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The Sacral Monster: An (Im)possibility of Indian Queerness

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**Abstract**

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Existing at intersections, monsters have historically been sites of possibility that allow for a recognition of queer realities, and contemporary monster stories have become explorations of queer insatiability and queer joy. Yet, the study of queer Indian monster stories has often been overlooked. In this thesis, I aim to address this oversight by employing an autoethnographical approach that centers the queer Indian monster through an analysis of *The Devourers* (2015) by Indra Das, “The Vetala’s Song” (2022) by Anuja Varghese, and the stories I’ve written for my collection in process, *The Taxonomy of a Curse*. I situate these texts in the cultural contexts they were written in, the history they evoke, and the mythologies—Hindu and regional—that they reconstruct, while allowing for my own diasporic histories and queer possibilities to exist in the specific genre space of the academic essay. Through this exploration, I imagine the pathways our work collectively constructs, which refuse Eurocentric homonormative categorization while simultaneously resisting notions of queer identity being possibilities only for the upper-class and -caste, pathways that I hope will lead to joyous queer futures in the subcontinent and beyond.

## The Sacral Monster: An (Im)possibility of Indian Queerness

I am eleven, and in my mother's ancestral home in Pondicherry when I watch *Arundhati*. I don't remember where my mother was, or my grandparents or aunts and uncles. All I remember is the fuzzy TV set, new for the 2000s, and my sister, small and soft, her gaze wide-eyed and mirrored by titular *Arundhati*. I don't remember if I put my hand over her eyes as we watch the woman draw power from the bone dagger made from the bones of her eponymous ancestor, if I let my sister see the dying horror that plagues the Arundhati bloodline. I want to imagine I do. All I really know is that it wasn't the blood or the gore nor the Tantrik Aghorīs that scared me,<sup>1</sup> but this idea that echoed in me long after we'd shudderingly reached the credits: that supernatural entities—abusers often, male often—even when they are eradicated through spiritual knowledges passed down from ancestors, are still ones meant to be *expected*. I am nineteen when I think about this again, looking down at the tarmac of the Chennai airport as I settled against the window of a plane to Ann Arbor, readying myself to leave the only real home I had known. I think about the way the supernatural was, ultimately, a *foreign* threat to Arundhati and her family, the way “true” home spaces, *whole* home spaces, meant returning, carrying on a preceding legacies rather than creating something new.

I am twenty-five when I read Anuja Varghese's “The Vetala's Song” about two women who reunify in death in one final moment of endocannibalism that brings these queer lovers together in their afterlives, Sharmila fresh from death finally becoming a part of Vetala, transformed into a supernatural entity. The story makes clear that any revenge enacted upon the men, the society that separated the lovers through distance and death, is only secondary to the Vetala's love for Sharmila. I wonder about death in my tiny Seattle apartment where the rain seeps into the walls; death, which remains a hurdle but is neither the end nor a vehicle for the

rectification of a fraught past; death as an acknowledgement that the monstrosity attached to queer Indian life can transcend the limitation of any natural time. Curled up and alone, I read “Vetala’s Song” over and over again, my pen pressed so hard under every reference to Sharmila’s diasporic daughter that it leaves imprints on the pages that come before and after. I think maybe I’ve become denatured and foreign too, if everything that was stripped of my person by my being here has stripped itself of me in turn. I wonder why queerness in “The Vetala’s Song” is seemingly assigned to the spiritual space of the homeland, while the symptom of its violent disregard is relegated to the material space of its peoples. And always, always I return to Sharmila’s daughter, this woman who ultimately returns the lovers to each other, monstrous only in her foreignness: What does it mean to be a monster, embodied? What does it mean to be a monster, disembodied?

I write monster stories from these questions, to explore the way Indian queerness has been inherently tied to these stories, but also to explore the ways in which those of us who have interrupted our homeland existences twist away from a backward-looking gaze to look into new futures, new conceptions where the readings of queerness can become as multiple as the assigned topographies, metaphorical and otherwise, that we as subjects occupy. It’s this want that makes me turn to *The Devourers* by Indra Das, a 2015 novel about werewolves, and Anuja Varghese’s 2022 story “The Vetala’s Song.” It’s this want that turns my gaze forward to my own work.

My collection in process, *The Taxonomy of a Curse*, reveals the way sacred monstrosity appears in families like mine, and way the monstrous can break the rigidity of hegemonic domestic ideals. All my stories look at mothers and daughters, queered by their relationships to each other and their relationships to themselves, while existing in and breaking away from the Brahminical patriarchy that deems their realities unfit. I am a Hindu Brahmin with

a long line of Hindu Brahmins behind me and my gaze can never be diagnostic even when gazes like mine purport themselves to be. This essay, then, is narrow in the way it looks at mythologies, which are primarily Hindu, but I hope that it nevertheless succeeds in writing past configurations of queerness, diasporic and otherwise that reaffirm hierarchical caste structures by ignoring queer and caste-ed realities that exist at these sites of possibility. Ultimately, I'm interested in how home spaces—which have been categorically dismissed as spaces that cannot hold queer and caste-ed bodies—can be expanded multifold if seen through monstrousness and sacredness. And so I read, I write, I find myself turning to Indian monster stories governed by insatiability, which, when intertwined with pre-existing mythology, elide Euro-American homonormative categorizations while simultaneously staving off religionationalist attachment of the “homeland” and upper-caste queer identities, by rendering the monster as a truly “impossible” being.

