

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

— 12<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access —

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed  
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 12, Issue-3 (June 2021)

Editor-In-Chief : Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor : Dr. Madhuri Bite



www.the-criterion.com



AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **The Representation of *Yakshis* in Kottarathil Sankunni's *Eithiyamaala*: Re-reading from a Feminist Perspective**

**Deepa Rachel Thomas**

PhD Fellow,  
The English and Foreign Languages University,  
Hyderabad.

**Article History:** Submitted-29/05/2021, Revised-17/06/2021, Accepted-18/06/2021, Published-30/06/2021.

### **Abstract:**

The immanence of women's body and sexuality incites fear and uncanniness in a male-centred society. Female bodies are expected to manifest and project male desire that the beauty and erotic of *yakshis* depicted in select chapters from Kottarathil Shankunni's *Eithiyamaala* embodies the expectations that the male community harbours. The paper re-reads *yakshis* as the phobic and the erotic that is threatened by patriarchal social structure, generating an entity, uncanny by nature yet canny in attributes ideal and palatable to male gaze.

**Keywords:** *Yakshi*, *Eithiyamala*, **uncanny, phobic, erotic, body, sexuality.**

Myths and legends are inextricably interwoven in human beings' societal and cultural life. They are the symbolic representations of the past, embodying narratives beyond human rationality, signifying the world and its constituents which are beyond human reckoning. These myths also mirror our past, reflecting the social structures, which reverberate through the present age. Myths in Kerala, being evolved within a patriarchal social system, entail subtle references to its treatment and perception of women and femininity. Women were snubbed and muffled, confining them within the domestic circumstances. They were pushed off from public spaces and were not given a political voice. Women were not given proper education or health securities, treating them as mere reproductive machines and unpaid domestic slaves. Female sexuality is objectified and mystified simultaneously and is given a divine aura, conforming womanhood to certain qualities and responsibilities, limiting their boundaries. Women are treated as a physical body restrained to do the socially prescribed gender roles. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft marks that they were "taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison" (Wollstonecraft 157). Literature of the time was mostly written

by elitists, particularly men, and their representation of women was mostly based on the male perception of female sexuality and femininity, palatable for readers who were mostly of men.

*Eithiyamaala* by Kottarathil Sankunni is a compilation of myths, legends, folktales, and the popular stories of the time in eight volumes. The first volume was published in 1909 and the eighth and the last in 1914. The book secured its niche in the minds of Keralites as it has drawn in the primordial myths and representations and beliefs into letters. The simple and lucid language of *Eithiyamaala* prompted the work to become popular. The content was published initially in *Bhashaposhini* literary magazine in series and later all the volumes were published together by Mangalodayam in 1973 and then by Current Books. They reflected the dense and lofty socio-cultural realities of the time. The narration of the legends in *Eithiyamaala* revolves around the norms and dogmas that are foundational to Kerala's culture- religious submission, respect to elders, teachers and parents, family, nationalism, morality, and ethics. The portrayal of women in their binaries-good/bad, modest/immodest is explicit in Kottarathil Sankunni's *Eithiyamaala*, a well-knit compilation of the myths and legends that were popular in the region, representing history coated with imagination, beliefs and rumours, bringing out a colourful representation of past, a garland of legends. There are tales of supernatural events, magicians, eminent physicians, goddesses, etc which give a clear idea of the then existing systems and precedent. The *yakshis* in *Eithiyamaala* conceptualize the gender asymmetry that prevailed and still continues to be in Kerala society. *Yaksha* is considered as the Hindu fairy-like ghostly being which is a "personification of fecund life", according to Mircea Eliade in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Eliade 190). *Yakshi* is the feminine form of *Yaksha*, the feminine spirit that manifests fertility and fecundity. But the *yakshis* discussed in the paper are not fairy-like beings but the meandering spirits of the dead humans with unfulfilled lives or unfulfilled revenges, whose stories were constantly circulated among the households of Kerala, prominently in Hindu houses. "The common belief is that those who die without enjoying the worldly pleasures, disturb the human beings out of jealousy and frustration. Such spirits are pacified and propitiated and gradually become the protectors of the locality and people provide offerings and rituals to the deity." (Unnikrishnan 775). The paper is an attempt to delineate the ulterior patriarchal intentions behind the representation of *yakshis* in Kottarathil Sankunni's *Eithiyamaala*. From the select chapters of the work, "Venmani Namboorippaadanmaar", "Vayaskara Chathurvedi Bhattathiriyum Yakshiyum", "Kadamattathu Kathanar", and "Kumaramangalathu Namboori", the portrayal of *yakshis* is

