called forth by the grandmother who informs them that the Yakshi has possessed someone in the family and that he will bind her after 41 days of rigorous puja. Ganga, as Maya, goes out with Unni and causes him to lose his brahmacharya, which makes the Yakshi's powers go stronger. Daisy's parents and fiancé meanwhile find out from a Christian Priest, Father Mikhael, who is considered to be the descendant of Kadamattathu Kathanar, that Maya is in fact Daisy. Father Mikhael sends a junior priest Father Vettukuzhi to bind the Yakshi and bring her to his abode, but he doesn't succeed. Father Mikhael's messenger meanwhile contacts Meppadan who by the time gets a divine vision that the Yakshi is in fact in Maya's body. Daisy, on a study tour, had plucked the iron nail which had bound the Yakshi on the banyan tree in front of the Kali temple and had consequently been possessed by her. The Hindu sorcerer and the Christian Priest come together as they discuss how to bind the Yakshi. It is supposedly a difficult job since either a member of the Manikaysseri family or the girl Daisy can die in the process of exorcising Ganga out of Daisy's body. Meppadan, with Father Mikhael's encouragement, decides to do a black magic rite called dahana homam. The plan is to destroy the spirit for ever by performing a dahana homam (funeral ritual) after doing all the final rites for the deceased. In the climax sequence, Maya is forcibly brought onto the exorcism site where her hands are tied and her body is placed on the funeral pyre. The sorcerer Meppadan reminds Ganga that the men who oppressed her are no longer alive and asks her to leave the body. As Ganga refuses to leave Daisy's body, Meppadan warns her that if she doesn't leave the body, Daisy's body will be burnt alive like how her own body was burnt alive long back. As Meppadan sets fire to the pyre, Daisy's body gets thrown off the pyre and they see Ganga's spirit ascending to the sky and becoming a part of the galaxy. Maya who wakes up in the hospital as Daisy cannot recollect her time in Manikyasseri. However, once her fiancé tells her the details of her stay at Manikyasseri, she decides to return to the Kovilakam as Unni's wife, Maya. It is also revealed that Daisy is pregnant with Unni's child, presumably the real reason why her family decides to let her continue to live as Unni's wife.

ⁱⁱ Madampalli Meda, an ancestral house, is supposed to be haunted by Yakshis and other evil spirits. Its evil reputation is so strong that nobody lives there and people do not even venture into the vicinity at night. It is there that Nakulan and his newly-wed wife Ganga who has lived most of her life in Calcutta come to live. Nakulan's uncle advises him not to live in the Meda since there have been unnatural deaths there in the past. He warns him that the house is especially considered undesirable for women who have been married off from other families and points to Ganga being a woman from another family. The house has a room in the Southern part (Tekkini) which is locked from the outside and Ganga's desire to use that room as her library is met with fierce resistance from Nakulan's uncle. Nakulan's aunt tells her the story connected with the room. Around 100-150 years ago, the Meda was the abode of a wealthy man who went by the title of the 'Karanavar' and ruled over the place. He had brought a Tamil dancer from Tanjore called 'Nagavalli' to stay in the Meda. Nagavalli was in love with another dancer called Ramanathan who came in search of her and started living in a house nearby the Meda. When the Karanavar came to know of the affair, he hacked Nagavalli to death in her room in the Meda. Nagavalli's spirit is believed to have become a Raktha Yakshi (a blood thirsty Yakshi) and the story goes that on the eighth day after her death, on the day of Durgashtami, the Yakshi even entered the interior of the Meda to seek vengeance for her death on the Karanavar. The Karanavar brought in Tantrics who did days of exorcist rituals to bind Nagavalli in that room. Some years later, the

Karanavar also committed suicide by taking poison and his spirit was also bound in the adjacent room. The aunt also informs Ganga that the house where Nagavalli's old lover Ramanathan used to stay is currently being occupied by her daughter Alli's fiancé Mahadevan. Ganga, though she knows the history of the Southern Part of the taravad, opens the forbidden rooms which earns her the rebuke of Nakulan's uncle. After that, a series of strange events start happening within the Meda. Clocks get broken on their own, Ganga's sari catches fire on its own, plates come crashing down to the floor etc with no visible human agency. Nakulan starts suspecting his cousin, his uncle's daughter, Sridevi, as the one responsible for these events and wants to seek the help of his friend, Psychiatrist Sunny Joseph. When his uncle and the local priest Kattumadan go to lock the forbidden room after performing intense rituals, they are shocked to find a woman (whom they see from a distance and hence are unable to identify) in the room and flee for their lives convinced that Nagavalli has come back to wreak vengeance.

Sunny, who is working as a Psychiatrist in the U.S., finally arrives in the Meda and starts investigating the strange happenings in the Meda. One night, he hears a Tamil song coming from Nagavalli's room. The next night, after locking Nagavalli's room from the outside, posing as the Karanavar, he has an exchange of words with the woman inside. She tells him that she is Nagavalli who has come to seek her revenge on the Karanavar whose blood she vows to drink on or before the coming Durgashtami. Sunny is now convinced that someone in the house has a dangerous psychic problem. When there is an attempt on Nakulan's life after someone poisons his cup of tea, Sunny tells the inmates of the taravad that Sridevi is the madwoman and locks her up in her room. Nakulan's uncle meanwhile had sought the help of a famous exorcist-priest Brahmaddattan Namboothiripad who promises to come to the Meda during the coming Navaratri festivities. Navaratri festival begins and once while all of the housemates are enjoying a Kathakali performance in the nearby temple, Ganga goes missing. Sunny and Nakulan search for the missing Ganga and see her physically struggling with another man in the Meda compound whom they recognize as Mahadevan, Alli's fiancé. Nakulan thinks that Mahadevan was trying to rape his wife, but Sunny has another story to tell. Sunny tells him that the real patient is Nakulan's wife Ganga and that she has a multiple personality disorder where she thinks of herself as the Tamil dancer Nagavalli. In her imagination, Nakulan is the Karanavar Nagavalli seeks to kill and Mahadevan, Alli's fiancé, is her lover Ramanathan. Sunny asks Nakulan to confront Ganga and make her consciously aware of her alter self. If Ganga survives this moment of the recognition of her disease, there is hope for her recovery. Following Sunny's advice, Nakulan asks Ganga not to go out with his relatives and his word of command brings out Ganga's alter ego Nagavalli who vows to drink his blood that night. As she easily lifts a heavy cot to throw at Nakulan, he calls out his wife's name which re-awakens Ganga's self. Ganga now realizes that she has some psychic problem. Sunny recognizes that the only way to treat Ganga is to give full play to her Nagavalli self, to bring it into the open and to appease it. With the help of Brahmaddattan Namboothiripad, he creates a ritualistic setting of exorcism as the backdrop where Ganga, who has fully transformed herself into Nagavalli, is brought in. There, the exorcist Brahmaddattan Namboothiripad tells her that he will help her kill the Karanavar on the condition that she will leave Ganga's body after her revenge is done. Ganga then hacks to pieces what she thinks is the Karanavar/Nakulan which is actually a dummy and collapses to the floor after extracting her revenge. She undergoes a few days of therapy and at the end of the hypnotism session where Sunny convinces her subconscious that she is Ganga, she wakes up. Sunny declares her to be perfectly normal now and the movie ends with Nakulan and Ganga leaving for Calcutta and Sunny proposing to Sridevi asking her to be his wife.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kalliankattu Neeli, the heroine of Yakshi tales centred around old Travancore, was supposed to be the ghost of a pregnant woman murdered by her husband for her jewellery. The woman Neeli, as her husband Tampi, hit her head with a stone, asked the nearby cactus plant (kalli chedi from which the name Kalliankattu or the forest of cacti comes) to stand witness to the crime. The story goes that Neeli came back as a Yakshi and Tampi, who mistook her for a prostitute, was murdered by her in the same spot, among the cacti plants.

^{iv} It needs to be said though that the *pretam* movie in Malayalam, especially one like Lisa, also borrows from the language of the Yakshi tale. It is a Hindu tantric who finally binds Lisa, the ghost of the Christian woman, much like in the climax of many a Yakshi tale.

^v I am not saying that the Yakshi cannot be used to refer to the ghost of a woman who died in the recent past or that the term *pretam* cannot be applied to the spirits of women who died in the remote

past. These usages are also common though generally, the term Yakshi conveys the idea of a remoter past compared to the term *pretam*.

^{vi} In the context of this paragraph where the Yakshi's powers are linked with natural forces like the wind and the rain, I wonder whether that word used should be "unchecked" instead of "checked".

^{vii} It has to be remembered that the Yakshi was once a tree goddess though it doesn't seem likely that the movie is making a conscious reference to that. While the Yakshi has been associated with vegetation in her tales like the Palm tree, usually presented as her abode and the Indian Devil tree, the scent of whose flowers is said to accompany her movements, the trees have never been portrayed as actively assisting the Yakshi in hunting down her victims.

^{viii} Translation mine.

^{ix} Translation mine.

^x Even the names 'Ganga' and 'Mahadevan', whether consciously or unconsciously, evoke mythical associations of the relationship between Ganga and Siva.

^{xi} Nakulan does walk with Ganga in one scene in this song and seems to be happy doing that. Still, in this scene, it is Ganga who pulls him closer to her as she sings rather than the other way round.

^{xii} While Sunny is a Christian, his respect for traditional methods of exorcism practiced by Brahmin sorcerers like Brahmadattan Namboothiripad and his visits to Sabarimala, the shrine of a Hindu god, are meant to present him as sharing the ethos of Hinduism. His religion though is also presented as free from the irrational beliefs of Hinduism like the fear towards manglik women. At the end of the movie, for instance, Sunny confesses to Sridevi and declares that for a Christian, there is no such thing as a manglik.

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Chapter 6

“What more do you want, Sakhi?”

Yakshi as the Friend-Protector

The last four chapters have attempted to chart the journey of the Yakshi from the outside to the inside – from the wayside where she stands enticingly, the “self-consolidating other” to her entry as the *other woman* whose other-worldly identity brings to relief the rules and regulations of the protagonist’s world while at the same time disrupting its order and finally to the *uncanny* sight of the family woman transforming into her *dreaded other*, the Yakshi. However, the Yakshi remains the object of fear/desire of the male protagonist in the texts dealt with in these chapters. In contrast to these, this chapter looks at those texts where the Yakshi enters into the lives of female protagonists, mostly in the role of a friend-protector. In these texts, the Yakshi can also be read as the embodiment of female desire thus bringing into focus non-normative sexualities.

The texts I plan to study in this chapter are the short story “Cheriyā Cheriyā Bhookambangal” by M.T. Vasudevan Nair (Translated into English as ‘Little Earthquakes’) and the movie based on it - “Ennu Swantham Janakikutty” (‘Yours truly, Janakikutty’). However, it has to be pointed out that the short story and its film adaptation are the works of a male writer and that hence, even in these texts, what we are exploring is the figure of the Yakshi in male imagination. However, since the two texts do differ greatly in how they *present* the Yakshi compared to other texts and in the concerns they generate, I think they need to be studied as a separate category from the rest.

Before going into these two texts, let's look at the larger question of how the Yakshi is envisaged in tales featuring female protagonists. The Yakshi has rarely been given a positive function except in a few tales like the tale of the avenging Yakshi Kalliankattu Neeli. Even in tales where there have been female protagonists like in the celebrated tales featuring the Yakshi and the mother goddess, the Yakshi is the “bad woman” the “good woman”, the Goddess, is supposed to defeat.

The texts which deal with what the Yakshi means to the female protagonists have been few and far between. There are texts like *Aakashaganga* and *Manichitrathazhu* which see her as the avenger, the wrongfully murdered woman taking the form of the Yakshi to avenge her murder. To a certain text, the figure of the Yakshi emerges in these texts as the embodiment of the latent possibilities of resistance that an ordinary woman may find in a deeply patriarchal society. However, the dominant narratives of these texts tend to finally see the Yakshi as the abject that needs to be cast out.

Before moving onto an exploration of the texts in this chapter, I would like to briefly discuss a ballad titled “Yakshi”ⁱ belonging to the group of ballads known as *Vadakkan Paattukkal* popular in the Northern part of Kerala. The reason why I want to discuss this ballad in particular is because it points to what the mythical figure of the Yakshi could have meant for the womenfolk. This ballad is quite different in tone and subject matter from the folktales surrounding temples, Namboothiris, priests and magicians collected in *Aitihiyamala*. The Northern ballad sketches a land where the ruler's word is the law and one where there are no gods or goddesses or magicians to save the people from the atrocities of the ruler, as against the benevolent rulers in the majority of tales in *Aitihiyamala*. The story is about the excesses of unbridled male sexuality embodied in the ruler of the land, Nayanar, that preys on the female body.

This unbridled sexual appetite of the ruler is checked in the tale by the embodiment of unbridled female sexuality, the *Yakshi*.

The ballad talks about a land in the northern part of Kerala ruled by the cruel and lust-filled feudal lord, Vattoli Nayanar. The time period is presumably sometime after the Europeans' entry into Kerala since Nayanar's main source of power is his legion of Madirasi (Madrasi) soldiers whose guns spit fire. Nayanar's soldiers' guns are so feared by his subjects that no matter how terrible his command, they have to follow it, whether it asks for young girls to enter his private quarters immediately after their puberty rituals or asks for young mothers to give their breast milk to strengthen his manhood. Finally, after days of discussion among the people, their leader, Daivam Gurukkal Nambiar, approaches Nayanar and tells him about a girl of apsara-like beauty who lives in the nearby village. Nambiar warns Nayanar to make his journey unaccompanied by his soldiers since the girl is very young and shy. When Nayanar arrives at the hill top all alone, he sees an extremely beautiful woman standing under a pala tree. When Nayanar expresses his desire to spend the night with her, the girl readily agrees and invites him to her mansion. The lust-filled Nayanar immediately embraces her upon which the girl transforms into a fiend who tears open Nayanar's neck with her long finger nails and then drinks his blood. Nayanar's shouts ring through the land on hearing which his soldier chief tries to go to his aid, however, Nambiar tells him that Nayanar is beyond any help as the land is inhabited by Kunjimangalam Yakshi who hasn't left alive any man who dared to sleep with her. The ballad ends with Nambiar coming back to his village where flowers and pearls line each step he takes.

Though in this story, the insatiable lust of the old Nayanar, the terror of the women-folk of the land, meets more than its match in the figure of the Yakshi, the

symbol of uncontrollable female sexuality, one cannot assume that the Yakshi here serves the function of a protector for the women-folk. The Yakshi here is an instrument rather than a subject and her destruction of Nayanar is not in any way connected with his sexual oppression of the women of his land. It is instead the village head Nambiar who is the hero of the story. What the women of the land thought of the Yakshi who put an end to their oppression does not find any expression in the ballad. However, reading between the lines, the Yakshi stands as a figure of female resistance – the only woman who can retaliate against the excesses of male lust.

There is another Northern ballad about the virgin Tatri (Tatri Kanyavu), the betrothed of a noble man of Nileswaram (a place in Northern Kerala), that resembles the ballad about the Yakshi in almost all points. It also has a Nayanar whose lust makes life hellish for the womenfolk of his land. His atrocities against them are the same as those in this ballad. However, here, the Nayanar desires to spend the night with Tatri, a young girl reputed for her beauty. As he makes way to the appointed place all alone (under her uncle's instruction who informs him that the young girl is very shy) where she waits for him, the tinkling of her anklets and her fragrance make him wonder whether she is a Yakshi. Soon after, his shout of agony rents the air as Tatri drives a poisoned dagger into his flesh. Tatri is welcomed with joy and gratitude as she makes her way home, her betrothed among those celebrating her victory over the hateful Nayanar.