### The Sacral Monster

It is in the same house that my mother grew up in that I find my first ghost. In the dark clutch of coconuts that close around the top of the tree like a fist, its pinnate leaves fanning out and covering the few stars in the sky, I find it waiting for me every time we return from America, when I am two, four, and finally for good when I am six. I draw Boo differently every time, giggling when my aunt tells me that I've drawn my ghost with impossible proportions. And each year that we return to Pondicherry, I look for Boo, worried that I'll be stolen by what lingers in the pitch black of my grandparents' home.

My aunt isn't the first or the last person to evoke impossibility; this is the notion that Gayatri Gopinath uses in her titular *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and Indian Public Cultures* when writing into the “unthinkability of the queer ‘female’ subject position within

various mappings of the nation and the diaspora” (Gopinath 15). Gopinath complicates the Indian queer narrative by examining the way it has been filtered through and past Euro-American homonormative narratives, subsequently marking queerness as a social configuration, though disembodied (11). Impossible is also the way the monstrous body is described by Yasmine Musharbash and Gein Hennin Presterdustuen in the introduction to *Monster Anthropology*, citing the impossibility of the monster’s physical taxonomy (4). It is then that in this doubly impossibility that monsters and their stories center and *re-embody* the queer subject, moving through and then past Gopinath’s readings of “female” queerness as being tied primarily to the disruption of various conceptual social spaces while retaining their “nominally female bodies,” in addition to their *sexual* alterity (182).<sup>2</sup>

The year I turn twenty-three my grandparents cut down the coconut tree, pulling up the roots that threaten the foundation of their house, and Boo disappears. My mother says my grandfather cries when it happens. Years later, when I write this having found out about all manner of ghosts that inhabit the Tamil landscape, and put Boo in words rather than in strokes of a pencil, I wonder if palm-tree ghosts and coconut ghosts ever intermingle, if the sacrality of one ever passes into the other. I wonder what boundaries and containments are crossed by my conceptualizations of the supernatural, and I begin finding answers when I learn about Muniswarar and Minis.<sup>3</sup>

In “Gods as Monsters: Insatiable Appetites, Exceeding Interpretations, and a Surfeit of Life”, an ethnographic account of Muniswarar and Minis, Indira Arumugam argues that gods and monsters are not distinct from each other in Indian public culture, which has been shaped by its multifarious religious sentiments. Rather, the supernatural and the divine are intertwined with and have governance over each other, even and especially as they elude human identifications,

particularly through the act of ritualization (Arumugam 45). Indeed ritualization is not indicative of a mutual relationship between the human and the sacromonstrous in India; rather, it's a methodology of containment enacted upon that which refuses to be limited, categorized, or otherwise probed for meaning. In the village of Vadavur, a hundred-and-fifty kilometers south of Pondicherry, formal worship acknowledges this insufficiency of ritual and the insatiability of the Minis and Muniswarar (Arumugam 50). This insatiability is enacted upon the human residents of the village in a multitude of ways, but primarily through the taking of life or through involuntary possessions. Ritual in Vadavur addresses this insatiability in two ways. The first is through the offering of an animal sacrifice, where the animal acts as interest on a human life, a debt collected after death. The second is by offering a living human body for voluntary possession, a common strategy across multiple South Indian traditions, and while Muniswarar's god dancer (i.e., his earthly form through the possession of a man) is of interest to me, more so is the intersection between possession and the gender-queered jōgappas of Yellamma, a South Indian goddess, also Sanskritized as Renuka.<sup>4</sup>

I am fourteen when I'm blessed by a jōgappa on a sweltering summer train from Bangalore to Chennai. As my mother passes soft twenty-rupee notes stretched neat of the creases by the damp that hangs in the air, I look up at bright, kohl-lined eyes, feel the touch of the jōgappa's downturned palm pressed into the curve of my head, her glass bangles multicolored and jingling, and I feel the weight of her blessing sealed indelibly between the strands of my hair. I am less of a wild thing at this age, and newly awkward in this womanish body as I look up at one that is differently-woman than mine. All I know about being queer is how I might love another woman someday, how I might grow out of my womanishness into womanliness. But in

that train with the heat blowing in through the open window, I look at her and feel like I could be a sacred thing too.

