
**Celebrating ‘difference’: Redefining Gender Roles in Syam Sudhakar’s
‘Enchantress atop the potted palm’**

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Abstract:

Syam Sudhakar's 'Enchantress Atop the Potted Palm' focuses on the cultural differences among women within the same cultural space, subverting the normative concepts of gender roles as determined by a heterosexual, patriarchal society. Emphasizing the difference between the 'other' woman as opposed to the mainstream, the poem situates the mythical *Yakshi* on the one hand and the mother and sister on the other. The article seeks to explore how gender roles are redefined in the poem, prodding subtly on the complex paradigms between patriarchy and cultural norms and its shifting power dynamics.

Keywords: Culture, difference, gender, patriarchy, *Yakshi***Introduction:**

Before the publication of Joan Scott's article on gender in the *American Historical Review* in 1986, the term 'gender' was restricted to the grammatical meaning given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and to the biological sex of a person. Scott's article helped the term 'gender' go beyond the notions of only being male or female. There has been a surge of studies and scholarship related to gender, which affects many disciplines other than literature, such as art, science, and history. So 'gender' is a relatively new category of historical analyses, and the term, Scott argues, "emphasizes an entire system of relationship that may include sex, but is not directly determined by sex, or directly determining of sexuality." Understanding gender and its many representations also comes within the broad purview of studies concerning women, feminism, gender roles, gender politics, etc. Initially, the idea was to recognize women's marginality and make efforts to integrate them and consider them equal to men, giving them equal opportunities in different sectors of life. In doing so, somewhere, the concept of 'women' became homogenized as if 'women' were a single unified idea.

Gradually, scholars, especially feminist scholars, began to focus on the different planes in which women exist. In talking about 'third world difference,' Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues against homogenizing women and their experiences. Mohanty observes that

whereas patriarchy has constructed a general and homogenous notion of women, there are "fundamental complexities and conflicts that characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races, and castes," especially in a country like India where fragmentation and multiplicities are layered in such ways that it is impossible to form a unified concept of 'woman.' In the words of Martha Easten, "Female identity has been seen as inherently bodily and biological, as ideologically constructed or as socially performed (101)." She further observes that as the lives and experiences of women differ, there is no one monolithic concept of 'woman,' and as there is no one concept of 'woman,' there is no one feminism either, but 'feminisms.' This idea of fragmentariness can be developed as a postmodern notion, also highlighting the diversity of the human experience.

This article seeks to explore how Sudhakar has redefined gender roles in his poem, 'Enchantress atop a Potted Palm,' which, interestingly, focuses on the cultural differences among women within the same cultural space. It aims to investigate the subversion of the normative concept of gender roles as determined by a heterosexual, patriarchal culture. Syam Sudhakar's poetry opens possibilities not just in themes and language but also in history, local culture, myth, and tradition. His fresh and experimental approach has added new horizons to contemporary Indian English poetry. His poems are marked by powerful and novel images, rarely seen among other Indian poets. Focussing majorly on nature, culture, life and death, and self-exploration, the poems have often trodden subtly on the complex paradigms between patriarchy and cultural norms and its shifting power dynamics. By the time contemporary poets like Sudhakar started writing, Indian English poetry had already established itself as a powerful medium offering a global platform for expressing things from a uniquely Indian approach, giving the younger poets a platform where they can experiment with form, technique, language and reinterpret set beliefs and notions. Being a bilingual writer, Sudhakar represents both the regional as well as the national at the same time, and his poems seem to be a collage of images, memories, and culture woven intricately into language that is at once traditional and modern, local and universal.

In her seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have been "defined by men, and if they try to break with this, they risk alienating themselves" (36). Gender identity thus has certain markers- both social and personal. Judith Butler, in 1988, famously argued about the performative aspect of gender identity, which she says is instituted through a 'stylized repetition of acts' and through the 'stylization of the body.' Over the years, this stylized repetition of acts and the stylization of the body have resulted in forming a structure of inequality based on gender, where the masculine gender has predominated over the feminine both in the social and the personal space. The social structure based on gender determines what one wears, what and how one speaks, what profession one chooses, and a lot more. So, gender, if not exclusive, becomes one of the foremost determinants of identity. A person belonging to a particular gender is expected to behave in a certain way, and when that is challenged when the normative conception of gender is subverted, the normal social order is threatened.