One can see that the Yakshi and Tatri perform the same function in both the stories. If the Yakshi spills Nayanar's blood using her fangs, Tatri does it using her poisoned dagger. Both are women who do not require a man to save them. One may surmise that local fables of Yakshis killing cruel men like Nayanar may have had their

origin in actual tales of retribution like Tatri's. Or perhaps, both Tatri and the Yakshi are the saviours imagined by a community plagued by heartless and lust-filled rulers like Nayanar. It is probable that in societies where women were regarded as powerless, they needed the myth of the Yakshi either to act out their stealthy acts of revenge (where a woman could kill Nayanar and then spread the story of a Yakshi being the murderer) or to strike fear in the hearts of rulers like Nayanar. However, it must be said that in this particular ballad, the Yakshi's act of violence against the man is on the surface non-mediated by any notion of retributive justice. She kills Nayanar because it is her nature to kill men and drink their blood, not because of who he is.

I discussed this tale to bring into focus the question of what the figure of the Yakshi could have meant for women. In M. T. Vasudevan Nair's short story 'Cheriyā Cheriyā Bhookambangal' ('Little Earthquakes'), we have one of those rare texts in Malayalam where the Yakshi's relationship with a female protagonist is explored. In fact, the scholar Renuka considers this story as one of the rare creative writings on Yakshi that has tried to re-conceptualise the figure of the Yakshi (Renuka 38).

This short story was adapted into a movie in 1998 titled *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* [Yours truly, Janakikutty]. While the short story and the movie both focused on the relationship between a young girl and a Yakshi, there were significant differences in their interpretation of it. I believe that the differing treatment of this relationship in the two texts needs to be placed in the context of the larger worlds the two texts build, especially in what each text considers as a legitimate sexual relationship – is it only a heterosexual one?

“Cheriyā Cheriyā Bhookambangal” [Little Earthquakes] (1990) VS *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* [Yours truly, Janakikutty] (1998)

Before I go into a discussion of the two texts, it would be worthwhile to look at their publication/release history.

The noted writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s short story “Cheriyā Cheriyā Bhookambangal” was first published in *India Today* (Malayalam) on 22nd August, 1990 (Ayyar and Subramaniam 14). It received the Katha Award for creative fiction in 1992 (Sharma 233). It was translated into English as “Little Earthquakes” by D. Krishna Ayyar and Raji Subramaniam as part of the *Katha Prize Stories Volume 2* in 1992ⁱⁱ.

The movie based on this story was released in 1998. The script for the movie was penned by M.T. Vasudevan Nair himself. It was a reasonable success at the box office, was critically acclaimed and fetched its lead actress Jomol, a debutante, a special mention at the National Film Awards.

The short story “Little Earthquakes” shares a few similarities with Malayattoor Ramakrishnan’s *Yakshi*. Both have first person narrators who, in the course of the narrative, inform the reader/listener that they have been admitted into a sanatorium and that people around them think they are insane. While in *Yakshi*, the narrator insists that his wife is a Yakshi, the narrator in “Little Earthquakes” insists on her friendship with one.

In “Little Earthquakes”, the narrator is a young teenager called Janakikutty. Janakikutty’s narrative records her alienation from her family members (the sole exception being her grandmother’s younger sister, Akkara Mutthashiⁱⁱⁱ) and her seeking refuge in her Mutthashi and a host of playmates including a Yakshi named

Kunjathaal and other spirits like *Karineeli*. The story is told in retrospect though the narrative is largely linear so that we come to know of Janakikutty's current location, in a sanatorium, only by the end of the story.

The movie *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* follows the short story in adopting a first person narrative style. Thus, when the movie begins, after an introductory song played in the background in which the protagonist Janakikutty walks around alone, watching birds and climbing trees, seemingly at one with the natural world around her, we get to see her turning to face the camera/viewer to subsequently introduce herself, "I am Janakikutty, but people around me call me Janootty. There are even some who call me Jatti. But I don't like that".

Janakikutty then takes us inside her house where each character starting with her *Amma*^{iv} ("too busy in the kitchen to even sit down") to her *Valiamma*^v ("always busy plaiting her daughter's hair and dressing her up") to Sarojini *Edathi*^{vi} ("there is a limit to which one can love one's child. She is not a child, but an 18 year old") to her own *Edathi* ("busy reading film magazines and won't help me with my studies, perhaps because she has failed her board exams twice") to her *Ettan*^{vii} ("always out. If mother asks him where he is going, he shouts at her") is introduced through her voiceover. The early scenes thus introduce the theme of Janakikutty's loneliness and alienation from her own family. She asks the viewer, "If no one has anything to talk to me about, why should I stay inside?"

This narrative style is employed throughout with Janakikutty often breaking down the fourth wall and directly addressing the viewer with her thoughts and judgements on the events happening around her. It is retained till the end of the movie where Janakikutty addresses the audience with a final summing up of her strange experiences.

There are indications within the text of the movie that Janakikutty's alienation is partly caused by the discord between her father and mother – her father's prolonged absence from home and her mother's lack of time to attend to her needs. Janakikutty's mother's staying on in her own house even after marriage and not re-locating to her husband's workplace seems to be a bone of contention between the two. This comes out in a scene where Janakikutty's parents have an argument. When Janakikutty's mother accuses her husband of not caring enough for the family, her father counter-accuses her of prioritizing her farming activities and Taravad duties over him.

While the movie is based on the short story and largely follows its first person narrative style, there are a couple of major differences between the two, the most important one being in the depiction of the protagonist Janakikutty. While in the short story, Janakikutty is still a child, Janakikutty in the movie is an adolescent girl, studying in ninth standard. Janakikutty of the short story is a child whose main source of unhappiness is her lack of company, especially when it comes to the games she loves playing. She is unmarked by any interest in heterosexual pursuits. In fact, it can be argued that she likes the Yakshi, Karineeli and her grandmother precisely because they are not part of the “weird” games of romance that the adults play around her. On the other hand, Janakikutty of the movie is at an age when she is slowly becoming aware of her own sexuality. She resents the adults in the family, especially Sarojini Edathi and her own Edathi precisely because they do not let her become a part of their grown up world where they dance to Hindi romantic songs and shoo her away when she comes to join them and whisper to each other behind her back.

The other obvious difference which possibly follows from the first difference is in the movie's characterisation of Janakikutty as somebody who is interested in heterosexual pursuits. Sarojini Edathi's lover Bhaskaran comes to play an important

role in the movie as Janakikutty's love interest while in the short story, Sarojini Edathi's lover does not get a name beyond Janakikutty's satirical reference to the "Gandharvan". Janakikutty's love story with Bhaskaran in fact has a major role to play in the movie's diverging from the short story. I will discuss this in detail later. Another difference is in the characterisation of Mutthashi. While Mutthashi in "Little Earthquakes" is presented as someone who considers the Yakshi in a friendly light, in the movie, she looks at Janakikutty's talk about her friendship with the Yakshi with apprehension.

There are two ways to look at the figure of the Yakshi in the two texts. One is to see her as the fantastical figure through whom Janakikutty expresses her secret longings and feelings of resentment. In such a reading, the Yakshi would then become Janakikutty's double. The other way to read the texts is to focus on the Yakshi as the fantastical figure Janakikutty invents to make up for the lack of a friend-protector. Such a reading would then focus on Janakikutty's relationship with the Yakshi trying to understand what it is that Janakikutty seeks in her friendship with the Yakshi. It would also help us to see what meanings the figure of the Yakshi could hold for women in general. The two texts differ significantly in how they present the relationship between Janakikutty and the Yakshi; hence the second reading is also an interesting way to understand how this difference comes about.

The key to both the readings though lies in understanding Janakikutty's situation. What is the lack in Janakikutty's life that makes her seek the company of a Yakshi? What is it about this figure that fascinates the young Janakikutty? First of all, I would like to focus on the short story.

Janakikutty lives in her mother's taravad which is matrilineal and has a joint family set up. In their taravad, her mother lives with her elder sister and both of their

children while their husbands work outside and come home only when they get leave. Janakikutty's father is the supervisor in a tea plantation and his continued absence from home is a source of great worry for Janakikutty's mother who blames it on the *Urvashi*^{viii} he has employed in his plantation as an extra hand. Thus, for all purposes, it is a woman-headed family though the fathers have a great say in the matters of their children. Thus, it is Janakikutty's father who decides not to send her to school for some time when he gets to know that she has been diagnosed as *possessed*. Similarly, it is Janakikutty's *Valiachhan* (the husband of her mother's elder sister) who fixes up the marriage of his daughter Sarojini with a co-worker in his company.

Though it is a joint family and Janakikutty lives with her siblings and cousin, she is extremely lonely. As she is much younger than her Edathi, Sarojini Edathi and her Ettan, none of them have time for her and drive her away when she seeks their company. The only person who considers Janakikutty important enough to be her confidante is Akkara Mutthashi, her grandmother's younger sister. Janakikutty takes great pride in her Mutthashi's knowledge of herbs and other medicinal plants and also in how she is going to pass on all of her knowledge to her favourite grandchild who is none other than herself.

However, in the household, old women like Akkara Mutthashi are considered as a burden. Since she is their mother's younger sister and not their own mother, neither Janakikutty's Amma nor Valiamma consider it their responsibility to look after her, especially as they allege that Akkara Mutthashi's children have abandoned her because of her wrong doings. The only company Janakikutty has in the house, her Mutthashi, is thus daily subjected to taunts and jibes by her Amma and Valiamma as well as the *Karyasthan* (care-taker), Ravunni Nair. Thus Janakikutty's only friend and ally in the household is herself an outcast in the family set up. Akkara Mutthashi is an

adult, but a powerless adult. The ally Janakikutty wants is perhaps someone who is powerful beyond imagination and that is where the Yakshi comes in.

Yet the Yakshi who becomes Janakikutty's friend is not quite the cruel Yakshi of folktales. Janakikutty's narrative in "Little Earthquakes" in fact begins with the recording of her disbelief at what others around her say about Yakshis, that Yakshis have *damshttras* (giant molars) which they use to drink people's blood and that Yakshis also chew and spit out the bones of the people they eat. Janakikutty cannot understand how people can say things like that about "poor Kunjathaal".

From the beginning of her narrative, one can see Janakikutty's attempts to present herself as someone more knowledgeable than those around her. This can in fact be read as a self-defence mechanism since the adults around her rarely consider Janakikutty as old enough to share their knowledge with. Janakikutty in turn makes fun of their adult pursuits in her narrative which seems to be her way of coping with the rejection. Janakikutty's claim of knowing the truth about Yakshis which is inaccessible to those around her must also be read along with this.

In making such a claim, Janakikutty is also challenging others' version of Yakshi tales where she is presented as the predator. Janakikutty's indirect claim is that such stories are lies since the Yakshi she knows is nothing like that.

We are also introduced soon after to the other central character, Akkara Mutthashi. . Akkara Mutthashi is someone who takes an interest in the natural world of herbs and plants as opposed to the other adult women in the house who are preoccupied with the domestic space. Janakikutty shares Mutthashi's temperament as she is also someone who likes to amble through the *parambu*^{ix} instead of sitting in the house reading gossip magazines like her sister.

Akkara Mutthashi is an interesting figure to study since by the end of Janakikutty's narrative, she becomes a part of the very world her stories to Janakikutty used to describe – the world of the Yakshi Kunjathaal and Karineeli. The old woman is the repository of traditional knowledge about herbs as well as old folktales about Yakshis. It is her stories that introduce the character Kunjathaal to Janakikutty.

However, we also get to know that her mother, mother's sister and the Karyasthan Ravunni Nair believe that Janakikutty has been possessed by some evil spirit when wandering around in their grounds at first with Mutthashi and later on her own. Thus, the possibility that Janakikutty has been "possessed" by a Yakshi is indirectly raised in the beginning of the story itself though Janakikutty dismisses this possibility by wondering if the same charge cannot be laid at the doors of her cousin sister Sarojini Edathi, her Ettan as well as her own Edathi. The reason why Janakikutty thinks that her siblings and cousin are *possessed* is because of their adult pursuits which seem weird to her like Sarojini Edathi's secret visits to the nearby pond to meet up with her lover or her Ettan's strange gesticulations to *Nanikutty*, the goat herdess who strays into their grounds on the pretext of grazing her goats or her own Edathi who seems to "devour" the photos of film stars in film magazines.

If being "possessed" is about acting abnormal, then Janakikutty's claim is that most of the adults around her fit the bill. Unlike the adults around her who deserve to be called by that appellation, Janakikutty though has not been *possessed* by any Yakshi. In this story, we can see that Janakikutty's narrative introduces a theme which rarely features in tales about Yakshis – friendship with one. Instead of a forceful possession of a young girl by a Yakshi which is all that the adults around her can imagine, Janakikutty is having one as a friend. However, it must be noted that in

having a secret playmate in the Yakshi, Janakikutty is also imitating the adults in their stealthy pursuits which she otherwise tries to mock.

The first meeting between Janakikutty and the Yakshi happens one afternoon when she strolls about in their *parambu* all alone. To Janakikutty, the Yakshi is so real a being that when she sees a woman standing under the mango tree, she knows at once that it is the Yakshi everyone talks about. She tries to run and to scream, but is unable to as she feels rooted to the spot.

I closed my eyes tight and chanted “Arjunan, Phalgunan, Arjunan, Phalgu ...”

I heard a soft voice. “Janakikutty.” It had a strange fondness in it. I liked the way she called me by my full name. Others call me Jatti. I opened my eyes slowly. Kunjathaal was standing next to me. (Nair 15)

Janakikutty whom everybody considers in the house as a mere child and not deserving of the respect of a grown up is impressed by the Yakshi’s addressing her by her full name. She finally meets a person who acknowledges her as an individual unlike the majority in her family. One can see in the Yakshi the kind of ideal companion Janakikutty is yearning for. The Yakshi talks to Janakikutty as if she knows her and enquires about her *Mutthashi*.

Janakikutty’s interactions with the Yakshi are a far cry from similar interactions in folktales though she tells us that while talking to the Yakshi, she was influenced by what she had heard about her.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her mouth as she talked. I told myself that I should not show her that I’m frightened. So I asked her as if I was not at all scared, ‘Where is your *damshttra*?’

The Athemmarkutty burst into laughter. *Ah, what pretty teeth!* She said, ‘The damshtra grows big only when we have a prey. But it scared everyone away. That’s why we have no one to play with.’ (Nair 16)

The Yakshi’s mouth which is usually seen as an object of fear is considered as pretty and attractive by Janakikutty. Instead of the femme fatale of the folk tales, here the Yakshi transforms into a lonely young woman who wants someone to play games with as her fangs have scared away potential playmates. One can see that to the lonely child Janakikutty, the Yakshi of the folktales who resides alone in her palm tree must have seemed like a kindred spirit, marked by the loneliness that she saw as part of her own existence.

However, what Janakikutty needs is not just a playmate of her age. The Yakshi while she plays games with Janakikutty is still an adult who when she looks longingly at the betel leaves that the Yakshi is chewing admonishes her, “Small children shouldn’t chew betel” (Nair 16). The Yakshi can be also said to stand in for the protective female figure that Janakikutty seeks in her mother, sister and female cousin, but do not get.

The first day of their meeting, both sit and play a game with pebbles called *kothengkallu* which the Yakshi wins easily. However, the Yakshi promises Janakikutty that she can win in the next day’s game. Janakikutty doesn’t set much store by her words and is happy enough to get a playmate. But to her surprise, it is she who wins in the next day’s game. Janakikutty then compares the Yakshi with the other adults she knows.