For a long time, the memory of that jōgappa and her sisters was one that I believed to be a sign of a thriving community of those that experienced gender alterity and, even with the fear and repulsion that followed them, I believed that the sacredness given to them by Yellamma attached was one that could not be dissolved so easily. But Yellamma, like her jōgappas, is conceived of as a “fringe” goddess, part of a Southern Tantrik pantheon that places her adjacent to other disease and charnel-grounds goddesses. And her jōgappas, who Nicholas J. Bradford describes as “ordinary male men who have become sacred female men” are queered, not because of an expression of “latent homosexuality”, but to their being called by Yellamma, who transforms their bodies through disease if they do not answer her, making them transgressors in more ways than one (Bradford 311-312).<sup>5</sup> The pseudo-possession of this role, both by the goddess and the Brahminical-patriarchal society that fears her, initiates jōgappas into their queered role in Indian society. A tri-directional relationship between the human, the monstrous, and the divine are thus conceptualized together in Indian religio-folk narratives, which in turn make their way into diasporic subjectivities.

The jōgappa that blessed me on that warm day exists more fully past the memory that I as an upper-caste Hindu child had of her. In proposing this conception for Indian queerness, one particularly predicated upon the Indian anglophone novel,<sup>6</sup> I feel acutely the threat of subsuming India’s most salient issues of caste in the same way current conceptions of queerness in India serve to efface the mobility that caste offers in this area of identity entirely. As the eldest daughter of my Brahmin family, my parents have neither accepted my sexual nor my gender alterity, but my move to America on their dime and no talks of marriage have allowed me to

exist within this domain without the fear of erasure. When considering the way Hindu-dominant culture mobilizes against queerness, it is impossible to separate this from the way caste endogamy is inherently tied to conception of sexual purity in India, to the sexual purity of the women I would've been and, in the eyes of my parents, now still am.

Brahminical patriarchy endows upper-caste women with a “protected” status from Dalit men through caste endogamy, which in turn allows upper-caste men access to both Dalit subjects' bodies and their sexualities, constructed along a gender binary. This is doubly apparent in the native conceptions of queerness as embodied in Dalit and OBC subjects existing with a religious space, one that is constructed as entertainment for a Brahminical viewership, but through which queerness is weaponized in relation to the underlying mechanisms of binary gender construction (Tamalakapula 161). This manifests in the jōgappa phenomenon, one that instrumentalizes and weaponizes queerness against Dalit subjects who are forced into cultures of silence constructed within their initiation into this gender alterity. It isn't that there is no agency in the vast and varied third-gender communities, like araivanis—the Tamil counterpart to jōgappas—that have their own communities and networks of support. And yet it still remains true that the mechanism itself has been used as a way to emasculate Dalit men, who are often subjected to violence when engaging in traditional displays of masculinity (161-62).

Finally, this discussion of our relationship as Indians to the sacromonstrous is rendered inherently incomplete without examining the latter's relationship to and emergence from the land, as well as the lived, queer realities of those that exist on the land. The land is the reason why my ghost disappeared when my grandparents' coconut tree did, why the Mohini-peis that once left long scratches down my grandfather's back no longer hunt at night.<sup>7</sup> Then, there's Yellamma, who is commonly worshipped in the form of both rock and shaped earth and the

Minis that occupy the wilderness, particularly the disappearing palms of Tamil Nadu, sharing space with other tutelary deities like Ravuthar (Bradford 310; Arumugam 54). The partiality towards natural formations that the sacromonstrous has both explains its habits of evading sites of human habitation, and the proclivity we have in attempting to categorize the more enigmatic and shadowy enclaves that surround community dwellings (Arumugam 56). And when I think about how I'm not afraid of the ghosts of my homeland in America, I wonder about the function of land within the sacromonstrous conceptions. Removal from the land—be it voluntary or involuntary—then may complicate narratives of the queer, diasporic Indian. Such a reading has the potential to reinforce a limiting notion that our diasporic gaze is one that is backward-looking, eternally longing for the topographies of the homeland and its wildernesses. This, underpinned by religionationalist propaganda from nation state, can produce a heteronormative and homogenous narratives of India, Indian culture, and Indian personhood, that in turn inform both the domestic and diasporic home space (Gopinath 4).

But it is not without reason that after reading about Minis in the middle of a cold Seattle night that I light incense and hold my eyes shut, breathing deeply with no prayer and no wards from my homeland: what exists can be built upon without being all there is. It is through books that I find words for my queerness and writing into the ways these texts provide avenues for reconceptions of queer life in the diaspora and India is what I want to do and am doing in this essay.