analysed from a feminist perspective, strictly looking at their image as the manifestation of male psyche's fear of the incomprehensive depths/caves of female sexuality and femininity.

The legend of Venmani Namboorippaadanmaar, described in the seventeenth chapter, deals with the eponymous protagonist's adventurous encounter and his secret liaison with a lustful *yakshi* who used to seduce the men near Vadakkunnathan temple (116). The men were afraid of the *yakshi* but the Namboodiri successfully subjugated her, taking her as his partner through the rest of his life. The fiery *yakshi* transforms into a modest and ideal partner within the male embrace. She subdues to the masculine power and acts as a subservient. Even when he was asked by his father to engage in matrimony, he seeks the permission of the *yakshi* and accepts to meet her on alternative days. On the day of "upanayana" of Namboori's son, *yakshi* was asked by Namboori to do the rites as his mother. This infuriates the rightful mother leading to the ousting of the *yakshi* from the Namboodiri's house. The incidents described by Sankunni throw light into the sexual adventures that men of the time engaged in. The depiction of *yakshi* as uncanny, the worldly experienced yet unworldly entities, emerges from the repressed masculine sexual instincts. Freud states, "what is *experienced* as uncanny... can be traced back without exception to something familiar that has been repressed" (*The Uncanny* 247). In "Notes on the Making of Feminine Identity", T K Ramachandran says that the masculine tendency to fantasize and project their whims and sexual fancies to the *yakshis*. He analyses their acts by saying that,

The element of fantasy that has entered into the depictions of the feminine is particularly marked in the legendary figure of the Yakshi that had become entrenched in popular imagination. The Yakshis of Kerala are vastly different from their Northern counterparts. They are blood-sucking vampires who lure way-fares to their doom using their sexual charm. The fear and aggression in the male psyche is clearly projected onto these figures and it is perhaps possible to see them as typifying feelings of post-coital rejection and guilt. It is not therefore accidental that in the famous legend about Suryakkaladi, recorded by Kottarathil Shankunni, it is the Namboodiri who refuses to let go of the Devimahatmyam who escapes from the clutches of the Yakshi. (121)

The male fantasy and sexual desire, particularly that of the upper castes were acknowledged by the society that they could be manifested in any form and the depiction of *yakshi* was one of the favourable forms. It embodied the phobic and the erotic that male sexuality craved for. Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principles*, analyses this dual side of attitude towards anything outside ego. The libidinal sexual instincts that sought pleasure

demanded communion whereas the phobic intensified instinct and pleasure was received through rigorous pursuit of the destructive and dangerous other.

Vayaskara Chaturvedi Bhattathiri's encounter with a *yakshi*, mentioned in chapter forty-seven, underlies the primary fear of man to enter into and comprehend the "cave" of femininity. On the way back home after an exorcism at Kozhikode Samoothiri's house, the *yakshi* follows him at night and pleads to Bhattathiri to keep off the book of magic chants he had beneath his headrest and when she promises not to harm him, he makes love with her (Sankunni 261). The book he had symbolizes the codes and norms prescribed for women and implies that the chants in the book are capable of enslaving them. On the very sight of the *yakshi* he became addicted to her and his lust is justified by adding that she was also interested in him. He took her to the *illam* as his mistress. They led a happy life and she gave birth to a girl child. Years later when they lost their passion for each other as Bhattathiri's youth degenerated, she abandoned her daughter and Bhattathiri. The immateriality of her body is that which gave her the freedom to liberate herself from the family and her leave was consented by Bhattathiri.