Yakshis are so true to their word. If my edathi says, “I’ll give it to you tomorrow,” it means she’s putting me off. She won’t give it to me. But Yakshis are not like that. And the next day, it was I who won. (Nair 16)

We can see here how different a figure the Yakshi cuts for the young girl Janakikutty compared to how she has been usually represented. Compared to the adults who say one thing and do another, the Yakshi in her steadfastness to her promises appears to be a superior person to Janakikutty. The Yakshi’s easygoing nature, allowing Janakikutty to win the next game, is another indicator of the kind of friendship Janakikutty seeks. She wants an older friend who is powerful and yet is someone who does not dominate her.

Janakikutty’s other playmate in this world is *Karineeli*. *Karineeli*, in folklore, was a female spirit which drank the blood of children and threw their dead bodies into the well (qtd. in Sajan 100). In “Little Earthquakes”, she is shown instead to spit at her victims, afflicting them with small pox. *Karineeli*, as a figure, might have associations with “Bhagavathi” or the Dravidian goddess who, if displeased, could afflict a person with small pox.

The world that Janakikutty constructs is interesting since it is based on her fantasies of ideal relationships. For instance, when Kunjathaal and *Karineeli* have their first meeting in front of Janakikutty, they remind her of her Amma and Valiamma in the antagonism they display towards each other. However, unlike the latter, Kunjathaal and *Karineeli* are able to set aside their differences for the sake of their common interest, which is to play a children’s game. It is ironic that it is the women involved in “childish” pursuits who appear more mature to Janakikutty than the women involved in “adult” pursuits.

Yakshi and Karineeli stood glaring at each other. I have seen Amma and Valiamma staring at each other like that. This was much more frightening. I feared war. But nothing happened.

“Why does thampuratti not let me join her game?” Neeli asked. My friend Kunjathaal grimaced, then nodded her head. “Okay, Come.”

Karineeli drew a game board on the ground. She brought broken tiles. And the three of us sat there and played vattu. (Nair 17)

In Janakikutty’s imagination, Karineeli also transforms into a lonely spirit in search of playmates.

The Yakshi, Kunjathaal and Karineeli may be Janakikutty’s playmates, but they are adults and not just adults, but powerful adults. They have the power the other adults in the family do not have. For Janakikutty, her association with these powerful adults is also a way of sharing in their power and changing her own status within the family. As the youngest in the family, who is seen as a nuisance by many of her family members, Janakikutty is totally powerless. But the company of her playmates is a source of strength to her and she attributes her elder sisters' fear of her to the friends she keeps. It also boosts her self-esteem. Thus Janakikutty casts herself in the role of the all-powerful young girl who spares the lives of her cluelessly arrogant family members due to her generosity. Now she not only has the power to do what she wants with her family members, but she has also the power to restrain her powerful friends from seeking vengeance on her behalf on her victimisers. This is especially apparent in an incident involving her elder brother who gets angry one day on seeing Janakikutty laughing by herself (though Janakikutty tells the reader that she was laughing along with her invisible playmates)

One day Ettan, who usually stood at the western window waving to Nanikutty,

saw me and came with his hand raised, Kunjathaal's damshtra started lengthening dangerously. "Don't do anything!" I warned her. That's why she held back. Neeli starts spitting when someone makes her angry. And immediately that someone's body breaks out in bubble-like eruptions. If Neeli didn't spit now, it was only because *I* asked her not to. (Nair 20)

It is not just her alienation from her surroundings that makes Janakikutty turn to the world of Yakshis, but her own unconventionality. Janakikutty, for a young girl, has firm opinions about everyone around her. In whatever way others may consider her, she thinks of herself as someone important. She likes wandering around in the *parambu* all alone and seeks the company of her Mutthashi whom everybody else shuns. In the world she constructs, the adults and her older siblings are cast in the role of stupid on-lookers who have no clue what is going on around them. In contrast to these clueless on-lookers, Mutthashi, whom everybody else shuns and sees as a liability, is presented as being wise enough to recognize the validity of Janakikutty's assertions and the existence of her world. Thus when she tells Mutthashi about her meeting Kunjathaal and playing games with her, Mutthashi advises her not to tell anyone and assures her that she knows how Yakshis are and states that they won't harm her. If Janakikutty's different perspective regarding Yakshis is an inheritance from her grandmother as the story implies, one wonders if the stories the grandmother tells have benevolent Yakshis as against the more popular Yakshi tales. One can compare this with Ganga's childhood in *Manichitrathazhu* where she was also brought up on the Yakshi tales of her grandmother. In Ganga's choosing the Yakshi Nagavalli to play out her desires and rage, we get to see that the Yakshi of her grandmother's tales was a figure she identified with. While there have not been many studies into how the Yakshi features in grandmother tales and in popular opinion, their

representation in them seems to be not much different from that in the popular folk tales, a story like this does open up the latent possibility of perhaps different meanings being generated out of the Yakshi myth in women's tales.

The Yakshi Kunjathaal can thus be seen as standing in for the powerful older female that Janakikutty seeks in her life, but doesn't get. However, to call the Yakshi just a stand in for a mother or an older sister would also not be accurate since the Yakshi is different from the older women in Janakikutty's life in one major respect – in her lack of interest in heterosexual pursuits. All the women in Janakikutty's life, be it her cousin or sister or her mother constantly worried about her husband possibly cheating on her, are marked by their heterosexual interests. In contrast stands the Yakshi Kunjathaal unconcerned about such things. In fact, the Yakshi, Kunjathaal, though it is not made explicit in the novel, seems to have had an unhappy married/loved life while she was alive and in her Yakshi form, has a deep antipathy towards matrimony. The only time Kunjathaal assumes her Yakshi form is when she witnesses the marriage of Sarojini Edathi, especially when she sees her bridegroom. Yakshis, in the popular lore, were often the ghosts of women who died because of unhappy marriages. For Janakikutty too, the source of her fascination with Kunjathaal is partly the latter's utter disregard for and even antagonism towards the sexual pursuits the other adults take part in.

For Janakikutty, the adulthood she desires becomes an extension of her childhood, one where she is granted power and agency which she does not get as a child, but one where heterosexual norms are curiously absent. It is one characterised by her homosocial bonding with powerful female spirits. Yet their relationship is one of give and take and is the pure friendship she desires.

The homosocial element in their friendship also needs to be highlighted since

Janakikutty's first thoughts when she sees the Yakshi are how pretty her teeth are and how beautiful her smile is. Janakikutty is again impressed by the fondness in the Yakshi's voice the first time she addresses her by her name.

At this point, it would be worthwhile to compare Janakikutty's first meeting with the Yakshi in the movie with that of the short story. The two are different in tone and point to how the two narratives differ in their presentation of the lack in Janakikutty's life that makes her seek the friendship of a Yakshi.

Unlike the Janakikutty of the short story, Janakikutty of *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* is someone who is interested in heterosexual pursuits. In fact, as mentioned earlier, this is a major difference between the two movies which have an important bearing on how Janakikutty's discontent and its possible panacea/embodiment, the Yakshi gets presented in the two texts.

In the movie, Janakikutty is studying in her 9th standard and is around 14-15 years of age. Her love interest in the movie is Bhaskaran, the Karyasthan Ravunni Nair's college-going son who gifts her chocolates and tells her she is his only company in the neighbourhood. To the adolescent Janakikutty, Bhaskaran's words take on a different meaning and he becomes the validation of her feminine charms which are invisible to the others in the family. Hence, when her sister and cousin shoo her away, she addresses the viewer mocking their pretensions at being great beauties and claiming that she also has her admirers. The love triangle involving Janakikutty, Bhaskaran and Sarojini Edathi is one of the major plotlines of the movie and the movie locates her discontent at being indirectly rejected as a potential mate by Bhaskaran in favour of her rival, Sarojini Edathi. Thus, unlike in the short story, where Janakikutty's friendship with the Yakshi doesn't require any special crisis to blossom forth, in the movie, it is her heartbreak that leads to her seeking the company of the

Yakshi.

In the movie, Janakikutty's meeting with the Yakshi happens as she runs away after witnessing Bhaskaran embracing Sarojini Edathi at the dilapidated *illom* (a Namboothiri house). From their conversation which she overhears, Janakikutty comes to know of their love affair. As she runs away from there, unconscious of everything else but her own misery, she falls down near the wall and lays there, unable to get up. The background music lends an air of mystery to the scene as Janakikutty recognizes that she is lying down in the *illom* grounds supposedly haunted by the Yakshi Kunjathaal. As Janakikutty looks around apprehensively, trees sway in the wind that blows, the only movement in the stillness that pervades the *illom* grounds. Suddenly, the Yakshi appears at the doorway of the broken down wall and comes running to where Janakikutty lies helpless on the ground.



There are indications though in the music and in the shot sequence that the Yakshi is not someone to be feared. There are replays of the Yakshi's movement towards Janakikutty, a technique usually used when introducing the hero of a movie. The background music also turns into a happy one as the Yakshi runs towards Janakikutty. The Yakshi's first action is to hold Janakikutty's hand and raise her head.

As Janakikutty stares at her in fear, the Yakshi says, "Don't be afraid. I won't do anything." Janakikutty surveys her from head to toe and stares especially at her teeth. "Hmm... what are you looking at?" "Damshttra", replies Janakikutty. "Oh, Janakikutty has also heard about it, right? Only under necessity will I bring out my damshttras. What else have you heard about me?" "You take them to the palm tree, then drink their blood and spit out their bones. Don't you?" The Yakshi laughs and answers, "I don't do that to all."

The Yakshi walks besides a limping Janakikutty who asks her, "Isn't that cruel?" The Yakshi laughs on hearing her question and retorts "If men act cruel, what else can one do?" Janakikutty's counters it with a statement about her own situation. "There are women who do cruel things as well." "Who?" asks the Yakshi. "Such things are there". "Who"? asks the Yakshi once more and adds, "Should I punish [her/them]?"

If one considers the Yakshi as Janakikutty's double, then it would be an insightful exercise to try to understand her emergence at this point in the narrative. Earlier, Janakikutty's Mutthashi had told her the story of Kunjathaal, the *Antarjanam* who had been murdered by her philandering husband and whose spirit was supposed to have brought ruin to his house. She had also added that the spirit still haunts the grounds of her husband's *illom*. It is this dilapidated *illom* that Sarojini Edathi and Bhaskaran use as their secret rendezvous point and in whose grounds Janakikutty falls

down. Hence, it is no surprise that once Janakikutty realizes the place where she has fallen down, she remembers its history and the story of the Yakshi haunting it.

Kunjathaal was a woman betrayed by the man she loved who had (according to her Mutthashi) instead sought women far inferior to her^x. Janakikutty must have seen parallels to Kunjathaal's story in her own situation since she must have also felt betrayed by the man she loved in favour of a girl she did not consider her intellectual equal.

Janakikutty's choice of the Yakshi as her double is also connected with the feelings of rage she experiences at what she considers as a betrayal of her love. However, Janakikutty's rage is directed at her rival Sarojini Edathi than at Bhaskaran. Thus when she wakes up on her bed surrounded by her relatives after being discovered in the grounds by Ravunni Nair, she stares angrily at Sarojini Edathi, her eye balls almost popping out in their fury. Sarojini Edathi is taken aback and whispers to her mother that she feels scared looking at Janakikutty.

Perhaps, Janakikutty also needs at that point an older woman, jilted in love just like her, who can put her experience in perspective. Thus, at a later point, the Yakshi asks Janakikutty not to desire for anything and tells her that it is when one hopes for something that one becomes unhappy. Janakikutty avers to the truth of her statement and mournfully replies that she understood the truth of her words belatedly.

To Janakikutty, perhaps going for the pleasure and security of a homosocial bonding with the Yakshi is also her way of rejecting (what may seem to her) the instability and treachery of a heterosexual relationship.

One also needs to regard the Yakshi as the embodiment of Janakikutty's feelings of resentment and possibly rage. It would be fruitful to look at the Yakshi in the two texts in this way. In "Little Earthquakes", the Yakshi can be regarded as the

embodiment of Janakikutty's feelings of resentment towards her family members who treat her with indifference and her only confidant in the household, Akkara Mutthashi, with disdain. As discussed earlier, in the story, Janakikutty lists out a number of instances where she indicates that the Yakshi was about to pounce on her family members who had dared to scold her for something or the other. In the story, the Yakshi's *damshttras* (giant molars) seem to lengthen whenever Janakikutty feels angry towards her family members and one can conclude that the Yakshi perhaps there stands as the embodiment of Janakikutty's own repressed inner self. However, in *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty*, these feelings of resentment are directed less towards her other family members and more towards Sarojini Edathi, her rival in love.

This is apparent in the very first meeting Janakikutty has with the Yakshi. In this meeting, they have an exchange where Janakikutty tries to make sense of the Yakshi's blood-thirsty self. Her question to the Yakshi whether it is not cruel to eat men and drink their blood is met with the Yakshi's response that such cruelty is necessary when dealing with cruel men. Janakikutty accepts the veracity of the Yakshi's statement and Janakikutty's words about there being cruel women as well is an indication of where her thoughts are headed. When the Yakshi asks her immediately as to whether she should punish those women, it seems to be a projection of what she herself wants to do. That is exactly what happens once they become friends.

Janakikutty's first act of revenge against Sarojini Edathi is to destroy her expensive clothes, make up items and jewellery. However, it is not she who performs these acts. As she takes up the scissors to cut up Sarojini Edathi's clothes, the Yakshi takes the scissors from her hand. Janakikutty looks on gleefully and even assists her as the Yakshi Kunjathaal goes about cutting up Sarojini Edathi's clothes and smashing

her jewellery.



The second act of revenge happens a bit later when Bhaskaran visits their home where he and Sarojini Edathi exchange secret glances with each other. Janakikutty sits listless and seemingly unaware of their exchanges, but her later actions prove that they disturb her greatly. Stones are pelted at Sarojini Edathi as she rests in her upper storey room, an event that later makes her Mutthashi suspect that Janakikutty is possessed.

In both the texts, Janakikutty's relationship with the Yakshi encounters a roadblock when her family members suspect her to be possessed and bring in an exorcist to exorcise the Yakshi out of her. In "Little Earthquakes", Janakikutty's Mutthashi remains her only human ally at this point. When a famous sorcerer is called to drive out the Yakshi from Janakikutty, she is worried and informs Kunjathaal and her Mutthashi. Both just laugh when they hear about the exorcism rituals. The

exorcism rituals that feature in many folktales and movies based on Yakshis like *Aakashaganga* get presented in a different light in “Little Earthquakes” where the exorcist is cast in the role of the villain.

The Mantravadi came from Kallaadikottu and started the elaborate ritual. A lot of lamps were lit and a round, sacred kolam was drawn on the floor.

In the beginning I was a little scared. When Kunjathaal and Neeli came and stood behind me, I felt better. Then Mutthashi came, dragging her aged frame. She sat down beside me and all my fear vanished.

The man drove nails into the kanjira wood.

I turned around and looked furtively at Kunjathaal. Kunjathaal was in a rage. But Neeli winked at her and grinned.

Then the wood was set on fire.

Oh, what heat! How much smoke! I fell backwards. Kunjathaal held me and I promptly fell fast asleep.

“The evil spirits have all left. Disappeared! Now there will be no trouble whatsoever.” When the Mantravadi said this, I was resting my head on Kunjathaal’s lap.

I laughed. (Nair 21)

In the exorcism scene in the story, the sorcerer is pitted against the child Janakikutty and the three women she loves and it is the women who win. The sorcerer turns out to be an ineffective villain who is as clueless about the real state of affairs and as powerless as Janakikutty’s other family members. It is also significant how Janakikutty’s laughter marks both her insanity and rebellion. In an earlier instance, her brother had scolded her when he found her laughing by herself. Here, when the Mantravadi makes the claim that he has exorcized the evil spirit, Janakaikutty again

laughs in mockery. Like in *Aakashaganga* where Ganga laughs tauntingly at her enemies' attempts to save themselves, Janakikutty's laughter is also mocking. In fact, this also brings us to the question of how the woman's unrestrained laughter is considered threatening in patriarchal societies. In fact in most movies featuring the Yakshi, the recurring trope is of her laughing gleefully at her victims as they try to escape her clutches.