### Storytelling, Consumption, and Ritualization

I am twenty and on the roof of my childhood home, where my mother and my sister are already asleep, listening to an American radio show from the 40s about werewolves. I am a child of an era where werewolves are handsome white men whose gaze is meant to devour

pleasurably. But the radio show I listen to makes no allusions to this—every monster is a monster only and every monster is only horrifying. I'm safe on my terrace while white women die perfectly poised, a bite on their upper arm through the fabric of their diaphanous sleeves, a flash of pale skin, and the night air is dark and warm, and I am home. I am not really meant to be here, not by standard “normal” markers of adulthood, anyway, but I take the year away from college and America to unknow the loneliness of new racialization and reconvene with myself. But it's not any better in Chennai, where in the streets I called home for seven years I feel like I some lost, foreign thing, except in this space between earth and sky where the dark night asks me to be only as intelligible as it is; and in the hours before restless sleep, I am something safely in-between. I don't wonder about the nature of interstitial spaces, needing only to be and to dream of being other in-between things. And then I am older and in Seattle, and I have forgotten the name of the radio show and the person I was on my terrace under the deep night, until I read Indra Das' words in *The Devourers*.

Written in 2015 the novel follows Alok, a transfemme history professor in modern day Kolkata, meeting a “half-werewolf,” later named as Izrail, son of Cyrah and Fenrir. Izrail tasks Alok with the transcription of two manuscripts, one written by his Nordic werewolf father, and the other by his Muslim mother, both in centuries past, and Alok identifies himself through the translation and finds himself entangled with Izrail's world, where gender, the monstrous, and the human blur boundaries.<sup>8</sup> The novel ostensibly follows in and contributes to the tradition of werewolf stories; where it differs from werewolf romances of my childhood or a radio show listened to in the dead of night, is in the movements past this conceptualization. *The Devourers* transfixes me in its shifting terminologies, the way “werewolf” and “shapeshifter”, “god” and “monster” intermingle and bring so many werebeast stories from across the globe together under

the purview of the text.<sup>9</sup> The story in even its smallest units, evokes an explicitly transnational view of mythological interpretation that serves to correctly identify the multitude of identities that comprise Indian society, past and present, without imposing a casually cruel fungibility upon these mythologies and its peoples. Rather, like in *Monster Anthropology*, this fictional framework allows for a gathering, contrasting, and comparing of “a great variety of different beings that otherwise would not be considered in the same conceptual space”, and this is done all while reframing nationalist anxieties centered around the purity and ownership of culture found in the condemnation of pre-Independence Indian literature featuring sexual alterity (Musharbash and Presterdustuen 2; Vanita 130).

The novel is structured into three major narratives, with an intrusion of Izrail’s fourth narrative, and begins with Alok’s task. Alok’s own narrative frames the two major epistolary accounts, the first from Fenrir to Cyrah and then from Cyrah to Izrail, all about the major events that lead to Izrail’s conception and his birth. When Fenrir rapes the human Cyrah, a poor, Muslim woman in Shah Jahan’s empire, and Cyrah subsequently journeys to find her rapist with Gévaudan, one of Fenrir’s ex-companions, I find myself wanting more from her than just revenge, just retribution, just *correction*. Then, in the damp of the Sundarbans, Izrail is born and learns of his heritage with the local shapeshifting tribe, and my hope is rewarded—Cyrah becomes Banbibí, a local forest diety, and Izrail transcends human time when he reaches shapeshifter adulthood. In the dim lamplight of my Seattle studio, I find myself in Alok, when it’s revealed that his interaction with these texts motivates the narration of the story, when he says, “I feel an anxiety, a yearning that compels me. This is a history that only I can tell. This is our afterlife, should I die the only human for this tale” (Das 300).

The construction of this text evokes a structure seen across Indian folk mythology, one of emboxed, linked stories that rely on a detached and moral choric narrator (Venkatesan 496). I think about the Devi Mahatmya here, a text on Durga who is re-categorized as a shapeshifter in *The Devourers*, where every choric narrator stagnates in their characterization. But Alok *doesn't* remain stagnant, nor is ze detached. Rather, through the longer intervals ze writes between the manuscripts, hir inward-looking gaze expands and changes. By the end of the translation, Alok not only reveals hir sexual alterity but contextualizes the narrative that hir sexuality ended hir engagement by exploring hir gender alterity (Das 301). This emergence and self-reconciliation are framed within the notions of storytelling and consumption, a relationship that materializes as ritualization. In Alok's case this is primarily metaphorical—hir consumption of the texts through translation results in hir own storytelling, that in turn forms the basis of hir rituals. Linguistically, these rituals take the form of hir interjections and interludes into the texts ze's translating; physically, they take the form of hir application of social Indian womanhood through a sari, accessories, and makeup. It's through this that ze categorizes and illuminates core tenets of hir identity to hirself, and speaks to the notion of queer visibility as allowing for internal replication.