Emphasizing the difference between the 'other' woman as opposed to the

mainstream, Sudhakar's poem positions the mythical *Yakshi* on the one hand and the mother and sister on the other. The mythology of the *Yakshi* occupies an important space in the popular culture of Kerala. The actual origin of *Yakshis* is obscure and predates Vedic times. The figurine of the *Yakshi* carved on the pillars of the Bharhut stupa in Madhya Pradesh dates to the first century BCE. According to some sources, *Yakshis* were also believed to be nature deities, signifying the various aspects of mother nature like hills, rivers, trees, etc. There are references to *Yakshis* in Buddhism and Jainism as well. Buddhist scriptures associate *Yakshis* with fertility and motherhood, and in Jainism, they were the protecting goddesses of the Jain *Tirthankaras*. Nila Rajeev's informative article on the culture of *Yakshi* explains in detail how Sankunni's *Aithiyamala*, the collection of old, ancient stories of Kerala, traces the origin and evolution of the *Yakshi* back to Buddhism and Jainism and then to Hinduism, and how it finally becomes a part of Kerala's cultural milieu. Though some writers like Raghava Varier have popularised the myth of the *Yakshi* as a goddess of fertility, *Yakshis* as essentially sensuous and evil female spirits were popularized in Malayalam literature starting from *Aithiyamala* to M Ramakrishnan's *Yakshi*. Rajeev identifies the myth of the *Yakshi* as a "collective fantasy upon which the fears and anxieties" of Kerala's patriarchal society are located. The *Yakshi* is the errant, 'other' feminine, who has always been associated with lust, sexuality, and fear. In his article, "Nailing Heads and Splitting Hairs," Corrine Dempsey describes the white saree-clad and long-haired seductress as a "young shape-shifting woman who is truly ravishing in both senses of the word- she is, in actuality, a fanged, voracious, vampiric ogress" (112). The *Yakshi* is believed to roam freely at night so that she can lure young men to her den, where after having a tryst kills them by sucking their blood and eating them, leaving behind only their teeth and hair to be found the next day under the palm tree. Like most ancient myths, the *Yakshi* myth was originally oral in form, from which it entered the written form, especially in Malayalam literature. This voluptuous, blood-sucking vampire of myths, legends, and folklore is the 'other' female who cannot be 'domesticated;' myths have revealed that she can only be tamed by a chaste male of the community. The *Yakshi*, the temptress, is the foil to the good wife, the mother, or the sister. In the popular culture of Kerala, she is perhaps the only female monster whose overwhelming sexual energy stands contrasted to the domesticated 'ideal' woman, be it the wife, mother, or sister.

There are numerous folk tales in Kerala that abound in the *Yakshi* lores. In some tales, the demoness is often contained by a powerful shaman or sorcerer who nails her (the nail being a phallic symbol) in the trunk of the snakewood tree. However, if anyone takes out the nail even accidentally, the *Yakshi* is again let loose. In some cases, she is tamed through extreme exorcism, which is a violation of the female body. Some other versions of these tales reveal how the captured *Yakshis* often plead with the shamans to permit her a place in any nearby temple. If the exorcist is kind enough to grant permission, the *Yakshi* resides in the temple area and is also worshipped as a deity in the temple's outer courtyard. It is thus very interesting to note that the *Yakshi* may remain confined within the snakewood tree as a demoness or may be transformed into a deity. But whatever her fate might be, demonic or divine, is decided by the male patriarch. Thus, with all her supernatural and sensual powers, she still has no agency. Over the years, numerous writers have dealt with

the *Yakshi* myth in Kerala literature. Apart from Sankunni and M Ramachandran, authors like M.T. Vasudevan Nair, C.V Raman Pillai, and others have added various dimensions to Kerala's *Yakshi* myth. As the demonic version of the *Yakshi* was popularised in Kerala's cultural space, many films like *Lisa* (1978), *Akash Ganga* (!999), *Akam* (2011), and many more were made on the myth of the *Yakshi*. In every film, she was shown to avenge the murderers of her previous life. Once her revenge is fulfilled, the *Yakshi* becomes the mother figure devoid of her sensuality and sexual excess.