In the movie, the exorcism scene is in some ways more important since it brings the Yakshi and Janakikutty closer to each other. It marks a turning point in their relationship since the possibility of losing the Yakshi as her friend makes Janakikutty treasure the relationship more and also helps her get out of her feelings of resentment and sorrow at her unrequited love.

The exorcism scene in the movie is also much more intense than the one in the short story since it is one which Janakikutty has to undergo alone. While the Mutthashi of the movie gives Janakikutty the attention she doesn't get from her family members, sharing her stories with her, she doesn't look positively at Janakikutty's talk about her friendship with Kunjathaal unlike the Mutthashi in the short story. Instead, it is fear that she feels when she hears Janakikutty talking about Kunjathaal. After the stone pelting incident, it is Mutthashi who tells Janakikutty's mother about her suspicions regarding her being *possessed* after her fall in the *illom* grounds. Hence, unlike in the short story, Janakikutty doesn't have the Muthassi as company during the exorcism scene.

The sorcerer's entry is like a thunderbolt as far as Janakikutty is concerned. She feels scared thinking about what the sorcerer may do to Kunjathaal. She describes to Kunjathaal the exorcism techniques she has read in *Aitihiyamala* like how the Yakshi is supposed to feel the heat on her own body when the exorcist heats an iron

dagger in fire or how a nail being driven into the head of a doll made of kanjiram tree (snakewood tree) is supposed to also go into the forehead of the Yakshi. She even advises Kunjathaal to flee from there as she cannot bear to think of her having to go through the pain. In Janakikutty's words about the exorcism methods in folktales and *Aitihyamala*, we get to see the side of the story from the Yakshi's perspective where the methods of exorcism get presented as acts of violence.

Janakikutty's concerns about the Yakshi being subjected to violence in the future awaken in the Yakshi memories about similar violence in the past and she finally tells Janakikutty her story. This is a unique instance in the genre of Yakshi movies in Malayalam where the Yakshi becomes the speaker of her own tale. As we have seen in *Manichitrathazhu* and *Aakashaganga*, the Yakshi's back story is always told by somebody else – an aunt or a grandmother who had seen it happen or heard it from someone else.

In Kunjathaal's recounting of her tale, her husband and his Karyasthan (care-taker) emerge as the villains. Kunjathaal's husband, the womaniser Namboothiri, hits her with a plank and thinking her dead, asks the Karyasthan (care-taker) to dispose of her body in the pond. The Karyasthan and her husband do not try to save her even when they realize that she is not dead and watch her drown in the pond. It is later made out to be an accidental death.

In Mutthashi's tale, Kunjathaal comes back as a Yakshi and destroy the kulam (clan) of her husband. However, from Kunjathaal's tale, it seems as if she is still searching for the men who had murdered her to take her revenge.

Janakikutty's knowledge of Yakshis till then had come from the tales she had heard from her grandmother and *Aitihyamala* where Bhattatiris married Yakshis who turned out to be honest Yakshis against the norm. However, in the Yakshi's personal

recounting of her history, she gets to see a tragic figure whose violent murder transformed her into a blood-thirsty spirit seeking revenge. Kunjathaal's recounting of her story ends with her almost baring her *damshttras* when she gets furious remembering the men who had murdered her.

The Yakshi's confession of her tragic past brings Janakikutty closer to her and when the exorcist comes to drive out the Yakshi presumably possessing her, Janakikutty's sorrow is compounded by her helplessness in protecting her only friend.

When the sorcerer tries to drive an iron nail into the doll made of *kanjiram* (snakewood tree) wood supposed to represent the body of the Yakshi, Janakikutty imagines the nail being driven into Kunjathaal's head mercilessly and the blood gushing out from her forehead. She covers her ears to blot out the sound of the hammer and falls down in a faint screaming aloud.

Compared to the early stage of their acquaintance where the Yakshi was for Janakikutty an instrument to avenge her feelings of resentment against Sarojini Edathi, the Yakshi has now transformed into Janakikutty's dearest friend. Their friendship has reached a point where it is Janakikutty who physically feels the iron nail presumably being driven into her friend's head.

However, like in the story, in the movie as well, the Yakshi is so powerful that the sorcerer's efforts to bind her end in vain. The drama involving the exorcism seems to be one full of just sound and fury as the Yakshi's existence is shown to be in no way threatened by the exorcist's machinations. When Janakikutty wakes up, she sees the Yakshi standing at the window smiling at her and gesturing to her that she is alright.



In the short story, the episode involving the sorcerer doesn't have much consequence apart from it creating a temporary crisis in Janakikutty's life. However, in the movie, this episode brings Janakikutty and the Yakshi closer than before. Their growing closeness gets depicted in the movie through a song sequence which employs romantic conventions that befit a pair of lovers reuniting after an agonizing separation.

T. Muraleedharan in his study "Women's Friendship in Malayalam Cinema" takes up this movie as one of the rare movies in Malayalam celebrating female friendship. He too makes a similar point about how this song sequence along with the others involving the two women in the movie "draw upon cinematic conventions of heterosexual romance, presenting the women in various postures of physical intimacy" (Muraleedharan 169). In this particular song, Janakikutty and the Yakshi ride on swings and dance together. The Yakshi waits upon Janakikutty, who is presumed to be undergoing rituals associated with the onset of her puberty, with new cloth and paan to chew. Paan, which otherwise figures as an ominous signifier in Yakshi tales, here transforms into a signifier symbolizing the Yakshi's affection for

Janakikutty. The Yakshi is the true sakhi in Janakikutty's life gifting her new cloth and giving her paan to chew, initiating her into her womanhood. Muraleedharan points to the homosocial element in this song sequence.

One such sequence presents Janakikutty resting her head on the Yakshi's lap, with the latter addressing her as *sakhi* and promising to fulfil all her desires. Later in the same song sequence there is a visual reference to *Thirandiukuli* – the ritual associated with a girl attaining puberty – in which the Yakshi is shown giving company to Janakikutty. The sequence thus becomes suggestive of the Yakshi's presiding presence over Janakikutty's emerging sexuality which acquires dimensions of same-gender affinities when one considers the Yakshi's explicit resistance and antagonism towards men and heterosexual institutions. The many shots of eye-contacts and gazes exchanged between the girls seem to suggest that it is the Yakshi who desires Janakikutty. But if the Yakshi is merely the imagination of Janakikutty's frustrated desire for Bhaskaran, then it becomes a case of a woman desiring "another woman to desire her". (Muraleedharan 169-170)

In the song sequence that Muraleedharan describes, the Yakshi who had cautioned Janakikutty against desiring things, promises to fulfil all her desires. Perhaps, the desire that the Yakshi considers as inimical to happiness is the desire for a successful heterosexual relationship. The Yakshi when she was alive had desired to lead a conventional life content with her husband and children, but that was not to be because of the philandering ways of her husband. Janakikutty too is in a similar situation where her feelings for Bhaskaran remain unreciprocated. As the Yakshi and Janakikutty get closer, the Yakshi reveals to Janakikutty the extents to which she can go to keep her happy. The lyrics of the song has the Yakshi promising to build

Janakikutty a mansion with a thousand floors atop a palm tree in the sky and the refrain is “What do you want, Sakhi? What do you want? What more do you want?”



While Muraleedharan tries to complicate the element of desire that emerges in the exchanges between the Yakshi and Janakikutty wondering whether the Yakshi stands for Janakikutty’s own complicated engagement with her own sexuality and desirability, the movie for its part presents it as a pure friendship. In the movie’s narrative, the song sequence also symbolizes Janakikutty’s increasing disengagement with Bhaskaran. Janakikutty, in fact, slowly starts accepting Bhaskaran and Sarojini Edathi’s relationship and when news comes of Sarojini Edathi’s impending marriage with her father’s colleague, she doesn’t greet the news with joy, but with disappointment and even hatches plans of switching the bridegroom at the mandap using Kunjathaal’s magic. Her friendship with the Yakshi becomes the centre of Janakikutty’s life for the time being.

The Yakshi also helps Janakikutty understand her cousin Sarojini Edathi’s situation by acting as a counter point to her biased perceptions. Thus when Janakikutty asks the Yakshi if it is right for a person to ditch a man after hugging him and kissing him (referring to Bhaskaran), the Yakshi tries to show her the other side of the coin and argues that it could be because young girls usually do not have the

courage to express their opinions.

Janakikutty's feelings for Bhaskaran fade to a point where she can even dream about marrying him off to her rival Sarojini Edathi, in the happy company of the Yakshi. Janakikutty has a dream where she sees the Yakshi officiating at the wedding of Sarojini Edathi and Bhaskaran. In the dream, the Yakshi and Janakikutty lead them to the wedding pandal where it is they who provide the bride and the groom with garlands to exchange. The Yakshi even does *kanyadaan* by placing Sarojini Edathi's palm on Bhaskaran's. As the married couple runs off happily, Janakikutty and Kunjathaal smile contentedly at each other. Thus, for some time at least, the primary relationship in Janakikutty's life becomes her friendship with the Yakshi. One could even argue that the Yakshi has in some ways replaced Bhaskaran in Janakikutty's mind. If Bhaskaran was desired not because he was a man, but because he made her feel desirable by giving her gifts of chocolates and treating her as an adult, one can say that the Yakshi performs the same role. She offers Janakikutty mansions atop her palm tree and treats her like an adult. In fact, the Yakshi performing the *kanyadaan* which is traditionally performed by an older man shows that for Janakikutty, the Yakshi, though a woman, is able to blur the gender roles.

However, even at this stage, there are indications in the narrative that Janakikutty's life with the Yakshi is just an interlude before Bhaskaran's re-entry into it. This future event is hinted in the Yakshi Kunjathaal's words to Janakikutty when the latter gets impatient with the Yakshi for not doing anything to prevent Sarojini Edathi's wedding with another man. Kunjathaal opines that whatever happens will be according to one's fate and wonders if the things happening are indicative of a different fate in store for Bhaskaran. Explaining herself further, Kunjathaal points to the possibility of Bhaskaran having a change of perception four years down the line

when he sees Janakikutty as a grown up young woman and wonders whether Bhaskaran would then look back at his love affair with Sarojini Edathi as mere foolishness.

In both the texts, Sarojini Edathi's wedding and the events surrounding it have a major bearing on how Janakikutty's friendship with the Yakshi plays out. However, the points of focus in the same segment in the two texts are different. In "Little Earthquakes", the event that mainly tests Janakikutty's friendship with the Yakshi is her Mutthashi's death. Since the Janakikutty of the story has no love interest, Sarojini Edathi's wedding with another man doesn't concern her beyond a point. It is Mutthashi's ill health which is her worry and when Mutthashi has a fall and gets bedridden days before the wedding ceremony, it seems like the old woman wouldn't be able to attend Sarojini Edathi's wedding. While Mutthashi yearns to witness the wedding ceremony, the adults around Janakikutty make fun of the old woman for desiring the impossible and advise her to stay quiet. Even visitors to the house advise Mutthashi not to trouble the family members further and ask her to pray for a quick death. Janakikutty feels enraged on seeing how others around her treat Mutthashi and how they have no time to even feed her properly, busy as they are with the wedding preparations for the wedding.

In the short story, it is not coincidental that the scenario surrounding Mutthashi's ability to participate in Sarojini Edathi's wedding becomes the focal point of the narrative, one which tests Janakikutty and the Yakshi's relationship. Till then, Janakikutty had always maintained that it was under her persuasion that the Yakshi had refrained from showing her true self in front of her unpleasant relatives. However, Janakikutty is now in a situation where the Yakshi has to show her prowess for her only human confidant, the Mutthashi, has no one else to support her in her wish to see

her granddaughter's wedding. Even Mutthashi's ill health doesn't accord her any sympathy from her family members; rather, it is her death which everyone seeks. To Janakikutty, the present situation is so unbearable that she needs the Yakshi to show her true prowess for the first time. Conversely, it also becomes a test of Janakikutty's own faith in her fantastical world symbolized by the Yakshi.

It is no wonder then that the Yakshi's demonstration of her prowess coincides with Janakikutty's narrative finally embracing the limitlessness of fantasy as a genre. Thus the story enters into the realm of fantasy that questions the rationality of the adult world as Mutthashi passes away on the morning of the wedding. The family members decide to keep the death a secret since they fear that once they come to know of it, people might quote some Shastra or the other to postpone the wedding. Janakikutty describes to the reader conversations amongst the adults which imply that the old woman has died, but to the young Janakikutty, they don't make any sense. As far as she is concerned, her Mutthashi is alive and wants to attend the wedding.

As Janakikutty confronts the Yakshi and asks her to make her Mutthashi attend the wedding, she is asking for her friend to work a miracle. To Janakikutty, the miracle is about making her bed-ridden grandmother attend the wedding. To the reader aware of the possibility of the Mutthashi's death, it is about making a dead person come alive. This exchange also shows Janakikutty's feelings of uncertainty about her own fantastical world.

Kunjathaal said nothing. I became angry.

"You call yourself a great Yakshi. What is the use? Can't you help Mutthashi? She wants to see the wedding."

Kunjathaal laughed.

"You said you could fly to the top of the pala tree. Is that also a bluff?"

Kunjathaal looked at me.

“Um. I’ll come to the wedding too. You bring Mutthashi. Neeli and I will wait at the gate.”

I wasn’t sure if she was joking. I hesitated. Kunjathaal said, “I am serious. I am sure Mutthashi will come. You call her.” (Nair 28)

What happens next can be read as the working of this miracle. When Janakikutty forces open Mutthashi’s door, Ravunni Nair informs her that Mutthashi is dead. Yet she ignores his words and goes inside. To Janakikutty, Mutthashi appears to be just playing one of her tricks by pretending to be dead. Janakikutty tells herself that she wouldn’t allow Mutthashi to die without attending Sarojini Edathi’s wedding. Ravunni Nair grins sarcastically when Janakikutty repeatedly calls Mutthashi’s name asking her if she is not coming for the wedding. What happens next in Janakikutty’s narrative is this.

Mutthassi opened her eyes. Just as I expected.

“It is time for the muhurtham. Let’s go. We have to rush.”

Muttashi sat up in the bed.

“Do you want to change your mundu?”

Mutthashi shook her mundu to take out the crinkles and wore it again. She draped a sheet over her head. In one quick movement she got off the bed, took my hand and started walking.

Looking triumphantly at Ravunni Nair who still wore his mocking expression, Mutthashi and I stepped out. Kunjathaal and Neeli were at the gate. Hand in hand, the four of us ran. Mutthashi was faster than us. In fact she was pulling us. (Nair 29)

Janakikutty and her Mutthashi not only take part in the wedding, but

Mutthashi also showers rice and flowers on the groom and the bride. Later when Janakikutty is questioned as to why she came alone for the wedding, she insists that she came with Mutthashi and describes what happened in detail. The adults consider it as her hallucination, but when Ravunni Nair checks Mutthashi's body, he sees rice and flowers in her hand. He wonders how they came there since when he performed the ceremonial bath of the dead body and laid out the body, they were not there. This makes the adults suspect that Mutthashi's spirit has entered Janakikutty's body.

We can see that M.T. Vasudevan Nair has thus added an element of supernatural to the whole affair making one wonder whether Janakikutty's version is not true after all. Rational explanations can be given for the incident. Perhaps it was Janakikutty herself who kept them there. Perhaps things did not happen as Janakikutty claims they did since after all it is her narration. However, in this twist, we get to see the power of the genre of fantasy to force open closed endings by making the fantastic appear real. After all, Janakikutty's version is supposed to question the ratio-centric adult world pointing to realms that a steadfastness to reason and logic often miss out on. This world is represented by the Yakshi and it is no wonder then that the Yakshi can make possible what appears at first to be impossible – make a dead person come alive.