Alok isn't the only human subject who engages in a queering through consumption and storytelling. This human ordering is duplicated in and by Cyrah, who writes her chronological narrative in the form of an autoethnographical account to her son conceived through rape, Izrail.<sup>10</sup> Even with abundant explorations of queerness, monstrosity and the expanded home, Cyrah is who my eye lands on with every re-reading of *The Devourers*, and this is because of the space she occupies in society and how this is inherently tied to who she is and who she becomes. Cyrah's caste is not explicitly named; I make assumptions here through her status as a sex worker outside of the bounds of "proper" Mughal society, which, according to caste

functionalities of the time, could place her as a lower-caste Muslim, though this cannot be mapped onto modern Dalit realities in an entirely homologous manner (Chaudhary et al 149). Still, this queers Cyrah inherently, if read through Gopinath's conception of South Asian "female" queerness as undermining social conventions and constructions, rather than through sexual or embodied alterity. And like the rape of Dalit women in present day, Cyrah's rape by Fenrir is not random but structured (Chapman 52). It is precisely because of this identity that Fenrir gains access to her body, differentiating her rape from that which is presented in *Arundhati*, which happens to an upper-caste woman who has the "right" to seek retribution. Instead, Cyrah's body is the "consumable" body and by saddling her with Izrail's conception, Fenrir further isolates her in a way her other rapists had not, especially with a child that is mixed, both within human and monstrous conceptions (Pal et al 61; Das 98). While Fenrir does not technically exist within the caste system as a foreigner, his status as a white man allows him to utilize the existing caste structure to sexually colonize Cyrah.

The public control that causes and accompanies Dalit rape doesn't follow, however, not because there was no possibility for it but because Cyrah mobilizes against Fenrir in a way that is often denied to Dalit women. She is able, through the access granted by journeying with Gévaudan, Fenrir's French werewolf ex-companion, to weaken and dissolve her ties to normative human society while seating herself firmly in humanhood by attempting to pin down the nature of the werewolf that raped her. But it's Cyrah's belief that Fenrir can take back what he has "given" her—an attempt to pin down the monstrous nature through known mythologies of equal exchange—as well as to enact her vengeance upon him, that allows her to make use of this most. It is Cyrah who becomes the consumer rather than the consumed, it is *she* who moves further into the wild, even as the wild moves into *her*, Gévaudan or no.

I find Cyrah to be the one that expands this idea of the home space as including the wild the most. Depictions of the domestic, human home spaces in *The Devourers* are only second to the forests, the plains, the mountains. These wild spaces are ones that humans, queered either through circumstance or body, are given permission to enter with the foreknowledge that they will be transformed, and expand what they consider home in return, such that the wild and its excesses are included within it. This expansion then disrupts caste-hegemonic and nationalist ideas of the home as being an ordered, categorized thing, intertwined with colonial ideas of the same, and invites transgressive Indian subjectivities to then reconfigure and occupy this newly definite “not-home” space (Gopinath 183). And like Alok with Izrail, it is this unimpeded wild coupled with Cyrah’s consumption of Gévaudan’s stories that finally culminates in an embodied affirmation of her queerness—she never rejoins human society, staying in the Sundarbans with Gévaudan instead to watch over Izrail as Banbibí. Cyrah thus entangles the space of the consuming narrator with that of a sacred subject with agency, and queers the space of the home by knitting its boundaries with that of the wild.

Her status as a metaphorized consumer is strengthened when she is *physically* consumed by Izrail when he reaches shapeshifter adulthood. Though momentarily disembodied, she *reembodies herself* when she possesses him, and through the memories that linger she gives him the ability to write her story (Das 272-83). In a reversal of Fenrir’s established accounts written on human skin, where the devouring of human bodies weaves their stories into the memories of the shapeshifter, and thus subsumes their consciousness into the body of the monstrous, Cyrah instead uses this mechanism to take control of Izrail’s body, thus transforming the replication of his father’s violence and obsession with memory and storytelling. The queer narrative, in Das’

conception, thus becomes uniquely tied to and dependent upon the monstrous in narrative forms and frameworks.

But Das does not place humanness and monstrousness in opposition through this mechanism, inexorably linking storytelling with Izrail's multiple mixed identities, and the way he speaks his own narrative into existence. By using the "glamour" his voice evokes,<sup>11</sup> Izrail transmits his memories through Alok, and leaves hir alive in the forests of the Sundarbans after they have sex, rather than consuming hir and gaining hir memories as part of his own, which Izrail and Alok ascribe to his latent humanity (279). Then, as Cyrah does, Izrail and Alok queer the home space by moving it into the wild, rather than bringing the wild under the purview of heteronormative domesticity. And by re-embodying the act of storytelling, not just through queer love and sex but also through Izrail's hope of returning his mother to life through the "shedding" of his bodies,<sup>12</sup> Izrail too re-embodies and ritualizes queerness too (284).

Rituals of self-identification are thus tied to the monstrous body, one which, in Das' world is inherently sacred, and queered. On sacrality, both Fenrir and Izrail's "second selves" are ones they and other werewolves bear with great pride. This is seen particularly in their refusal to allow human eyes to look at their sacred selves without paying for the gift with their lives (Das 127). On queerness, Das writes these beings as having fluid sexualities and gender presentations governed only by their own willingness to want and to be anything, changing inexorably like the fauna do with their geography, like humans do with the expectation of their communities.<sup>13</sup>

The intertwined notions of the queer and natural put *The Devourers* for me in direct conversation with the sexual politics of India and the diaspora, which codified homosexuality as "unnatural" under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1860, when India was still under British rule, but this remained in effect for over seventy years after independence until 2018.