A gendered reading of 'Enchantress atop the potted palm' (2005) offers new insight into one of the many spaces in Malayalam literature employing the *Yakshi* myth. Sudhakar gives a footnote about the *Yakshi*, who is "a demoness, who, with her enchanting beauty, seduces young men" (mostly from the elite Brahmin class). Asking for wet lime so that she can have her *murukku* (beetle leaf), she takes them to her home on the top of a palm tree and sucks their blood. "Her beauty comes from her flowing hair, captivating eyes, alluring smile, and the fragrance of pala flower" (*Drenched by the Sun*). The word 'enchantress' is not usually applied to the docile and obedient woman, domesticated within the patriarchal ideals of society. So, the 'enchantress' of the title is typically associated with the *Yakshi*, the sinning woman outside the realm of the established social order.

'Enchantress...' is not just another piece of literature on the popular myth. It has, on one side, the aberrant *Yakshi* and, on the other, the mother and the sister- the contrasting faces of the so-called virtuous and errant woman. Traditionally, the domesticated women enjoy a higher status than the sensuous *Yakshi*. But in tagging them as virtuous, patriarchy has confined women within the four walls of domesticity, shouldering them with the responsibility of household chores and, most importantly, child-rearing. From a very young age, girls are taught to be obedient to their fathers and, after marriage, to their husbands. They are not supposed to raise their voice or question the authority of the male members of the family. The social expectations regarding the ideal role of the 'good woman' restrict her from finding an agency of her own.

The poem begins in pain and anguish, in a typical patriarchal setup, with the poet-narrator thinking of his sister, their shared childhood, how they grew up together, and how gradually they drifted apart according to social structures and practices:

One such enchanted night

I woke up to discover

you and me

a hill apart

cannot touch

cannot speak

cannot eat

cannot sleep together

a bath together ... never. (1-9)

The physical distance that should come between a brother and sister with age is a natural

social structure, but the young author is still unaware of it. His question, 'Why so?' appears as dumb as if someone asking if a plane hitting a sixty-four-storeyed tower killed all the passengers on board. One does not miss the subtle sexual undertone of the lines, especially in the phrase, 'a bath together...never.' While bathing or sleeping together might be normal childhood practices among siblings, they also carry sexual connotations. Another sexually charged phrase is 'virgin water.' The sister's dilated eyes are compared to 'sluiced virgin waters.' There are subtle sexual hints but sexuality in the sister's case is suppressed because explicit or overt sexuality is not considered virtuous or moral for the 'good girl.'

The sister is compared to a 'doll.' A doll is beautiful but only a showpiece, having no life and no voice of her own. The comparison emphasizes how women are often looked upon merely as 'objects' that can be owned or possessed. Society prefers to keep women locked in showcases like a doll, but all the time, they dream of freedom, as represented by the sister 'gazing into infinity' dreaming of 'a dusk full of wings'- she silently dreams of freedom. The brother, on the other hand, in the same household and sharing the same childhood, does not have to think of any of these fetters because of the gender difference. In her book, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), Sylvia Walby notes that the system of patriarchy helps us to reject the notion of 'biological determinism,' which says that men and women are naturally different because of the difference in their physiology. The biological difference is exaggerated in the patriarchal notion establishing that men have the dominant role whereas women are the subservient. This subordination of women takes place at different levels, starting from within the family to the workplace, in society, almost everywhere. Discrimination between a male child and a female child within a family is very common. Besides the very common son preference, there also exists discrimination against the girl child in food, in not allowing girls to go for higher studies, lack of freedom and mobility, and in the tendency to marry off the girl early.