In both the texts, the Yakshi Kunjathaal displays her violent self for the first time during Sarojini Edathi's wedding, an incident which disturbs Janakikutty to the point where she disavows the latter's company. However, the results of this altercation differ in the two texts which need to be finally traced to Janakikutty's own conflicted feelings about what the Yakshi embodies.

In the story "Little Earthquakes", Kunjaathal's damshtras grow longer and longer and her eyes spit fire when she looks at the bridegroom. When Janakikutty sees

Kunjathaal jumping towards the groom as he poses for a photo with the bride, she bursts into a loud scream and falls unconscious. However, when she wakes up, the groom seems to be unharmed. This is the incident in the narrative that indirectly indicates to us that Kunjathaal must have had an unhappy marriage and that her death could have been a result of that. The movie gives a detailed backstory to Kunjathaal, but the short story leaves it at that. Her caste identity as a Namboothiri woman of old is enough of an indication to let the readers presume what could have happened. Since caste and inheritance laws forbade younger brothers in the Namboothiri families from marrying women of their caste, the percentage of young marriageable Namboothiri women were quite high compared to the percentage of marriageable men in the community leading to child marriages and polygamy (Kodoth 351-352). Perhaps, Kunjathaal was married off to an older Namboothiri man with many wives who treated her badly and was responsible for her death.

The incident at the wedding leads to an altercation between Janakikutty and Kunjathaal. Though Kunjathaal and Neeli come to visit Janakikutty to appease her, she is not won over. She continues to remain angry with Kunjathaal for frightening people with the *damshttra* at the wrong time and asks them to leave telling them that she is not going to play with them any longer. Janakikutty watches them leave, “heads bent in shame” (Nair 31).

Janakikutty’s narrative however ends with her with her otherworldly playmates and not just that, an addition to her set of partners. The new addition is her *Mutthassi* coming back as a child version of her self – *Mutthashikutty*.

In Janakikutty’s narrative, *Mutthashi* dies soon after witnessing *Sarojini Edathi*’s wedding. Janakikutty who has to witness the funeral all alone cannot bear to think of how scorched *Mutthashi* must feel on being burnt in the funeral pyre. And

then something surprising happens - she suddenly sees Mutthashi coming out of the pyre.

The white cloth with which Mutthashi had covered her body turned into wings. Mutthashi came towards me, flying. Before I could turn my eyes from the courtyard, Mutthashi had landed on my bed. My happiness knew no bounds. I held Mutthashi in a tight embrace. (Nair 31-32)

At the end of the story, we see Janakikutty addressing a woman who could be the nurse in the hospital she has been admitted to. Janakikutty informs her that the little girl who sits behind her, wearing her skirt and with her hair cropped short, is none other than her Mutthashi. The nurse runs away, but Janakikutty sees Mutthashi sitting on the window sill and is surprised to see her former playmates, Kunjathaal and Neeli helping Mutthashi climb down from the sill. Kunjathaal laughs at Janakikutty calling her silly and tells her that they hadn't left her at all. Janakikutty's narrative ends with the words:

Now for kothengkallu and vatu and all my other games, there is a foursome. Mutthashikutty and I are partners. Kunjathaal and Neeli the other team. How well matched we are!

Ah! What more is there to wish for! (Nair 32)

At the end of the narrative, we see Janakikutty placing her "dead" Mutthashi within her private world of Kunjathaal and Karineeli. By the end, Mutthashi has also transformed into a little girl who is addressed as 'Mutthashikutty' (*kutty* is used to refer to a child) and who takes part in the games the other three play. For Janakikutty, unable to come to terms with her Mutthashi's death, death itself becomes a game, a trick that Mutthashi plays on others to fool them. It also marks the end of Mutthashi's adulthood with its trials where others see her as a burden. Mutthashi lives on as a

child in Janakikutty's world where the Yakshi and Karineeli continue to give her company. Janakikutty's narrative seems to suggest that it is Kunjathaal's powers which made it possible for Mutthashi to attend Sarojini Edathi's wedding. Is Kunjathaal behind Mutthashi's transformation too? The narrative doesn't seem to say anything regarding this. The indication is that the world Janakikutty entered into with the coming of Kunjathaal is so magical that miraculous things keep happening where all her wishes, one after the other, come true. Perhaps, it is only fit that Mutthashi enters the world of spirits like Kunjathaal and Karineeli who, after an unhappy life, enter into a world of their own making.

The genre of fantasy also needs to be highlighted here. In a traditional story, the death of Mutthashi would have been the climactic event that marked the breakdown of Janakikutty's fantastical world. Mutthashi's death can in fact be read as an instance of Janakikutty's imaginary world being under siege. She is unable to do anything even when she sees her Mutthashi being burnt on the funeral pyre. But then miraculously, Mutthashi grows wings and comes flying towards Janakikutty. What would have been a sad turn of events turns out to be a happy coincidence as Janakikutty gets a very agile Mutthashi as her imaginary playmate. As in the case of Yakshi and Karineeli, Mutthashi had also been marked by her disinterest in heterosexual pursuits as her age had put her outside that sphere. Now her transformation into a young girl makes her even more compatible in Janakikutty's world.

N. Sajan in his study of the story interprets the ending of the narrative as Janakikutty's attempt to transcend the logical end points of a classical narrative. He points to how Janakikutty's narrative and her "wayward movements and actions" always try to "violate the very spatio-temporal boundaries fixed by those who occupy

the space of reason” (Sajan 101). This is especially apparent in the open ending of the text. Sajan quotes William Labor who argues that every good narrator continually words off the question of “So what” at the end of his/her narration (Sajan 101).

The two anticipated events in the story are Janaki’s cousin Sarojini’s wedding and Mutthashi’s death. They seem[sic] to function as two extreme poles of reality: one metaphorically signifying the beginning of life (narration) and the other metaphorically representing the end of life (narration). These two events usually are the culmination of a classical narrative. But Janakikutty wants to stretch her metonymic tale beyond these points of culmination. She does not seem to prefer her reader to ask the evaluative question “So what?” ... Janakikutty’s tale tries to transcend the anticipation of her Mutthashi’s death and the “curious present” that would definitely take her to the point of culmination of the tale. So very intelligently, even after her cousin Sarojini’s marriage and Mutthashi’s death she re-forms her coterie ... This seems to be a new logic of Janakikutty’s discourse of a self moulded reality” (Sajan 102-103)

One can say that the structure of Janakikutty’s narrative that ends in the “present continuous” without the threat of a closure mirrors its subject matter – mortality, whether it be that of Mutthashi or the narrative is held at bay as the genre of fantasy cuts through closed endings. The Yakshi Kunjathaal is the perfect representative of this world, a figure who embodies the possibilities of fantasy to rework mythical figures of the past to suit the present of a lonely young girl. It is no accident that the Yakshi is a female spirit for Janakikutty seems to revel in homosocial bondings that perhaps cannot be sustained for long in a heterosexually conditioned society where growing up for a young girl equates to entering into heterosexual

pursuits. The Yakshi, a rebel of the patriarchal order, transforms in this story into the ideal female companion, sensitive to the young girl's needs, yet powerful enough to protect her.

The Yakshi also needs to be read as Janakikutty's double, a figure who stands for what Janakikutty wants to be – a super child-woman, if one can call her that, one who is simultaneously an active child, interested in children's games and a powerful adult, unmarked by heterosexual pursuits. The incident at the wedding where the Yakshi bares her fangs can be then read as Janakikutty's own repressed self voicing its protest at having to grow up and be part of a heterosexual union later. It is an incident that causes Janakikutty some unease, perhaps revealing to her her own violent latent self. Janakikutty scolding Yakshi and Karineeli needs to be seen as an acknowledgement of this unease. However, Janakikutty cannot function without her double for without the Yakshi, she is powerless. It is because she drives away her friends that she is forced to witness Mutthashi's funeral on her own, unable to stop it. Mutthashi sprouting a pair of wings and coming back to her needs to be read as Janakikutty embracing her double for in the hospital room, Kunjathaal, the Yakshi, makes it clear that she had not gone away despite Janakikutty's angry words. Mutthashi's re-birth as Mutthashikutty can only happen in a world where the Yakshi Kunjathaal and Karineeli continue to exist. Without Mutthashi, her sole human ally, Janakikutty cannot survive on her own especially in the absence of her double, the Yakshi to assist her. Janakikutty comes out of her dilemma by recognizing the Yakshi as an inevitable part of her world/herself.

This is not how things play out in the movie where the Yakshi's unleashing of her latent violent self leads to a more serious altercation between her and Janakikutty which ends in the Yakshi leaving Janakikutty forever. When the Yakshi bares her

fangs on witnessing the wedding, especially on seeing the groom, presumably remembering her own wedding, Janakikutty cries out asking her not to kill anyone and falls down in a faint. Later when the Yakshi comes to visit her in the hospital, Janakikutty shrinks away from her, her eyes dilating in fear. While there is a scene of rapprochement between the Yakshi and Janakikutty later in the movie, the Yakshi's revelation of her true self seems to have created an insurmountable barrier between both.

The Yakshi Kunjathaal's baring her fangs on seeing the bridegroom can be read as her antagonism towards the heterosexual institution of marriage. If we read the Yakshi as Janakikutty's double, then this becomes a moment when Janakikutty comes face to face with her own repressed self. However, unlike in the story, this is a self Janakikutty is unable to accept as part of herself.

In the beginning of their acquaintance, the Yakshi was for Janakikutty an instrument to wreak her revenge on her rival in love, Sarojini Edathi. However, her friendship had slowly transformed Janakikutty into someone who could move on from her one-sided love for Bhaskaran and subsequent feelings of jealousy towards Sarojini Edathi. She had reveled in her friendship with the Yakshi where her friend promised to make all her desires come true. However, it must be remembered that all along, the Yakshi had acted in accordance with Janakikutty's wishes where her acts of violence like pelting stones at Sarojini Edathi or cutting up her clothes and smashing her jewelry were under Janakikutty's instructions.

If one looks at the Yakshi as Janakikutty's own repressed self, then one can say that for her, once her repressed self tries to come out of the limits of legitimacy within which it is inscribed (like the petty acts of violence mentioned above), it becomes a self to be feared. Perhaps, what Janakikutty rejects through the Yakshi is that part of

her self which cannot function in a heterosexual society, one characterized by its deep antagonism towards heterosexual institutions. It is significant that after Bhaskaran betrays her, the Yakshi takes on some aspects of the heterosexual gender role of Janakikutty's lover in the movie. In fact, one wonders if Janakikutty's rejection of the Yakshi after witnessing the wedding stems from her realization that despite her homosocial and possibly homosexual feelings, she will have no choice but to enter into a heterosexual union in the future. In fact, if she couldn't even prevent Sarojini Edathi from marrying the man whom she desired, what choice will she have in the future if she cannot come to terms with the heterosexual norms of her society? Hence, it is no accident that when the Yakshi visits Janakikutty in the hospital, her eyes dilate in fear and she shrinks away from the Yakshi. It is Bhaskaran who comes to the terrified Janakikutty's aid, a symbolic moment that foreshadows her coming back to the legitimacy of a heterosexual relationship.

With Sarojini Edathi married to someone else and Bhaskaran now seemingly aware of

Janakikutty's femininity and her suitability as a partner, the Yakshi has no more reason to stay on in Janakikutty's life and she disappears forever. The movie ends with Janakikutty's statement that while she did miss Kunjathaal for a while, after some days, she completely forgot about her since the interesting conversations with Bhaskarettan^{xi} left her no time for anything else. She tries to make sense of her time with Kunjathaal by wondering if some days playing with Kunjathaal were part of her *yogam* (fate).

T. Muraleedharan that *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* though it starts out celebrating female friendship ultimately sees it as "incompatible and, at the same time, replaceable with heterosexual relationships" (Muraleedharan 168). He points to

how the “subtexts of same-gender desire remain fragmentary” in the movie with the narrative resolution “unilaterally celebrating heterosexual values and male-female bonds” (Muraleedharan 169-170).

To make sense of the way Janakikutty’s discontent has been written differently in the movie, one has to read it with the changes in her family set up in the movie. In the movie, like in the short story, Janakikutty’s mother undergoes a lot of frustration on account of her husband whose long absence from home is attributed to his falling for a servant woman at the workplace. In the short story, the mother’s anxiety regarding her husband’s fidelity remains unresolved until the end. However, in the movie, this anxiety gets resolved in the most dramatic fashion when Janakikutty’s father comes back for the wedding with the maid he is considered to be under the spell of. Muraleedharan describes this scene thus.

One of the most violent episodes in this film is one in which Kunjuttu finally meets this maid – a lame and hunch-backed woman with dark skin – and heaves a sigh of relief. The physical handicap of a poor woman becomes a matter of comfort and pleasure for Kunjuttu as it reassures her of her husband’s fidelity, and more importantly, about her own desirability to the male gaze. (Muraleedharan 167)

To me, the return of Janakikutty’s father and the subsequent episode where Kunjootty’s suspicions are exposed as ridiculous foreshadow Janakikutty’s own entrance into a heterosexual relationship, proven now to be sacrosanct. This is because the movie does set up parallels between Janakikutty’s situation and her mother’s at the beginning of its narrative where her mother’s suspicions regarding her husband’s fidelity foreshadow Janakikutty’s own disappointment in love.

Muraleedharan remarks on how for a movie celebrating female friendship,

many of the female-female relations within Janakikutty's household are shown to be strained. He takes the instances of the rivalry between Janakikutty's mother and her elder sister and their harassment of their mother's sister, Akkara Mutthassi. It may not be right to say that all the female relationships in the family are marked by discord since Sarojini Edathi and Janakikutty's elder sister seem to have a solid friendship that transcends the rivalry of their mothers. However, for the most part, the women in the family seem to regard other women with suspicion. In fact, the concept of the Yakshi is used by these women directly or indirectly when talking about women they consider as possible threats to their desired relationships. The greatest irony here is in seeing women who have had the misfortune to be labelled as Yakshis using the same appellation for women they consider as rivals to their or their loved ones' legitimate relationships. Akkara Mutthassi is an interesting case in point. Janakikutty is amused and intrigued by Mutthassi whose scandalous past history is looked upon with disapproval by the rest of the family. Mutthassi, a married woman with children, had eloped with a Tamilian contractor who had come to oversee the construction of a bridge nearby. She had come back home after a span of twenty years after her lover's death (which Ravunni Nair considers as a lie declaring that she had been instead abandoned by the Tamilian when she had lost all her wealth). Janakikutty, however, looks upon her Mutthassi's adventures with amusement and cannot believe that the old woman in front of her had escapades like these in her youth. However, while Janakikutty is able to look upon Mutthassi's romantic adventures with sympathy, it doesn't extend to her cousin Sarojini Edathi's own relationship. She often refers to Sarojini Edathi as a Yakshi in her conversation. Similarly, even with such a past, Mutthassi herself is quite conventional in her appraisal of other women. It is in fact Mutthassi who first breeds the germs of suspicion in Kunjootty's head regarding her

husband's fidelity. She describes the maid in Kunjootty's husband's workplace in Yakshi-like terms, pointing to her bewitching beauty and claiming that she is the kind to "devour men".