When I read *The Devourers* years later, I think about the way Indians still believe queerness to be a “Western” concept, even though the codification of homophobia was an imperial import (Vanita 128). But Das first acknowledges these notions by mapping the “unnatural” onto the “foreign,” before complicating this through explorations of “homegrown” monsters with the same markers of alterity. It is in response to multiple concerns that stories like *The Devourers* and stories like it are conceived. If nationalist retellings like the *Shiva* trilogy by Amish Tripathi, which promote revisionist versions of history influenced by organizations like the RSS,<sup>14</sup> then stories like these transform these selfsame histories into sites that are complicated by migration and queerness. I can find and place myself in Das’ world and put into words to the nameless things I dreamed of becoming on my terrace so many years ago because it reframes and transforms multiple mythologies that already interact within me—radio shows and bad TV, incense rituals and prayers that have no words, horror movies I remember over a decade-and-a-half later—and I’m queered by these multiple knowledges too being not fully one thing or another. And when I write my stories in Chennai this August and wonder still if I’m meant to call that loved place home, I’ll know at the very least, in that space between earth and sky, what it means to recognize and be in the in-between.

#### Metaphorical Monsters, Mothers, and Me

I am twenty-one when I come out to my mother. Amma is confused, tells me that it’s normal to feel this way, that every woman has another in her life that holds her heart dearly, fiercely. She tells me about her friend from school, an unruly thing like I am. *Katta-kural oda*, my mother says, *with a voice thick like wood*. The friend got married off young, Amma following that same path several years later. She repeats again that it isn’t this thing called bisexual or whatever but just this bond women have and it’s not the first time I wonder whether I

am a woman at all. My mother and her friend are from a time when the word “lesbian” was still underused in Indian vernacular, even and especially with regards to self-identification (Dave 600). India had only been independent for some thirty-odd years when my mother was that age, and “Western” signifiers were resisted in favor of pro-grass roots terminology, inexplicably intertwining the homosocial and the homosexual, and subsuming the latter. Only physical transgression sealed and separated the two, and no sanskari woman would ever transgress.

I think about this when I read Varghese’s “The Vetala’s Song.” Published in the 2022 anthology, *Queer Little Nightmares*, this story details the afterlife of Vetala, unnamed in life even as she is made titular death, and her quest to reunify with Sharmila, her lover who she was separated from in the 80s after a public kiss at Thatheri Bazaar in Varanasi.<sup>15</sup> Sharmila returns, but dead and cremated in the arms of her “foreign” daughter whose face bears resemblance to hers. When the daughter attempts to dissolve Sharmila’s ashes in the Varanasi, Vetala takes ownership of the remains and consumes them instead. Reunited at last, the lovers sit at the Eastern charnel grounds, under the bodhi tree that guards it, and wait for the sun to dissolve them together.

Here, I think, are two lovers, *distinctly* lovers. I wonder if Amma is queer like I am, wonder if the idea that same-sex love was fleeting and temporal, “subsisting between students in the premarital phase” that permeated the country during her early life was enough to give up any idea of that kind of love (Vanita 128). I imagine my mother as a college student like Vetala was, and wonder if Amma would’ve felt differently if she had read this story. This story that acknowledges the history of lesbians in Indian fiction and reconstitutes the ways they were featured in early 20th century literature, renegotiating the terms under which these texts “[got] away with” making lesbians visible (128). Rather than annulling same-sex yearning through a

marked tension between lesbians or through voluntary heterosexual involvement by one or both lovers, “The Vetala’s Song” firmly states the joyous nature of lesbian partnership, and the stubborn afterlives that persist after the violences of heteronormativity. Would it have been different if my mother knew what queer joy, queer afterlives could look like?

Hypotheticals and otherwise, I know my mother doesn’t know the kind of queerness I do, but I wonder if that make her experience not queer at all.<sup>16</sup> And in the dead of winter, when the sky outside my window darkens too soon and I can’t stop thinking about this, I write “Agony Aunts and Mother of Pearls”, a sunlit story about Poonam, whose child produces pearls from her mouth, and Damini, her neighbor and a single mother like her. Over the phone, my mother helps me with background knowledge of Thoothukudi, where the story is set, and I believe that I can predict what she’d say if she read the story: that these two women were friends and nothing else, even if to me they are friends and *something* else, physically distinguished as lovers or not. But my mother surprises me when I give her the final draft of it and she reads it on a train ride from Bangalore in May. Amma tells me in several voice notes that hold the rush of air, the rattling of the train, that there’s a hint of something else, something fluid, something I made the choice not to name explicitly in the text itself but only because names anchor and make the unknown and the interstitial into something known and fixed. I call my Amma, and we talk honestly for the first time in years about the way this story and others are steeped in the glimmers of a transcended impossibility; together, we imagine something other than named queerness. And in her voice and mine, Poonam says to Damini, questioning the surety that modern queer life asks, “I have often wanted to be like you, to be the kind of woman you would be proud to share yourself with, but I keep forgetting that you have already done that and so much more, and I can only be who I am” (Ramesh 21).