Kadamattathu Kathanar's lore in chapter seventy-two depicts how he has subjugated *yakshis* and even transformed them into maids (437). Kathanar met a fierce one who usually seduced men, took them into woods, and sucked their blood. He offered her lime pasted on an iron nail and once she accepted it, he hammered down an iron nail into her head, transforming her into an obedient servant. Then, Kathanar transferred the *yakshi* to an old woman as a domestic aide and thus reduced to the status of a domestic slave and her labour is taken for granted without any gratitude paid. The iron nail symbolizes the male ego which hammers down into the female identity. The very act degrades her into a slave's position. "Women are 'objects' in social transactions and exchanges", as given in Pramod K Nayar's *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, who have no power over their own body or even on their mind, but is used by men as a commodity and is manipulated by their patriarchal ideologies (103). And this is clear in Kathanar's act of transforming the *yakshi* into a slave who obeys whatever demanded.

In the one hundred and twenty-fourth chapter, Kumaramangalathu Namboori also transforms a young and beautiful *yakshi* into a maid using his magical powers, assigning her the duty of a servant at his *illam* (Brahmin house). But a few days later she eluded the place and returned to her location of early days. Namboori went after her and made an agreement

that if she remains harmless to the people, she will be worshipped as his family deity or otherwise he will sacrifice her. In these myths, *yakshis* are portrayed as sirens with ethereal beauty as well as vicious nature. It is male magicians who went out to exorcise them from the possessed people. Men needed magical wands and deep knowledge in magic to deal with them. He enslaves her using his tactics and offers her that she will be worshipped if obeyed. The obedience of the immense other is the demand and if conceded, would be treated as divine whereas if disregarded would be nullified of their social and cultural existence by nailing them to a tree or bottling their spirit.

The *yakshis* in the above-mentioned chapters are represented as bloody, erotic and mysterious. They reflect the male perception of women in the Malayali social system which is patriarchal. The image conforms to the socially accepted ideal of Malayali woman, beautiful in appearance, with long hair of jet-black hue, seductive in gesture and submissive in action but is extended further as lusty bloody ghosts, who drain humans, mostly men to death. “The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it.” (Wolf 12) The beauty of *yakshi* is ethereal, signifying the male concept of an ideal woman. “The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power.” (13) The seductive appearance of *yakshis* imply that they are the extended manifestations of female beauty and sexuality. They are also given the status of mothers as in Vayaskara Chaturvedi Bhattathiri’s tale. Their sexuality is exploited and objectified by turning them into slaves, utilizing them for sexual gratification. The beauty of woman is a yardstick that the society constructed to fit in the whims and fancies of the opposite sex. “Women are mere “beauties” in men’s culture so that culture can be kept male” (59). The beauty of the *yakshi* is the sole reason that drives the men to them, indicating that for the men, there is nothing but physical exquisiteness in *yakshis* to be appreciated. The reduction of a gender to mere external appearance is what the above cases disclose. This reductive definition of the other gender is a result of the fear that roots from ignorance as well as knowledge of the other. The knowledge of the immense in the feminine and the underlying potential bewilders the male dominated structures the same way the unknown and unpredictable in the nature of feminine confuses and threatens them. Their existential surety is thwarted by the very existence of the other, an extremely distinct and different other, that refuses to be deciphered.