The depiction of the female-headed household is to a large extent negative in the movie with the older females either engaged in what are later proven to be ridiculous preoccupations (Kunjootty's rants against her husband's fidelity) or in conflict with each other. For instance, when Janakikutty publicly disgraces Sarojini Edathi by talking openly about her relationship with Bhaskaran in front of her possible groom and party, Meenakshi, Sarojini Edathi's mother accuses Kunjootty of being the cause of her husband's infidelity since she, like her daughter, lacks character. It is Meenakshi's husband who intervenes on Janakikutty's behalf and saves the day. Both the husbands are presented as reasonable and kind and it can be argued that the end of Janakikutty's alienation is also made possible by the return of her father to the scene. Muraleedharan points to how it is Bhaskaran who "sweet-talks Janakikutty back to sanity" wondering if the suggestion is that "only men can restore normalcy in women's lives" (Muraleedharan 166). I argue that it is not just Bhaskaran who represents this idea. At the end of the movie, as Janakikutty stands wiping her tears after the Yakshi bids her good-bye, Bhaskaran comes in and consoles her assuring her that both her father and he are nearby and that there is nothing to be scared of anymore. Thus, at the end of the movie, it is the arrival of the men which is shown as fulfilling the lack that the Yakshi's appearance had tried to make up for.

However, one must also keep in mind that contrasted with the animosity that women of the household have for each other, the relationship between Janakikutty and the Yakshi do point to possibilities of female friendship that transcend the normative. Though Janakikutty sees Sarojini Edathi in Yakshi-like terms for the most part, the

Yakshi's ability to empathise with Sarojini Edathi's situation and make Janakikutty understand the rationale behind her Edathi's silence does help Janakikutty to see her erstwhile rival in a more sympathetic light and helps her get out of that cycle of animosity.

At the end of the day though, one has to admit that female homosocial bondings in the movie, even the idealized one between Janakikutty and the Yakshi, are treated as temporary replacements for a real heterosexual relationship as represented by the one between Janakikutty and Bhaskaran.

However, when we talk about female friendships in both the texts, it is also important to note what doesn't get included in its narrative of inclusivity. In both the texts, Janakikutty is friends not just with Kunjathaal. There is another woman in their set – Karineeli. However, Karineeli is relegated to a secondary character in both the texts and one wonders if her caste has a bearing on this. An exploration of the figure Karineeli in both the texts would help us understand the codes of exclusion that reach into even fantastical constructions of female friendship.

Compared to *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty*, it is in "Little Earthquakes" that Karineeli gets a fuller description. In the story, she is presented as a fierce spirit who can afflict her victims with small pox by spitting at them. The first time Janakikutty meets her is when she has an altercation with Kunjathaal. She is also presented as a lonely spirit in search of a playmate like Kunjathaal. However, there is a difference in Janakikutty's description of the two spirits, Kunjathaal and Karineeli, making one wonder if caste continues to explicitly mark even the non-human bodies of spirits. This could be because in Janakikutty's imagination, the spirits take on the appearances of people she is familiar with. Kunjathaal is described thus:

You've seen the Athemmar girl, haven't you, she who was married off to that

Kunnamkulam boy? Well, Kunjathaal looked exactly like that. A white mundu with the traditional kara and kuri; a white blouse; a white cloth around her shoulder. She had a red spot of chaandu on her forehead. Studs in her ears. A necklace of sovereigns around the neck. (Nair 15)

Karineeli gets the following description:

You know that parapoodam^{xii} that comes dancing in the Velakali temple festival. And you must have seen Kali who comes to sweep our courtyard and collect the cowdung. Kali looks just like the parapoodam and this Karineeli is a younger version of our Kali. Karineeli wears no blouse; only necklaces made of stones and beads. Her teeth are black. That may be because she chews betel. (Nair 17)

The figure of Karineeli could be an amalgam of different folk tales, but her lower caste status is a given. One can see her caste status in her dress itself. She does not wear a blouse as lower caste women were not allowed to cover their breasts as per the rules of the caste system in Kerala. As against this stands Kunjathaal, the ghost of the Namboothiri woman, whose neck is also hard to see because of the cloth that she wears over her blouse. Again, Karineeli punishes through spitting at her victims, while Kunjathol's fangs come out and she drinks the blood of her victims. Karineeli reminds Janakikutty of the lower caste servant Kali who comes every day to sweep the ground and collect the dung.

Thus caste continues to be a marker even on the ethereal "bodies" of the spirits. Janakikutty continues to see the ghosts of the two women in terms of the caste they belonged to while they were alive. The ethereal body of the upper caste spirit is described in positive terms (there is a reference to how pretty Kunjathaal's teeth

looked as she smiled) while in the case of the lower-caste spirit, the lower-caste woman she is compared to is herself de-humanized. Ironically, Kali, the lower-caste woman to whom Karineeli is compared reminds the narrator of the lower-caste spirit, *parapoodam*, generally played by a man wearing a dark mask at temple festivals.

In the story “Little Earthquakes”, compared to the film, there is more interaction between Janakikutty and Karineeli. Karineeli remains a part of Janakikutty’s gang till the end and in important moments like the exorcism scene, Karineeli is also there to lend support to both Janakikutty and Kunjathaal. Karineeli also acts as Janakikutty’s protector-friend even ready to spit at Janakikutty’s Ettan when he gets angry with Janakikutty. Yet it is also clear that Janakikutty’s primary loyalty is towards Kunjathaal who is addressed as “Tamburatti” (a term used to address a woman belonging to the royal family) by Karineeli. Perhaps, Janakikutty’s own identity as an upper-caste young girl comes out in aligning herself closer with the upper-caste spirit of Kunjathaal than that of the lower-caste spirit Karineeli.

In the movie, Karineeli is almost relegated to the background and acts as the guard of the Yakshi Kunjathaal than a character in her own right. Janakikutty never considers her as part of her set of friends. Muraleedharan in his article “Women’s Friendship in Malayalam Cinema”, basing his study on *Ente Swantham Janakikutty* along with a few other movies, highlights the outsider status of Karineeli. “Karineeli appears in the film briefly in the guise of a ‘Dalit’ woman, thereby complicating the racial dimensions of female friendships. Both Janakikutty and the Yakshi treat Karineeli as an outsider to their world of idyllic friendship.”(Muraleedharan 177)

Thus, one has to conclude that in both the texts, while Janakikutty’s and the Yakshi’s friendship gets presented as ideal in many respects, the relegation of Karineeli to the margins of their friendship complicates any discourses on the

possibilities of female friendship challenging the status quo.

To conclude, this chapter has been my attempt to explore the possibilities generated when the Yakshi is seen as a friend-protector to the female protagonist and ask whether these texts are able to go beyond the stereotypical representations and typical concerns associated with her depiction as the femme fatale in popular folk tales and movies. Compared to texts where the Yakshi is the wife/lover and explore the dangers/possibilities in the relationship with a non-human semi-divine/monstrous female being, these texts explore the dimensions available in the Yakshi myth for women readers and viewers. The Yakshi emerges in these texts as a symbol of female power, desired to some extent by the female protagonists for her superhuman powers. However, what differentiates the Yakshi from other superhuman females, like say the goddess, is her more pronounced violent self. The Yakshi's violence and rage are for the most part seen as positive qualities by the female protagonists since they see in her the embodiment of their own repressed feelings of resentment against the society they are part of. The Yakshi's identity as an older powerful female and her transformation from a victim when she was alive into a figure of resistance are also partly the sources of attraction for the female protagonist in these texts.

However, one also cannot miss out on the subtext of same-gender desire centred around the concept of female friendship that emerges in these two texts. The Yakshi in these texts can be read as standing for a world based on homosocial bonding that a young girl is forced to leave behind as she grows up and becomes part of a world built on heterosexual relationships and institutions. The Yakshi's rage can be read as the young girl's own feelings of resentment at having to give up the world of female-female bonding to become a part of heterosexual relationships.

The two texts, the short story "Little Earthquakes" and the movie *Ennu*

Swantham Janakikutty, though they use the same source material, diverge significantly in where they locate the lack in the female protagonist's life that calls forth the mythical figure of the Yakshi. In both the texts, Janakikutty emerges as alienated in her surroundings, but while in "Little Earthquakes", this alienation is compounded by her lack of interest in heterosexual relationships, in *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty*, it is produced by her not being considered suitable enough to participate in one. The narrative resolutions of the two texts vary accordingly.

However, the larger difference also lies in how the domestic arrangement gets presented in the two texts – in the short story, one of the major heterosexual relationships in the text, that of Janakikutty's parents, is portrayed as one riddled with serious issues – the anxiety over Janakikutty's father's fidelity towards his wife remains unresolved till the end. In contrast, the heterosexual relationships in the movie are generally positive – Janakikutty's parents have a strenuous marital relationship because of suspicions about the husband being unfaithful, but these are presented as unfounded by the end of the movie. The contrasting ways in which heterosexuality get written in the two texts have a bearing on the Yakshi-Janakikutty relationship too. In the story, Janakikutty's homosocial relationship with the Yakshi offers her the security impossible to find in the heterosexual relationships of the day while in the movie, it has to give way to a heterosexual relationship, re-legitimised by the end of its narrative.

However, it also needs to be pointed out that while the relationship between Janakikutty and the Yakshi in the texts does bring to relief female-female relationships that diverge from hetero-normative, it is one that is still inscribed within the caste norms of the day. This becomes clear when we contrast it with Janakikutty's friendship with the lower caste spirit, Karineeli. The young upper caste girl

Janakikutty's primary loyalty in both the texts is to the upper caste spirit than the lower caste one. Thus, even the ideal female friendship envisaged in the two texts is one that works on certain codes of exclusion.

Notes:

ⁱ Unlike the folktales in *Aitihyamala* which are available in English, this ballad is untranslated and is available only in Malayalam as part of a collection of tales featuring the heroines of the ballads of Northern Kerala.

ⁱⁱ I am relying mostly on this English translation though I will also be keeping in mind the Malayalam source text as reference.

ⁱⁱⁱ Literally, the grandmother from the other bank. Janakikutty's grandmother's sister's actual home is some place on the other bank of the river near their house.

^{iv} Mother

^v Mother's elder sister

^{vi} Elder sister. Sarojini Edathi is in fact Janakikutty's cousin, the daughter of her elder aunt.

^{vii} Elder brother.

^{viii} The implied meaning is that the woman has seduced Janakikutty's father in the way a famed apsara like Urvashi was supposed to do.

^{ix} "Except in towns, the pattern in Kerala is one of houses surrounded by groves and woods, ponds, and usually a serpent mound. This area is called *parambu*." (Ayyar and Subramaniam 14)

^x Mutthashi's class and caste prejudices are apparent as she talks disparagingly about the "vrishalis" the Namboothiri spent his nights with instead of with his wife. When Janakikutty asks Mutthashi what the term means, Mutthashi answers dismissively, "those women who come for *puram pani* (work not directly in the household, but outside it)".

^{xi} Janakikutty calls Bhaskaran Ettan since he is older to her.

^{xii} "There are many otherworldly characters that people Janakikutty's world. *Kunjathaal* and *Athemmar* (page 15) are deviations from the word 'Akathullaval', or the 'lady inside', meaning a Nambudiri Brahmin woman. 'Kunju' mean [sic] kutty or child. While, *brahmarakshas* is the spirit of a Brahmin, *Karineeli* and *parapoodam* are the spirits of lower caste persons. In temple festivals, a man wearing a dark mask plays the part of *parapoodam*." (Ayyar and Subramaniam 17)

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

One of the major reasons I chose to do my thesis on an Indian monster was because I felt that there was a real lack of academic interest in the field of India's horror and fantasy traditions. When one contrasts this with the large number of studies on the figures of the vampire, the witch and the zombie even within the Indian academy, the absence of any such studies exploring Indian monsters seems especially striking. When I chose the representative figure of the Yakshi based on my familiarity with her representations in Kerala's horror-fantasy traditions, it hadn't occurred to me that the study of monsters could also be part of a larger field called Cultural Studies. However, a work like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Studies* introduced me to the concept that cultures can be read through the monsters they bear. This chapter of my thesis is going to be a focused exploration of this concept as it tries to put together the discussions surrounding diverse texts in the five major chapters.

One of the most challenging and exciting exercises for me while compiling this thesis was drawing a historical map of the Yakshi's journeys from her origins as a fertility deity to her femme fatale avatar in Kerala's folklore. This was an interesting process since it made me aware of the rich religious-cultural histories that have contributed to the evolution and transformations of this figure. In fact, compared to many monsters, the Yakshi is a more difficult figure to pin down since she has taken on so many different avatars in varied religious mythologies and cultural contexts that the only thing that can be said about her with certainty is that she is a shape-shifter literally and metaphorically. However, the continuing currency of this figure in different popular religions points to how there is something about this figure that

cannot be ascribed to others. Is it her initial links with nature where she stood as a primitive goddess of fertility and vegetation that have left their imprint on her, a “wildness” that surfaces whether she is worshipped as a goddess or demonised as a monster? Perhaps, the Yakshi’s “original wildness” defies any attempt at permanent domestication and that is why the term continues to retain its ambiguous connotations even today. The term Yakshi has managed to retain what some may call its “ontological liminality” where it stands in a space marked by in-betweenness and simultaneity. In her position as the “liminal other”, the Yakshi occupies the no (wo)man’s land between two countries – one of divinity and the other of monstrosity, simultaneously straying into and interrogating their borders. What I point to is how the Yakshi’s refusal to be tied down to one pole of the spectrum, whether it be that of divinity or that of monstrosity, calls into question the concreteness of those categories themselves.

This aspect of the Yakshi comes out clearly in my second chapter where I discuss how contextualising the tale of the Yakshi VS the Goddess of Chottanikkara reveals that the Yakshi, unlike the female monster she is portrayed as in the tale, turns out to be a goddess in her own right, revealed in the ending of the tale. In the other text that I discuss that of the Christian Priest of Kadamattom, the Yakshi and the Priest seem to partake of similar qualities – the Yakshi may be monstrous, but the Priest’s magic is no less monstrous. The texts in this chapter look at the Yakshi as the “self-consolidating other” of the Goddess and the Priest who need her to construct their own selves. When one puts the Yakshi alongside her rivals, be it the Goddess of Chottanikkara or the Priest of Kadamattom, the categories of the divine and the monstrous do not seem so well-defined as they first appear. Cohen often talks about how the monster helps in revealing the arbitrariness of “difference” where it turns out

to be “mutable rather than essential” and how it thus “threatens to reveal that difference originates in process, rather than in fact (and that “fact” is subject to constant reconstruction and change)” (Cohen 12, 14-15). Thus, a careful study of these texts reveals that there is not much separating the Yakshi from the Goddess or the Priest and that she is less the “other” of these figures and more their “self”. This chapter also attempts to read the two Yakshi tales as part of particular religious histories, a process that involves reading the contexts of the tales as co-texts.

The texts that I explore in my third chapter ask as to what it is about the Yakshi that contributes to her monstrosity. Borrowing from Barbara Creed’s concept of the “monstrous feminine” which emphasizes “the importance of gender” in the construction of a female monster’s monstrosity, I explore the story of Venmoni and its re-tellings where the Yakshi, unlike in the texts in the 2nd chapter, is feared for her overpowering sexuality and not her blood lust per se. Thus, here, it is the Yakshi’s overpowering female sexuality that makes her the monster and the tale and its re-tellings are about attempts to domesticate her sexuality into a pleasurable one for the male protagonists. The texts in this chapter also attempt to understand the role of fantasy in the construction of figures like the Yakshi. This chapter that focuses on a particular tale and its two re-tellings, one as a play and the other as a film adaptation, also engages with the question of how the same source material gets interpreted in different ways in different time periods and genres.

In my fourth and fifth chapters, my focus is on the domestic space where the family woman turns into her dreaded other, the Yakshi. In my fourth chapter, where I read Malayattoor Ramakrishnan’s novel *Yakshi* and its movie re-tellings *Yakshi* and *Akam*, I try to understand the process of monster-making or “Yakshi-making”. How do Yakshis get created in a modern society? While many of the texts that I deal with

have Yakshis as the doubles of the female protagonists, *Yakshi* and its re-tellings are different since the figure of the Yakshi stands for the abjected part of the self of the male protagonist. The Yakshi here is the monstrous part of his self that Srini never acknowledges as his and which he instead tries to transfer on to the body of his wife.