When my mother gets married, she is twenty-two, and she boards a plane for the first time with her new husband, my father, to America; I imagine her here: a small-town Brahmin girl always looking backward. She tells us stories about India, and we visit every summer until Amma realizes that it's not enough and we move back for good when I am six. My sister and I never experience the early marginalization in America that my mother and my friends of color do. That comes much later, and I ritualize my relationships to these places through my writing, watch as I make the invisible visible and physical through the monstrous even when I don't name what's happening, watch how that transforms harm. I wonder whether it's my way of seeking legitimization or containment or both. But I also wonder if my mother unlike me felt that being diasporic was not the same as being Indian, and if the harm that did to her, to me is not worth bearing mention regardless. I wonder if her rituals and her "productions of authentic culture" were a result of this lack (Gopinath 7). And when those failed, I wonder if she decided to let India do the heavy lifting, to allow the Savarna patriarchal system to raise us because it benefitted us. Perhaps everything she tells me now about my sexuality, my gender comes from the subconscious way she, as the productive diasporic subject, necessarily needs to reproduce the hierarchical relationship the diaspora has to the homeland by assuming nationalistic imaginaries.

We are both Sharmila's daughter in different ways, I realize, my mother in what she believes and me in what I do. This diasporic subject in "The Vetala's Song" begins to engage the sequences of productivity through the performance of death rites, with these rites rendered fragmented and impaired by her foreignness (Varghese 31) And yet the aim of the nationalistic project that people like my mother and I are subject to and engage in, unwittingly or not, comes to a grinding halt when Varghese doesn't allow it to assimilate this foreign daughter. Vetala and Sharmila's reunification is possible not by the strict moral order of the Sanskritized Hindu canon,

but by the transgressive in the Tantrik, and the lovers together stage a moment of intervention for her, and she leaves, changed.<sup>17</sup> It is this that both acknowledges the nature of the diasporic subject as *intertwined with but separate from* the native subject, and offers alternative ontologies for self-identification, both supernatural and material.

I will never become the Indian woman my mother wants me to be, but my body doesn't become transgressive merely when I strip pottus from my forehead,<sup>18</sup> leaving the sticky residue behind. Instead, it is in my rituals, these stories I write of bad Brahmin women, or womanish persons anyhow, who backtalk and refuse their menses ceremonies and allow every ounce of anger turn them monstrous like me. And though my abstracted queerness is regarded as monstrous, my family and my society never exhibit a threat of physical violence like they do the emotional. And yet, when I talk about ritualized queer afterlives, is it only because *my* dominant-caste, diasporic queer life, specifically *my* life, is shaped to endure? I wonder if, with age, I would've become the "productive queer citizen" in India, my queerness being only incidental to my caste (Bhattacharya 151). Did I not learned to twist my tongue in this foreign country, to speak with a vaguely midwestern lilt? Do I not hold onto the body that would allow me to slip into the ways of Brahmin womanhood in India and in the diaspora? Do I not refuse hormones, think about top-surgery as some distant dream, visible only in my fiction where bodies can become anything because a medical transition would queer me so physically that I could never be around my family and my community in the same way, never go back to India without being afraid?

Maybe this is why I revere embodiment, to make clear that the Brahminical closet is a threat, even if it's tempered by my ability to access it. I write "Between Our Bodies" and look at what the closet does to bodies like mine, especially when that speaker *is* a good Brahmin woman,

or tries to be, and there is no reward, no retribution in that access, because their monstrous body, their gender alterity nevertheless persists and is inseparable from them (Ramesh 66-105). I write “These Glass Afterbirths” and see the consequences of staying in the closet and *still* losing my family, *still* losing my community, and I am dismayed by that hypothetical (41-65). And then there’s this essay.

Like those before it, it invites accusations of a self-hatred cultivated by “modernist and Western” ideas of “progressivism” at best, and a threat of violence if placed in a public sphere at worst.<sup>19</sup> I wonder if I’m right in thinking I can avoid physical violence if I keep writing in English and keep using highly academic language and a solid list of references, and when I write this for the first time, I wrap myself in a dense, academic essay and hope it’ll keep me safe, before I am made to realize that this is where I am hurting myself, there is nothing that will make my queerness less visible, and whatever palatability I might be able to engender will also serve to disregard and invisibilize queer and caste-ed realities. And then I am almost twenty-six when I ritualize and write about this and most of my best stories, almost twenty-six when I publish under the name Krishnameera because it splits into two differently gendered names and because it’s the name of a friend’s mother, the only one in my childhood who never viewed my gender alterity as monstrous. I realize later that it’s a good, Brahmin name, more evocative of the sacred than “Sanjana” is, but I hope that under that name that carries its specific weight I can craft new narratives and literatures that acknowledge the pre-existing mythos that is wrapped around our queer lives, narratives that acknowledge nationalist, Brahminical indoctrination and move past them.