The beautiful or the ideal is a notion that entered human socio-cultural thought along with the right to choose. The choices were initially informed by necessity or need and later by

various factors among which beauty was prominent. The Platonic ideal thrice removed from reality was, for many, the ultimate representation of the best. The ideal that is inaccessible yet can be aspired to. The social system that demands docility from the inferior beings compels them to be presentable to and worth the time of the men. This is the same with any society where women take the upper hold as well. Wolf explicates how the notion of beauty is informed by the economic and social position of its members by giving the example of the Nigerian Wodaabes among whom “women hold economic power and the tribe is obsessed with male beauty; Wodaabe men spend hours together in elaborate makeup sessions, and compete—provocatively painted and dressed, with swaying hips and seductive expressions—in beauty contests judged by women” (*The Beauty Myth* 13). Thus, the notion of beauty is a social construct developed and extended to satiate the dominant groups. And through this beautification her subjectivity and intellect are conveniently ignored. According to Ann J Cahill, “when the gazer puts himself “in the position of being the sole perceiver,” the beautifying woman’s own perspective is implicitly denied... She is reduced, then, to a derivative of male desire, only an object of utility” (“Feminist Pleasure and Feminine Beautification” 50). The man when becomes the sole perceiver of the beauty of the feminine subject, he a) attains the power to evaluate/judge/ the other, b) does not aspire to become the other as realizing feminine beauty is undesired, c) seeks to have the feminine beauty a part of his achievement by objectifying and subjecting the other, d) disregards everything except the physical beauty of the subject, e) makes himself vulnerable to the consequences following the pursuit where if the consequences are worth the vulnerability he places himself in, he proceeds, and f) constantly struggles to nullify the existence of her subjectivity. But the *yakshis* in the select works constantly contest the conforming and reductive patriarchal norms by inciting a fear of the unknown and incomprehensible in the minds of men.

The manifestation of extended sexual fantasies of men can be found clearly in the *yakshis* in the work. The familiar behaviour and image of women are attributed to the inhuman and unearthly beings, thus converging the notions of familiar and unfamiliar, real and unreal. The *yakshis* are real that the men experience their presences and see them whereas they are not real that they are not visible to the public and are incapable of a tangible physical existence. The strange and unfamiliar in the familiar beauty of woman’s body is what the *yakshis* harbour. Freud, in *The Uncanny* says, “something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar. But of course, the converse is not true: not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening” (124-125). Here the entity is depicted as frightening but simultaneously familiar to be domesticated or even enslaved. The uncanny, according to Nicholas Royle, “can involve

a feeling of something beautiful at the same time frightening, as in the figure of double or telepathy” (*The Uncanny 2*). The unfamiliar *yakshi* becomes familiar and later the familiar *yakshi* is unfamiliarized. Familiarity is problematic like unfamiliarity. The unfamiliar is threatening and unpredictable whereas the familiar poses the fear of being unfamiliar at any time, like peace about which Royle says that it is ideal thus strange. The engendering of a narrative around *yakhsis* is uncanny in itself and the relationship between them and the men too is unfamiliar. The familiar in the *yakhsis* enabled the men to access the women of their desire closer to them in the imaginary realm whereas the unfamiliar distanced and induced fear and awe in them, a drive to access the inaccessible.

The uncanniness of not only the psyche but everything that associates with human experience drew tremendous scholarly attention in the past. Its vacillation between the familiar and the unfamiliar has been problematized and theorized by many. The identification of uncanniness in the canny or canniness in the uncanny is the projection of the repressed human emotions according to Freud. A deconstructive reading of the uncanny engenders new dimensions that inform the search for gaps and traces in the given text. Uncanny discourses, Royle states,

both, uncannily overlap; and overlap *in* and *as* the uncanny. Psychoanalysis is uncanny on account of what Freud himself calls a capacity for ‘laying bare... hidden forces’... it brings to light things that perhaps should have remained hidden or repressed. It makes the familiar (the self, desire, memory, sexuality, everyday language and behaviour) uncomfortably, even frighteningly unfamiliar... The uncanny overflows psychoanalysis... [into] deconstruction... [which] makes the most apparently familiar texts strange, it renders the most apparently unequivocal and self-assured statements uncertain... [and involves] surprising, indeed incalculable effects of all kinds of virus and parasite, foreign body, supplement, borders and margins, speciality and haunting. (*The Uncanny 24*)