In my fifth chapter, I look at the motif of the Yakshi as the avenger who arrives as the abject to break open closed systems built on gender and caste hierarchies. In both the texts, the women who turn into the Yakshi are murdered for questioning the rules governing the casteist and classist societies they are part of. If in *Aakashaganga*, the Yakshi uses the figure of the perfect family woman Maya to wreak her revenge on the family which had been responsible for her murder, in *Manichitrathazhu*, Ganga, the family woman, uses the figure of the Yakshi Nagavalli to voice her repressed rage and illegitimate desires. One of the major ways in which I try to understand the implicit violence contained in Ganga's domestic arrangement in the movie *Manichitrathazhu* is through the trope of binding – Ganga's passionate self, sexual and otherwise, has been bound in her “self” as Nakulan's wife.

In the sixth chapter which looks at texts where the Yakshi is cast in the role of the friend-protector, the attempt is to go beyond typical representations of the Yakshi as the femme fatale and explore other aspects of the Yakshi, especially the meanings she holds for female protagonists. The Yakshi is *desired* by the female protagonists in the short story “Little Earthquakes” and its movie adaptation *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty*, for a number of things - for the possibilities of female power that she represents, for her “beauty” and for the security she offers as an older female. This chapter also differs from the other chapters in its exploration of homosocial relationships centred around the friendship between the Yakshi and the younger female protagonist.

My thesis coincidentally has a number of texts which share with the Yakshi the ability to shape-shift, i.e they are re-tellings. Thus, the same source text takes on different shapes in different cultural contexts. For instance, the tale of the Brahmin Venmoni and the Yakshi set in medieval Kerala becomes a site to explore existentialist questions in the 1980s. In the 2010s, the tale becomes the subject matter of a movie which uses it to challenge standardised representations of the Yakshi in Kerala's film tradition. All the three tell the story of the forbidden love between a human and a Yakshi, yet their areas of focus are different. Even in texts which are not direct re-tellings like Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's novel *Yakshi* which takes off from the folktale of Venmoni and the yakshi and gives the older narrative a 20th century twist by making it into a psychological thriller, the fascination for a particular Yakshi story never seems to die. This is also partly due to the cultural scene of Kerala with its significant reading public which often ensures that popular literary works get adapted into plays and movies.

While I have tried to explore a variety of texts to understand the meanings the figure of the Yakshi holds in Kerala's cultural imaginary, it needs to be admitted that the thesis has its limitations. At the end of the day, I have had to make a selection, partly based on the availability of English translations and partly based on my own preference and the framework of my thesis. I have tried to choose those texts which are widely popular and hence, which I believe, have shaped the dominant representations of Yakshi in Kerala's Cultural Imaginary. This means that there have been Yakshi stories like those of authors like C. Ayyappan and U.A. Khadar which I have not been able to include as part of the thesis.

There are a number of texts in Malayalam which look at the figure of the *pretam* or the ghost and are structurally and tonally very similar to some of the texts

studied as part of this thesis – for instance, a movie like *Aakashaganga* bears striking resemblance to a ghost movie like *Lisa*. These texts have not come under the purview of this thesis mainly because I wanted this particular study to be exclusively focused on the figure of the Yakshi. This study has also not looked at texts in which female protagonists are not identified as Yakshis, but can be read as sharing their characteristics –femme fatales who use their sexuality to wreak their revenge on men or the larger society that victimised them.

Another major limitation of this thesis has been the relative absence of texts by female authors. Even in the case of texts which look at the Yakshi as the friend-protector, the texts are all penned by men. My thesis does take a cursory look at texts of unknown authorship such as the two ballads centred round female protagonists in chapter 6 which may be speculated to have female authorship. While I am aware of this limitation, I have to admit that texts which look at the Yakshi from the female point of view have been comparatively rarer. Perhaps, a thesis like this is also an attempt to start asking questions about the need to re-investigate the figure of the Yakshi and free her from her standardised representations, the majority of which are centred around male protagonists.

There have been attempts like the short film “My Grandfather’s Yakshi” directed by the woman film-maker Anoodha Kunnath which tries to interpret the Yakshi tale as grounded in the reality of the caste system of the time. In this short film, a grandson remembers his grandfather’s favourite Yakshi story at his funeral. His grandfather’s story used to be about the beautiful woman he met on a stormy night when he lost his way. The woman gave him company and they talked to each other like long-lost friends. The woman had only an aunt to call her own and on the way, she suddenly remembered that she had forgotten to buy the lime that her aunt

wanted to have for her paan. The grandfather then took the woman home and was about to offer her the lime from his father's paan box when his father found him. His father then asked him to hold his hand and then to take a look at the woman. As he looked at the woman, he saw her transform into a Yakshi. His father then threw an iron key at her and she flinched from its touch and disappeared for ever. The narrator recounts that his grandfather used to end the story saying he used to carry the key wherever he went as a memory of that encounter and that he never got to see that woman again. As the grandson remembers the story and looks outside the gate, he sees an old woman standing on the road trying to peek into his house. The old lady's grandsons arrive in an auto rickshaw and take her home, but even while sitting in the auto, the old woman's eyes are still on the house. The last shot has the grandson taking out the iron key from his pocket and staring reflectively in the direction of the auto that left with the old woman.

From the clues in the movie, it seems that the grandfather's Yakshi was the woman he had fallen in love with while he was young. She ought to have been from a family inferior to theirs, probably of another caste and his father must have put an end to the relationship. The woman flinches when the father throws the iron key at her and shrieks out as if in pain. One wonders if the iron key stands for imprisonment. Perhaps the woman was locked up and her disappearance was carefully orchestrated by the grandfather's father who wanted to break up their relationship. The regret in the grandfather's voice at the end of the story points to how his feelings towards the woman were not what the story made it out to be. The old woman at the end seems to have been the woman he had loved, the beautiful Yakshi of the tale.

While the grandson avers to the regret in his grandfather's voice whenever he told the story, that the grandfather could deal with the past and his regret at the end of

a forbidden relationship with a woman from a lower social background only through the genre of a Yakshi tale points to his inability to be truthful to himself and those around him. The short movie thus raises the possibility that the Yakshis in the Yakshi tales were often women from lower social strata whose relationships with upper caste men often resulted in their sexuality being vilified by those higher up in the hierarchy.

A future study on Yakshi can also look at her from an eco-feminist perspective trying to read in her systems of nature worship. After all, the ambivalent responses to the figure of the Yakshi can be read as the fear/respect towards those figures which embody the wildness of nature. More than that, the Yakshi can also be read as the symbol of a culture in tune with the natural world around it. For instance, Vayaloppilli Narayana Menon's 1957 poem "Yugaparivartanam" [The Transformation of an Age] records the poet's conflicted feelings at the turning of the age marked by the transformation of the society from a feudal to an industrial one by the mid-half of the 20th century. The feudal past marked by the *marumakkatayam* system of inheritance and *sambandhams* contracted by the *Namboothiris* is invoked in the poem. Industrialisation has changed the familiar rural landscape for ever – there are electric posts dotting the rice paddies and the *Karimpana* (the palm tree) on the hilltop has been destroyed, making the poet ruefully wonder whether it has also rendered homeless the Yakshi who resided there. The coming age is marked by the literal and figurative destruction of a feudal age of darkness, symbolized in the poem by the electric posts and the battle cries on the lips of the former tenants influenced by the Communist Movement. The poet who belongs to the feudal class has ambivalent feelings about the changes transforming the world around him. On the one hand, he fears that industrialisation will usher in an age where "human values" no longer matter and on the other hand, he is hopeful that the destruction of the old system

based on the exploitation of particular groups will usher in an age of brotherhood where there will be true equality. The Yakshi, while standing as a vestige of the feudal past also stands for the values and meanings it held – of familiar legends and myths rooted in the fears of the dark unpierced by electric lights and a world where large scale deforestation hadn't made its presence felt (Menon, “Yugaparivartanam” 48).



Now that I have summarized the major points of discussion in my thesis as well as its limitations, I would like to spend some time discussing areas I have not explored in this thesis. One of the major cultural artefacts associated with the figure of the Yakshi in Kerala has been a sculpture titled the “Yakshi” situated in Malampuzha in Central Kerala. The first nude statue in Kerala’s public space which was opened to the public in 1969, “Yakshi” by the famous sculptor Kanai Kunjiraman, was hailed in

art circles as the embodiment of fecundity and motherhood while it was reviled by the conservatives as an obscene art form (Thomas 61).

There have been feminist readings of the sculpture such as the recent one by Yakob Thomas which argues that the sculpture re-writes the model of the Kerala woman built around the patriarchal control of the female body and sexuality (Thomas 83-84). He points to what he calls the feminist politics involved in the sitting posture of the sculpture (Thomas 83-84). Thomas points to how sitting “properly” with her legs together all the time is ingrained into the psyche of girls right from their childhood (Thomas 83-84). Women are trained not to sit “improperly” which is to spread their legs or to cross their legs while sitting (Thomas 83-84). Hence, the Yakshi’s sitting posture where she sits with her legs spread out is to Thomas a political act where she refuses to be a disciplined female body (Thomas 83-84). He argues that Kunjiraman’s later nude female sculptures like Sagarakanyaka (the virgin of the Sea on a beach in Southern Kerala) look rather tame in comparison since the postures do not have the bold defiance of Yakshi (Thomas 82). He points out that the sculpture “Yakshi” has a dynamic quality to it where it seems as if she has been caught in a moment of motion (Thomas 82). From her posture, it seems as if she is looking into the horizon and deriving energy from the natural world (Thomas 82). Thomas argues that no one can look at the sculpture without feeling a bit scared of it (Thomas 82). This, he opines, is in contrast to the later sculptures where the female bodies are completely passive (Thomas 82).

While Yakshi’s sculpture can be read in this way where her body language can be considered as openly defying the patriarchal rules that govern how a woman should move about in a gender-biased society like Kerala, to consider it as a radical sculpture on that count alone seems to me a bit of a simplification. To argue that the

sculpture offers only a “dynamic female gaze” is to miss out on the male gaze that is very much a part of the public space. If it is the viewer who decides what meanings to generate out of an object, then can one deny that the nude sculpture of a woman in a public space also offers its male viewers avenues of pleasure? Do all women have the freedom to gaze at a sculpture like that in a traditionally conservative society like Kerala? One wonders as to how many women would find it liberating to have a nude statue of a woman with her legs spread out in a public space where they are not allowed to move about freely. While I am not denying the symbolic capital of a sculpture like the Yakshi, I argue that such symbolism holds ultimate meaning only in a society where women have the right to move about freely or sit the way they want without the fear of male surveillance or violence. In a society like Kerala where women from the lower castes have even fought for the right to cover their breasts, how can one assume that a woman would always find a nude female sculpture liberating? (Menon, *A Survey* 310).

Debates around its revolutionary potential notwithstanding, the sculpture “Yakshi” points to how the figure of the Yakshi has always had a place in Kerala’s cultural imaginary in explorations of models of alternate femininity.

Another space where the figure of the Yakshi has featured prominently is in the cyber space. Today, there are two popular Malayalam Facebook pages dedicated to the Yakshi, one titled “Yakshi” which was the pioneer of the trend and the other titled “Kalliyankattu Neeli” which identifies itself as the “younger sister” of the Facebook page “Yakshi”.

An article in Hindu introducing the page “Yakshi” writes,

Here Yakshi is the embodiment of woman empowerment, one who does all those things that women of ‘respectable families’ can only dream of She talks about social issues that concern all of us, especially women, in clear concise poetical language. This deadly combination of a writer-cum-social critic was born on June 25. Barely a month old, she is already liked by more than 11,000 Facebook users, who cannot help bemused [sic] and inspired by her words. (Anoop, “This Yakshi”)

The author of this page, who chooses to remain anonymous, points out that she wanted to explore the figure of the Yakshi from another angle, “as a means to discuss the politics of women” (Anoop, “This Yakshi”). She views the figure of the Yakshi as a symbol of what most women crave for –“Liberation from morality, social rules and restrictions” (Anoop, “This Yakshi”). Yakshi’s posts are “mostly a set of black slides with white writing on them that reminds one of night and moonlight associated with the original concept. The slides make sense individually, but more when put together. The posts together form an album titled ‘Yakshi quotes’” (Anoop, “This Yakshi”). The caption on the Facebook page which reads “Purakilundu” [Behind you] merges the Yakshi myth with that of an all-knowing medium of investigation. The Yakshi, in the tales, may have stalked her victim either in the guise of a beautiful woman or as an invisible presence. In her Facebook avatar, she is now keeping track of events and people and is surveying each news story.

“Yakshi” takes on various social issues, including gender issues, through its thought-provoking, but humorous quotes. It also often uses characters and markers of different Yakshi myths to interpret the social and political events happening around it. For instance, when a popular newspaper in Kerala known for its bias towards one political party changed its loyalty to that of its rival party after the elections which had

swung in the latter's favour and started featuring more reports and stories on its leader who was the new chief minister, "Yakshi" described the political opportunism of the said newspaper in these words: "After all, once the cross in his hand gets broken, even Father Kathanar will only have good things to say about Kalliankattu Neeli" (Sajeesh¹ 37). "Yakshi"'s reference was to the popular legend of the Priest of Kadamattom who was supposed to have defeated a famous Yakshi through his powers of sorcery. In Yakshi's interpretation of the tale, Kathanar's prowess was confined to the cross he held, losing which he became completely helpless in front of the Yakshi.

In another of the "Yakshi Quotes" popular during the election campaign in Kerala, "Yakshi" warned against casting votes for untrustworthy candidates/parties. "Some votes are like lime. If you give them, then only your bone and skin will be left the next day" (Sajeesh 37). "Yakshi" was referring to how in the Yakshi tale, it is the traveller's offering lime to the wrong person which results in him being reduced to bones and skin the next day.

"Yakshi" also takes on partisan media which often buys police stories in their entirety without critically investigating them. One quote reads thus: "Some news stories are the ghosts of police FIRs. The 'Your correspondent' you have been eternally searching for is the constable in your nearest police station" (Sajeesh 38). "Yakshi" is pointing to a situation where the anonymous "Your correspondent" supposed to report news as it happens merges seamlessly with the representative of official brutality.

വിരലുപോലും വെളിച്ചം കാണാത്ത കുപ്പായമാണ്
സുരക്ഷിതത്വം തരുന്നതെങ്കിൽ,
ആ സുരക്ഷിതത്വത്തിനെന്നോ പ്രശ്നമുണ്ടല്ലോട്യേ.

#YakshiFacts

The “Yakshi” also uses its “Yakshi Quotes” to expose the hypocrisy of a patriarchal society. The above quote taken from the page reads: “If what gives you security is a robe that doesn’t even let your fingers see the light, then there is something wrong with that security, ain’t it?” The quote seems to mock ideologies that imprison women claiming that it is for their safety.

പുസ്തകപ്രകാശനം നിർവഹിക്കാനുള്ള സ്വാമിജി
റോട്ടിലൂടെ ചിരിപാഞ്ഞുപോകാൻ സാധ്യതയുണ്ട്,
ബസ്സിന്റെ വലതു വശത്തിരിക്കുന്ന
പെണ്ണങ്ങളെല്ലാം സീറ്റൊഴിച്ച്
ജനിച്ചിട്ടേയില്ല എന്ന ഭാവത്തോടെ
ഇടതു വശത്തേക്ക് മാറി നിൽക്കേണ്ടതാണ്.