I want to be part of a queer diaspora that can instead “mobilize questions of the past, memory and nostalgia for radically different purposes” as Gopinath writes us as being able to

(4). I want to be able to acknowledge sacral monster stories and their casted histories, point to the stories of the sub-continent and beyond, and their gaps. And it is out of these wants that I, Indra Das, Anuja Varghese, and so many Indian writers like us construct Indian queerness as something new, rather than something solely against. By making sacred the queer insatiability that runs through our stories, which in turn can be seen as autoethnographical accounts by the hybrid monsters that occupy these stories, and through the emphasis placed on the phenomenological, embodied nature of these monsters, I believe our texts allow for new histories, and for old home spaces to be unraveled and extended and reconstituted into the wild.

It is here that we become a part of something that carves out spaces for new histories, for new presents, for new futures, and for our collective queer afterlives, where impossible beings become possible.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Tantra: An esoteric practice in Hinduism and Buddhism. Aghorīs: practitioners of the Tantrik practice known as Aghor that employs antinomian ritual practices. For more information see White, “Tantra” and Barrett, “Aghorīs in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Online Hinduism*.”

<sup>2</sup>I put “female” in quotes throughout to indicate the normative use of “female” as intertwining gender and biological sex. I use “gender alterity”, “transfemme” and other such descriptors where I can.

<sup>3</sup>Muniswarar: a god part of the Tamil pantheon of gods, here referring to the tutelary deity of Vadavur in Tamil Nadu, India. Sanskritized into wider Hindu canon as an emanation of Shiva. Mini: Amoral fertility spirits. For more information on the relationship between the two, see Arumugam 45-49.

<sup>4</sup>Sanskritization: The process by which local or tribal gods are assimilated into the wider Hindu pantheon. See Flood *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 17-19.

<sup>5</sup>I generally take issue with Bradford’s study on jōgappas for a number of reasons, primarily derived from my critique of ethnography, but also because he encounters but does not expand on the “female” counterparts to jōgappas, known as jōgammās or jōgātis.

<sup>6</sup>A discussion of the effects of the Anglophone novel are beyond the scope of this essay, but Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan has written extensively on this subject, particularly in the *Introduction to Interventions*, Vol. 20, Issue 3 of 2018.

<sup>7</sup>Mohini-pei: Tamil ghosts that prey on married men, according to my grandfather, but also seen in various iterations across Tamil lore, with Sri Lanka having the most well-documented of these myths.

<sup>8</sup>I use ze/hir/hirs/hirself to indicate Alok's movement through the novel and an acknowledgement of their gender alterity as it might be conceived of after the novel. This isn't supported by the text, where ze's referred to using he/him/his/himself, when ze's referred to in the third person at all, but this is also prior to the revealing of their transness.

<sup>9</sup>For examples of this see Das 155.

<sup>10</sup>I call her story autethnographical because her account follows in Bochner and Ellis' definition of the same. Cyrah uses her reflexivity to speak to the wider condition that surrounds women of her time, making references to time markers, her own history and community, as well as that of the shapeshifters'. For further reading on redefining autoethnography see Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*.

<sup>11</sup>Glamour: a kind of illusion that shapeshifters can use on their prey, done through oral storytelling.

<sup>12</sup>Shedding: an ability where shapeshifters remove their skins and re-emerge as one of their victims

<sup>13</sup>Das writes of genderqueer "vukodlaks," Slavic werewolves who tear skins of their second selves, but transform this into the rituals of writing, (51-54) as well as Izrail's intersex imakhr or "shapeshifter maker" (276). All these emanations are seen by the shapeshifters as just as ordinary as the multiple iterations and natural adaptations of their species across the wilds of the world.

<sup>14</sup>RSS: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist organization.

<sup>15</sup>Varanasi is particularly prominent as a Hindu holy site and that the story is set here rather than in other places in India is notable.

<sup>16</sup>Gopinath would disagree, as do I.

<sup>17</sup>It is possible to read this as a true and final rejection of the homeland and all its facets. However, I would rather read this as mirroring Vetala's own acceptance of the supernatural when it comes to her post-death—as consumption of a narrative that truly serves to further one's own rituals of self-identification and the jurisdiction over the liminalities of the self that is attained through the same.

<sup>18</sup>Pottu: Tamil; A red dot worn by Hindus in the middle of the forehead. Also known as “bindi”

<sup>19</sup>A quick look through the variously politically-aligned, Indian subreddits shows this quite plainly, but so does talking to those in diasporic Hindu temple circles.

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