The childhood bond between the siblings expresses itself in the poignant lines where the poet imagines his sister asking him about their native village now that she has left after marriage:

After marriage
in the quiet of the night
you would call,
'Is it raining,
has the mango tree flowered,
How are Chinnu and her little ones?
I forgot the name of the dumb valet
who drowned in the well.
Our writing table in the corridor
give it to me
if not in use.
I know not what I feel... (26-37)

Marriage is another institution where men often dominate women, often oppressing and exploiting them. Marriage domesticates, and confines women and her sexuality is

regulated and controlled- the more domesticated she is, the more virtuous she is considered. Social expectations of being a 'good wife' make them easy subjects who can be dominated, and they are devoid of acquiring their own voice and identity. They agree to the male authority as society conditions them from an early age. A married woman uprooted from her native place and family and expected to accept another place and family as her own often finds comfort in the memories of her childhood days. Here, the sister wishes to keep a slice of her childhood with her, so she asks for the writing table. The touching line, 'I know not what I feel,' is so common an emotion of so many married women who, being suddenly put into a new life with new people and a new setup, fail to grasp whether to be happy for the new life or be sad at having to leave her roots.

The first part of the poem is about the women we are used to seeing around us- the domesticated ones, the ones confined within the rules set by society. Both the mother and the sister are passive women who have accepted their fate, accepting the fact that it is the men who decide their lives for them, be it the father, the husband, the brother, or the son. They have no voice and no agency; keeping their feelings and emotions suppressed for a long time makes them forget their own identities. The palm atop which the *Yakshi* comes to reside is planted by the mother after the sister's death:

One such enchanted day after she died

Amma planted a palm in a pot.

'It will only be up to her waist.'

For Amma, she was even now the scale. (51-54)

The domestic space is suddenly inhabited by the supernatural *Yakshi*, but the poem, from its very opening lines, hints at the presence of the magical lurking behind through the repeated use of the word 'enchanted.' "For Amma, she was even now the scale" reflects the poignancy of the mother's loss and her desire to cling to the past. The girl's height has frozen over time, and she will never grow up again. Traditionally, mothers and daughters have strong and lasting ties, and the daughter gradually becomes the mother's representative. The daughter becomes the mother's successor, and she accepts the role and the life that her mother lived, which has been coming down for centuries. But in this case, the role is reversed; the daughter has been frozen in time, and with her, the mother, too, has somehow remained captivated within.

As the poet comes out of his house one night, he is lured by the *Yakshi* into her den, as per the myth, asking for wet lime. However, the twist in the poem is that *Yakshi*, instead of killing the narrator, falls in love with him. To keep women under men's control, patriarchy operates on various social customs, social roles, and traditions. It has set distinct 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics, private-public spaces, etc. "In this system," as Walby states, "women's labor power, women's reproduction, women's sexuality, women's mobility and property, and other economic resources are under patriarchal control (20)". The poem reveals how gendered socialization starts from early childhood when the siblings learn the appropriate behavior of their sex. Usually, from the patriarchal viewpoint, all women are a

class. However, women are not the same everywhere; rather, they are determined by their individual situations. In this poem, the *Yakshi* is not merely an enchantress but a liberated woman who has the courage to reside outside the 'social structure' and the domestic space relegated to women in general. She is the 'other' woman who cannot be dominated or kept subordinated; the *Yakshi* stands in stark contrast to the traditional women in Indian households. According to the myth, only a chaste male can tame the *Yakshi*. But Sudhakar reworks this myth, demystifying the *Yakshi* and attributing human qualities to her. The poet here opines that the *Yakshi* need not be tamed. She represents the new woman, liberated and aggressive, with a voice and mind of her own, symbolizing the ideas of empowerment and emancipation. This new woman has an agency and who, like in mythology, is not interested in luring men into her den to kill them. She would rather walk side by side with the man of her love in this male-dominated world, considering both to be in equal standing, something that feminists have been long fighting for in every part of the world:

In the heavy fragrance
of the bridal chamber
atop the palm
is heard brittle laughter. (63-66)

There is a stark difference between the two bridal situations, as reflected in the poem. The sister's marriage is the result of the patriarchal social custom. The lines denote a sense of sadness, a sense of losing one's roots and identity. She longs for her home in the silence of the night, her childhood memories being her only solace. Throughout the poem, the sister is silent. Silence is a very important aspect as far as women are concerned- the more silent a woman is, the more virtuous she is considered. Very often in marriages, women are swept into silence because of sexual surrender or unwilling physical consummation. In this poem, the sister is swept into permanent silence, though the poem does not delve into the reason behind her death.