The feminine that is familiar becomes the unfamiliar and alien, a parasite that interferes, interjects with men. This uncanny feminine beingness has a number of features and functions and a few of them are, a) the unfamiliarity of the familiar incites fear and uncertainty, b) the unfamiliar has the potential to be familiarised through constant engagement, c) the unfamiliar has access to inner realms of the other’s thoughts, d) the familiar becoming distant or strange, silent or inaudible, is the moment when the other becomes unfamiliar too, and e) the unfamiliar that becomes familiar has possibilities of conforming to the norms of the other for the sake of the bond (of acquaintance) that they share. This strangeness or defamiliarization of the *yakhsis*

from the human women gave them access into the repressed fantasies of the men. The unfamiliar side of woman enabled the men to venture into the uncertain and dark realms that were slippery and threatening, yet exciting. The desire to conquer the unknown instigated them to domesticate, marry, or even enslave the unfamiliar feminine forms. The tendency to bind the *yakshis* to the familial relationship and the entailing necessities is an outcome of the conditioned cultural inclination to actualize the prevailing social power structure.

The concept of family prevails persistently throughout the book. Sankunni's writing reflects the importance given to familial institution in Kerala culture. Sexual gratification and procreation are what familial bonds meant and *yakshis* were tamed into obedient mistresses who treat their men well. The *yakshis* in Sankunni's stories plead and request their partners rather than argue and ask. In Vayaskara Chathurvedi Bhattathiri's story, even the abandonment of Bhattathiri is with her consent and he accepts the responsibility of his daughter born from the *yakshi*. Venmani Namboorippaadanmaar's liaison with *yakshi* becomes an illegitimate relation which distorts his family life, but being a man, he manages to put the blame of the omen that arouses from his extra-marital affair on his wife and people gathered in for his son's *upanayana*. Even though there are ruptures in the family, Sankunni insists on the reinstatement of the institution, reminding and reaffirming that family is the basis of human beings' societal life. "Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient." (Millet 33) Family/ male rule is the nail that is hammered into the heads of *yakshis* and if obedient, they will not be nailed but petted and pampered as in the first two tales. If the woman consciousness underlying *yakshi* tries to be belligerent, she will be subjugated using the ideological and coercive powers. The iron nail is meant for those who negate, neglect and contend patriarchy and gender asymmetry that prevails. The *yakshis* depicted in *Eithiyamaala* are indomitable but the very presence of the sorcerer drains her ferociousness, turning her into a subservient entity. *Yakshis* represent the subaltern female-self, which is mutilated and fiddled within families for their own purposes and pleasures.

The beautiful *yakshis* are attributed with brutish features by the male writers, manifesting their inherent fear of the women's immanence. This fear of the "voices of darkness" channelizes into the creation of *yakshi* images which depict humility and brutality at once. (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 93) It is the elaboration of what Freud said in *The Question of Lay Analysis*, "the sexual life of adult women is a 'dark continent' for psychology" (43). Women's psyche and sexuality were regarded as conundrums impossible to unravel. In this vastness of woman's mind frightened and even disturbed man. "The metaphorical power of