#Yakshi

Another quote refers to a recent controversy in Kerala where a Hindu Swami who was supposed to launch a book requested that the female translator of the book be not invited for the event since as per the rules of their ashram, women’s “impure shadows” were not supposed to fall on the Swamis. (“Protests erupt”)ⁱⁱ. The quote

reads, “The Swami who is supposed to do the book launch is expected to bulldoze through the road anytime now. The women sitting in the seats on the right are asked to vacate their seats and move to the left pretending that they have not even been born.”

A longer quote points to the unfreedom in a middle-class set up where a young girl’s morality is under scrutiny from all sides. In this quote, a young girl’s desire for freedom to do what she wants gets presented as something possible only after her death and her unfreedom is tracked to the “noble taravad” she is born into. The criticism here is of families who act like the sorcerers in Yakshi tales. If the sorcerer binds the Yakshi with his magical staff, the men of the so called “noble families” bind the “family woman” with chains of “respectability”, though physical violence as a means of binding is also not completely ruled out. In the reference to “Vidamatten”, Ganga of Manichitrathazhu is invoked in whose words to her husband Nakulan, “Yakshi” traces the rage of every woman against strictures of patriarchal control. The Yakshi who laughs hysterically at her victims, travels all alone in the night and sits on the palm tree becomes the embodiment of the “free woman” the young girl born in the “noble taravad” wants to be.

Walking about humming a song, with your hair, unrestrained by a

headscarf, flying in the wind.

Clambering up every tree in sight to perch there swinging your legs.

Roaming around refusing to alight in the tender moonlight.

Laughing boisterously in the midst of loud chatter.

Asking “Vidamatten?” [You won’t let me go?] when told not to go.

Tying a swing and riding it like the wind...

Is it that after death, one can do whatever one wants?

Hey girl, there is nothing as ignoble as being born in a “noble

taravad” at a time when morality’s mantra-vadis move about waving

their binding staff. (Sajeesh 38)

There are other quotes which question patriarchal codes of control which specify that a woman’s freedom of movement ends once the day ends. In this quote addressed to wardens of ladies’ hostels, the Yakshi, the woman who walks the night, is mocking the said and unsaid rules that govern the functioning of such institutions where its women boarders are expected to be back in their hostels before nightfall. The quote reads, “Girls are not cattle sent to graze in the campus to be taken stock of at dusk and locked up in their sheds” (Sajeesh 38).

N.P. Sajeesh, who discusses the significance of Malayalam internet satire in his article in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, points to how pages like the “Yakshi” provide food for laughter as well as serious thought to the viewer/reader through its poetic quotes. He points to one such quote which through the pun on the word “grounded” links a marker of the Yakshi myth with a patriarchal stricture. The quote which addresses a patriarchal society reads, “Weren’t you always scared of the girl who wasn’t grounded enough?” (Sajeesh 28) Sajeesh points out that in this quote, the fear towards the Yakshi whose feet do not touch the ground merges with the fear towards the girl who refuses to stay on the ground, i.e within bounds (Sajeesh 28). Shedding more light on the pun, Sajeesh writes as to how in a moralistic society, a woman who keeps her feet planted to the ground, i.e who doesn’t aspire to go beyond the

structures of control which fix her place, is celebrated as a “respectable young woman” (Sajeesh 28). The usage also points to how a patriarchal society fears a woman who refuses to “stay on the ground” i.e who voices her opinions and involves herself in public affairs. Thus, the Yakshi in stories, often identified by her feet which famously do not touch the ground, becomes the symbol of the female rebel.

There are other quotes which attack capital punishment and superstition which use markers of the Yakshi myth to make their point. Thus, the quote against capital punishment reads, “If murders committed in the name of justice are justifiable, then why have you nailed and bound all the ghosts?” pointing to how state violence doesn’t differ in any way from the violence of the ghosts which gets condemned in stories (Sajeesh 38). This quote addressed to the famous sorcerer, Kathanar, mocks at religious superstitions by highlighting the similarity in the shape of the cross and the electric post and wondering where the superiority of the cross lies. “If the ghost is one who flees at the sight of the cross, shouldn’t she also run away in fear spotting the electric post, dear Kathanar?” (Sajeesh 38).

In order to understand the revolutionary nature of this Facebook page, one needs to situate it in the debates about what Banet-Weiser and Miltner call “networked misogyny” which they define as “an especially virulent hostility and violence towards women in online environments” (Weiser and Miltner 171).

In their study of verbal and online abuse in India, Kovacs, Padte and Shobha S.V. quote a paper from the Association for Progressive Communication and write,

ICTs allow perpetrators to commit violence anonymously and at a distance from the women they are targeting, making it harder to identify perpetrators and charge and prosecute them. The number of rape threats, calls for violence,

misuse of images, and sexuality based attacks directed at women across the world online – including in India – is indicative of the gender-based discrimination that the “democratic” space of the Internet has not effaced. Women experience a consistent and systemic demeaning of their selves, which rather than being based on their views, politics or ideas – or essentially, what they say - attacks their gender. (Kovacs et al 3)

Sajeesh in his article on satire in social media points to how female celebrities in Kerala like the TV anchor Ranjini Haridas, actress Reema Kallunkal and the social worker Arundhati are often the targets of online abuse. One of the most frequent insults hurled at such women is to call them “sex workers” trying to reduce them to their bodies (Sajeesh 37). The “trolls” use the anonymity of social media to hurl abuses at the women (Weiser and Miltner 171). In her blog post “What the Internet Gave the Kerala Man (Apart from Porn)”, Sandhya Menon discusses the facebook pages of two female celebrities in Kerala, Ranjini Haridas criticised for her “broken” Malayalam and “modern” life style and Manju Warriar, an actress whose comeback to movies after years of being a home-maker involved separating from her superstar husband and leaving her daughter’s custody to him. She points to the vitriol of hate Haridas receives on her facebook page from commenters who “leave no aspect of her untouched – her makeup, who she is with in the picture, her clothes, her smile, teeth, even her being single, or being raised by her mother, having lost her father early” (“What the internet”). In contrast, “the hate on Warriar’s page manifests itself differently; she is called a bad mother ... She is wished ill-luck with her come-back film; she is condemned for leaving her marriage and husband” (Menon, “What the internet”).

In the cases of “networked misogyny”, we get to see the female targets being reduced to their bodies by attackers who use the anonymity social media offers as a shield. In contrast, in the case of a Facebook page like “Yakshi”, we get to see a woman using the anonymity of the social media to her advantage by using an anonymous Facebook page as her platform to launch a critique of the society, especially its gender codes.

One of the significant ways in which the anonymous Facebook owner of the page has tried to re-interpret the figure of the Yakshi is by claiming the space of a witness that the Yakshi, in her identity as a spirit, i.e. as a woman outside life, offers. She sees revolutionary potential in the formlessness of the figure. The “Yakshi” thus stands as the omnipotent and omnipresent being who despite being a female cannot be defined by her body.

In a question and answer session posted on a tumblr page dedicated to the facebook page “Yakshi”, answering a question about why she tries to intervene in the social questions of the day from the hidden space that the invisible identity of her facebook page “Yakshi” offers, the owner of this radical page writes,

Why do you insist that one needs a form to say what one wants to? You always decide what to hear based on who says it and not on what is being said. Yakshi is an image that has taken shape in human imagination, mainly male imagination. Therefore, all the falsehoods of human emotions can be found hidden here and there in Yakshi. Through the cracks that form when the Yakshi asks herself how she became what she is, you are looking into the nudity of your own falsehoods. Honestly, it is you who are hiding, Mister,

even when you think you are being fully visibleⁱⁱⁱ. (“The Yakshibition of truth”)

In her interpretation, the figure of the Yakshi, being a male construct, reveals the falsehoods about masculinity itself. “Yakshi”, the facebook page, links the potential of invisibility that an anonymous page offers with the figure of the invisible Yakshi.

Linking the figure of the Yakshi with intransigent female power, the anonymous writer adds,

The contributions of women in history have rarely been recorded. They were sometimes recorded as “anonymous” though. The concept of Yakshi was definitely patriarchal. That some women were out of men’s control was not acceptable to the patriarchy. They realised that power of uncontrolled women is unparalleled and branded them demons. (Anoop, “This Yakshi”)

In another interview, the owner of the page tries to see in the Yakshi tale a relentless war of the victims of social injustice against the wrong-doers as well as social structures which abet them. She asks,

Have you ever thought about how Yakshis and ghosts come into being? To become a Yakshi is a totally revolutionary move one adopts in a situation where convinced of the impossibility of getting the justice one seeks from others, one sets about in search of it on her own. In a place where systems of investigation are transparent and the legal system is free of corruption, what role is there for the Yakshi? Those who commit crime approach the sorcerer to bind the Yakshi. The sorcerer possessing special powers becomes the agent of

those with money and influence and subdues the Yakshi. The bound Yakshi, if she succeeds in getting out of her imprisonment at any point of time, goes about seeking justice again. She gets subdued again. It is a life as tempestuous and revolutionary as this that you have “brought down” to [stories of] lime and seduction! (Sajeesh 39)

The anonymous Facebook page titled “Kalliyankattu Neeli” tries to highlight caste issues along with those of gender. One of Neeli’s Quotes reads, “Don’t think Koran and Neeli will stay mum. They have the accounts of a thousand years to settle. The white god will have to pay.” (Sajeesh 39) “Koran” in Malayalam sayings stands for the Dalit labourer forced to starvation even on the day of Onam, the harvest festival. Neeli in the tale of the Yakshi Kalliankattu Neeli is the non-brahmin woman^{iv} murdered by her Tamil brahmin husband while she had been pregnant and who became a Yakshi to avenge her murder. The quote points to the rise of Dalit (female) voices which, among other things, are also going to be critical of religious concepts based on hierarchies of colour and caste. To get a sense of its radical potential, the Facebook page “Kalliyankattu Neeli” which identifies the Yakshi Neeli as a Dalit Yakshi and uses her voice to protest both caste and gender violence needs to be read in conjunction with texts like “Little Earthquakes” and *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* where the Dalit spirit gets marginalised in the narrative.

At the end of the day, the question arises: what is the purpose in studying a figure like the Yakshi in today’s context? What has this monster, which perhaps attained the prototype of its current avatar in medieval Kerala, to say in a time and place so distant from that of its conception? Does such a figure hold radical potential even now? The discourse about “Progressive Keralam” which was popular in academic circles some decades ago used to paint a glorious picture of Kerala and the

status of women within it seeing the social reform movements and other political movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as ushering in an era of gender equality. However, numerous recent studies have questioned such claims. For instance, J. Devika, in her work, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Reforming in Twentieth Century Keralam*, writes:

Celebratory accounts invisibilise the new patriarchy shaped by modernity in Keralam, first, by projecting the public space as if it were a space free of patriarchy; and secondly, by remaining vague about new patrifocal family forms and other constraints on women inaugurated by social reformisms and political movements (Devika 12)

The public space in Kerala is still a very masculine space where men and especially women have to behave in line with certain codes of “moral” conduct. The situation has only worsened in recent times with frequent incidents of moral policing. Writing about how conservative sections of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam came together to oppose the recent ‘Kiss of Love’ campaign in Kerala that tried to reclaim the public space from the hands of self-proclaimed guardians of moral policing, Meena T. Pillai writes,

One of the prime manifestations of communalisation of politics in Kerala has been the masculinisation of the public sphere. A great deal of recent scholarship has bust the myth and mystique of the “Kerala woman”, exposing the fact that Kerala’s high rate of female literacy does not translate into either women’s freedom or agency. Moreover, it is largely within the undemocratic precincts of a chauvinistic and conservative family space that large sections of Malayali women seem to find themselves groomed and grounded. Most of them are

sabotaged by intimate and affective economies, and it is on such manufactured consent that women's citizenship rights, especially the right to mobility and choice, are curtailed and monitored. *It has been drilled into Kerala's collective unconscious that women belonging to "good families" will not be seen outside their homes after sunset, until and unless properly chaperoned by male members of the family.* Women's bodies which were co-opted by different movements and agendas in the history of Kerala, including conjugal, caste and agrarian reforms, are now co-opted by counter-democratic communal forces, in order to forge an emotional and ideological unity amongst themselves, at whatsoever minimal a level. (Pillai 11)

The Yakshi in the tales that originated in medieval Kerala was marked by her travels in the night, challenging the temporal constraints imposed on the women of the day. However, even centuries later, the mobility of women in Kerala after sunset remains the same as that of their counterparts in medieval Kerala shaped as it is by the dictates of a patriarchal society. The "good woman" is still the woman who stays at home once the sun sets or is seen outside in the company of the male members of her family.

The constraints are not just on the woman's movements, but also on her sexuality. A woman who dares to challenge the norms with her active sexuality is still branded as a Yakshi. There is another side to this coin. A "powerful" woman often gets branded as a "Yakshi" where it is implied that she has used her sexuality as a tool to reach her ends. Shalini Usha Nair, the director of *Akam*, has talked about this in detail in an interview. "It was fascinating to note that any woman who becomes powerful, economically or politically, starts acquiring a 'Yakshi' status, the underlying implication being that she had somehow used her sexuality to gain power"

(Sathyendran, “Inside”). The use of the term “Yakshi” to label “powerful women” is also thus meant to reduce them to their bodies.

In such a social context, I believe that there is a need to reclaim the radical potential of this figure beyond her standardised representations in movies and literature and re-interpret her for a new audience. One needs to tap into the untapped potential she holds for alternately viewed versions of femaleness that can challenge the normative femininity of a patriarchal society like Kerala’s. Hence, attempts like the Facebook page “Yakshi” where the Yakshi stands as the formless witness who laces her social commentary with sarcastic laughter are the need of the hour. Pages like “Yakshi” and “Kalliyankattu Neeli” are proof of the potential the figure of the Yakshi holds for social critique. They also point to the array of re-interpretations this figure can undergo even in the 21st century. One can see these anonymous facebook pages as the palm tree on which the 21st century Yakshi perches herself to sarcastically laugh at and interrogate the unequal world around her.

In my thesis, I have tried to read Kerala’s culture through its monster, the Yakshi. What one needs to remember in the case of the Yakshi of the popular Yakshi tale is that it is the construct of a patriarchal society. Yet as the object of its fear, the monster also helps reveal the fault lines of the culture which gives birth to it. The texts discussed in this thesis point to how the “other”, the Yakshi, is integral to the construction of Kerala’s goddesses, heroes and idealized masculinities for they need her “monstrosity” to define themselves. At the same time, the monster is also what Cohen calls a “vehicle of causative fantasy” which is simultaneously desired for what it represents – the forbidden, the illegitimate (Cohen 18). However, that alone cannot account for the fascination for the Yakshi. One has to surmise that the Yakshi, originally a nature deity, also stands for something beyond the bounds of “culture”

and that the desire for her is also partly rooted in her being undomesticated, in her embodying an alternate femininity that is free of social constraints. A study of the Yakshi, thus ultimately becomes a study of the culture(s) which produce and sustain her, a descent into the foundations of a its meaning-making, the discovery of the nebulousness of its categories built around images of the “self” and the “other” and the unearthing of its deep-seated fears and desires.

Notes:

ⁱ All the quotes taken from Sajesh’s Malayalam article on internet satire have been translated into English by me.

ⁱⁱ The writer Sreedevi S Kartha who translated the book ‘Transcendence: My spiritual Experience with Pramukh Swamiji’, co-authored by former President APJ Abdul Kalam and Arun Tiwari, was asked not to attend the launch of the book by the event organizers since the chief guest Swami Brahmvihari Das, a representative of Pramukh Swamiji of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha refused to share the stage with a woman who were not allowed anywhere near the Swamis by the Sanstha. The event was finally called off after strong protests. (“Protests erupt”)

ⁱⁱⁱ Translation mine

^{iv} In some versions like in the historical novel *Marthandavarma*, she is a Nair woman while in others, she is the daughter of a sex worker.

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