The *Yakshi*, on the other hand, is by her own choice. She is the liberated woman, asserting that women are not a homogenous species. The difference is in race, class, religion, and other markers, each having its own specificity. The silent helplessness of the sister or the mother, as revealed in the poem, is not present in the lines that talk about the *Yakshi*. Though all belong to the feminine gender, the gender roles they play are not the same. The *Yakshi* is not a passive recipient of fate or what society thrusts upon her but chooses the path of resistance to patriarchy. As myths have described her, she is aggressive, but her aggression is for asserting her identity. She is not a powerless victim in a male-dominated system. She is the woman with agency, stretching out her hand towards her lover. She is the 'new woman' (a phrase developed by Henry James), sensuous and irresistible, but the poet does not uphold these as negative qualities. By reworking the *Yakshi* myth, he tries to break the orthodox image of women, break their silence and their passive existence, and attain their identity. The poem also has a fresh take on the concept of the 'chaste male.' The term 'chastity' means refraining from sexual intercourse. The 'chaste male' is the one who has not indulged in any sexual intercourse. According to the myth, such a male can tame the *Yakshi*. Sudhakar reworks this myth and makes the union between the *Yakshi* and the author based on the bond

of love, marriage, and companionship. The poem ends with the postfeminist belief that men and women are equal and no one is above the other. It is not necessary for men and women to fight for supremacy or defeat one another, but they should walk together, respect each other's space, and value one another.

Death looms large in the entire poem, and the entire atmosphere is pervaded by the still silence of 'death' in more ways than one. On one level, death is literal for the sister, with whom the poet shared his childhood and growing up days is dead. On another level, death is metaphorical- death in the sense that the society-approved 'good women' have no freedom, no voice, and no agency. Nowhere in the poem do these women appear 'alive' even if they are breathing, engulfing the poem into a deadening silence. On the other hand, the *Yakshi*, who mythically is the death-giver, becomes the life-giver, which is another instance of role reversal. Instead of killing the young man, she becomes her companion, sharing love and life with him.

Apart from the poetic excellence, the poem's importance lies in the fact that it treats the *Yakshi* neither as a demoness nor a deity but gives her human qualities. She is not a monster but a woman with agency, nor is she a deity whose sexuality needs to be compromised. As Nila Rajeev has rightly pointed out, "the *Yakshi* narratives of Kerala have been constructed around patriarchy's fear around the sexuality of women," the male protagonist of 'Enchantress...' has been able to overcome this fear. And because this fear is no longer there, the *Yakshi* need not be transformed "from the voluptuous woman to mother goddess" (Rajeev). Through negotiating the *Yakshi* myth, Sudhakar has deconstructed and questioned the gendered power structures that have long been naturalized in society. The *Yakshi* here champion the cause of women's freedom, their voice, and identity. The whole poem has an enigmatic silence, the only sound being the *Yakshi*'s 'brittle laughter.' Through her laughter, the *Yakshi* refuses to be silent or be silenced by patriarchal dictates. She refuses to be the 'other,' representing the transcendent woman who can make her standpoint clear and constitute her own future. Further researchers might develop on the demystifying and 'humanizing' of the *Yakshi* from the point of view of the standpoint theory, an important feminist social theory that argues that an individual's perspectives are conditioned and shaped by their social and political experiences. It has not been included in this article as it is not possible to incorporate every angle within the scope of a single paper.

According to myths, the *Yakshi* could only be tamed by a chaste and powerful male. In 'Enchantress...', we find the deconstruction of this myth, too. Whereas the *Yakshi* has been ostracized by patriarchal society as a marginalized, fallen woman, she is brought into the mainstream by a man (poet here) only. Being different, outside the structured parameters of patriarchal society, does not necessarily mean being unchaste or immoral. The *Yakshi* does not need to be tamed as its sensuousness is no longer feared but celebrated as love. She does not have to fit within the domestic ideals of society to be accepted. The man is the bridge between the mother, sister, and the *Yakshi*. He does not exclude one to include the other but accepts each woman along with their individuality and differences. Postfeminism calls for a

harmonious existence of the genders where no one gender is superior to the other. In viewing the *Yakshi* in a new progressive light, attributing her with humaneness, identity, and agency, the poem has redefined gender roles, celebrating difference and inclusiveness together.

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