annihilation”, as Gubar and Gilbert say in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, is incomprehensible to man and in turn he presents the unknown as terrorizing and dismal. Despite *yakshis* being attributed with heavenly beauty, they appeared haunting men in dreams. They roamed under the pall of night, the incomprehensible darkness, frightening even the bravest man. The power of annihilation is something immanent within women, which always disturbs men and thus compels them to contain women within the prescribed boundaries of the “cave”. “Being woman”, as Ann Snitow says, “was magic” (quoted in *A Gender Diary*, 35) and man stood astounded on realizing the immanence of feminine power. Female body/ sexuality is like a cave, which is full of vitality and wisdom and the darkness of a cave always frightens man. The night that acts as the backdrop is the darkness of the “cave”, hindering man from entering the cave. Here *yakshis* are using their beauty as a tool to annihilate or digress the “other”, subverting the hierarchy. Their beauty is the bait that they place before the cave and the path through it is an extremely dangerous experience. Those writers who have tried to travel through the warren paths leading into the cave encouraged women to be in their works the epitome of preservation and destruction. The fear and the lust for the female body and sexuality manifests in the depiction of the ghostly spirits. The Freudian lack is not what leads into dematerialised forms of *yakshis*, but the womb envy along with the want to become complex that women physically and mentally are. The fear of female sexuality was there from time immemorial, ending up in barbaric deeds of genital mutilation, infertility, etc which subdue woman’s sexual powers. The vagina of women contains “so much darkness and secrecy surrounding them — like the Bermuda triangle” as Eve Ensler says in *The Vagina Monologues* (1). This darkness frightens and causes a shiver in the very existence of man. He is afraid of the immanence that she bears and he attempts to hide his fears by trying to subjugate the “other”. He uses chants and magic to subdue women who seem to go out of their control. The male ego finds it difficult to move through the dark caves, so he throws into it his light of wisdom, which is the male rationale. The *yakshis* in all the stories mentioned are powerful and independently fares but are suppressed and enslaved by male sorcerers, indicating that women have to be wary of their deeds and should be obedient to the norms and codes laid down by male oriented and male dominated social structures.

*Eithiyamaala* by Sankunni portrays *yakshi* as the representation of female body/ sexuality which men always craved to and proved victorious to subjugate. They are the typical Malayali women who succumb only to “male magicians”, satisfying male ego. The *yakshis* are usually transformed into servants or exorcised, echoing a warning that any aberration from the idea of woman will ultimately end up in “bandhana” or binding. So family, society and

myths construct the idea of woman and inflict it into the collective consciousness of a race. *Yakshi* emerges as a powerful image symbolizing a woman who anticipates freedom and an independent self. She is always in her struggle to liberate herself from the nail that has imprisoned her. The politics of sexuality that locates within our culture, literature and social structures is a result of man's inherent fear of woman's sexuality. Kottarathil Sankunni's *Eithiyamaala* depicts the beautiful but fierce and threatening *yakshis* who represent the extended male psyche which fears the dark depths within women.

### Works Cited:

- Cahill, Ann J. "Feminist Pleasure and Feminine Beautification". *Hypatia*, vol. 18, no. 4, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Fall/ Winter 2003, pp.42-64.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Translated by Rosemary Sheed, Sheed and Ward, 1958.
- Enslar, Eve. *The Vagina Monologues*. Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2009.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Question of Lay Analysis: Conversations with an Impartial Person*. Translated and Edited by James Strachey, W. W. Norton & Company, 1969.
- . *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintick, Penguin, 2003.
- Gubar, Susan and Sandra M. Gilbert. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 1979, Yale University Press, 2000.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2010.
- Ramachandran, T. K. "Notes on the Making of Feminine Identity in Contemporary Kerala Society". *Social Scientist*, Vol. 23, No. 1/3, 1995, pp. 109- 123.
- Royle, Nicholas. *The Uncanny*. Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Sankunni, Kottarathil. *Eithiyamaala*. Kottayam: Current Books, 1996.
- Snitow, Ann. *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary*. New York: Duke University Press. 2015.
- Unnikrishnan, Sandhya M. "Visualizing Yakshi in the Religious History of Kerala". *Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*, 5, 2017, pp. 757-777.
- Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. New York: Harper Collins Publications Inc, 2001.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *The Vindications: The Rights of Men and The Rights of Woman*. Eds. D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf. Toronto: Broadview Literary Texts, 1997.