# Querying the Queer: A Study of the Queer Identity in the Sri Lankan English Novel

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**Abstract**

Employing the insights gleaned from queer theory, this paper engages with the literary representation of tabooed sexualities by scrutinizing the depiction of the queer character in the post-Independence Sri Lankan novel. The methodology of the study is based on a textual examination. The primary texts under scrutiny are three texts by the two pioneers of the Sri Lankan English novel, Punyakanthi Wijenaike (*Giraya* and *Amulet*) and James Goonewardena (*An Asian Gambit*); in which one finds the earliest appearance of the queer character in Sri Lankan English fiction. In a nutshell, the paper examines how these authors negotiate with what the feminist critics term, "the perceptual screen provided by our patriarchal cultural conditioning" by attempting to see if the works of these authors hold any subversive potential. This end is achieved by examining whether the depiction of the queer character in the novels of these authors is employed as a means of tracing a redefinition or a reaffirmation of the patriarchal social institutions such as love and family. In the exploration it becomes evident that especially in Wijenaike's work there is a critical recognition the discriminatory aspects of certain patriarchal institutions. Nevertheless, the study unearths that in spite of the authors' ostensibly radical move of engaging with tabooed sexualities in the Sri Lankan society in their novels, their depiction of the queer character is predominantly governed by homophobic, heterosexist undercurrents. It is hoped that this paper will throw new light on the preoccupations of the Sri Lankan English writers, enable new readings of old texts, and illuminate a previously unexplored area of experience in Sri Lankan English fiction.

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The term, 'queer identity', is used to denote the sexualities that differ from the heterosexual norm. Although referring to 'alternate' sexualities as 'queer' initially strikes one as the height of heterosexual presumption, the word was initially brought into the register of sexuality during the turn of the 20th century by the gay men themselves in New York who used it as a code word to refer to their sexuality. During the latter part of the 20th century with the publication in 1969 of Paul Goodman's The Politics of Being Queer that had a significant impact on the gay liberation movement, and with the launch of the organization, Queer Nation, founded by victims of anti-gay violence, which popularized the slogan, "We're here, We're queer, Get used to it!", the meaning of the word came to be invested with the more positive associations of freedom and independence of spirit having to do with the fact of social nonconformity. The term came to be appropriated later by the academia as a relatively gender neutral term which is free of the male bias in the hitherto used term 'homosexuality,' and employed as, "an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional gay and lesbian studies" (Jagose 2002: 2).

The term, 'queer identity', then, is wider in scope than either 'homosexuality' or 'lesbianism' both of which are generally restricted to an understanding of a rather stigmatized sexual experience with a member of the same sex. On the contrary, 'queer identity' provides a broader understanding of sexuality that need not necessarily be limited to a sexual experience. It works as an umbrella term inclusive of a broad spectrum of behavior patterns that do not fit under the preconceived labels of sexual identities, conceptualizing sexuality in terms of bondings between members of the same sex that enable them to give and receive practical and political support and share a rich inner life. Such an inclusive definition of sexuality as entailed by 'queer identity' provides a freer and a more uninhibited interpretive strategy for a reading of texts for their representations of gay/queer identities, which helps unearth the suppressed narratives of the tabooed relations between members of the same sex.

Employing a "critical consciousness about heterosexist assumptions" (Bulkin qtd by Zimmerman 1985: 201), western feminist critics have demonstrated how the representation of sexuality in literary texts had largely been confined to the depiction and discussion of the heterosexual experience, serving either to stereotype or suppress altogether the expression of 'other' sexualities so that they appear

nonexistent and serving, tautologically, to reaffirm the patriarchal assumption that heterosexuality is the only sexuality. Bearing in mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's observation of "texts as sites of definitional creation" (Sedgwick 1985:3), it is my intention to explore the connections between literary texts and social dynamics through an examination of the strategies of suppression, silencing and stereotyping, highlighting therein the undercurrents of homophobic, heterosexist assumptions in the representation of queer sexuality in the Sri Lankan English novel.

**Queer Identity in Sri Lanka.**

Before exploring the delineation of the queer in the Sri Lankan English novel, we must examine the queer discourse in Sri Lanka against which these texts are placed and studied. Upon venturing into a study on the queer discourse in Sri Lanka one meets with a stumbling block - an absence of a substantial corpus of published research on the queer community in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless this lack of research itself is a telling indication of the mainstream society's suppressive attitude towards the queers. A rare instance of research into the Sri Lankan discourse on the queer, Shermal Wijewardena's study titled "Missing Niche Audiences and Underground Views on Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Sri Lanka", reveals that the mainstream Sri Lankan society rationalizes atypical gender identities through uncompromisingly heteronormative glasses. Wijewardena analyzes the social discourse on gender and sex based violence that was triggered by Ashoka Handagama's film "Thani Thatuwen Piyabanna" which centered around the discovery of the protagonist's transgendered identity,and finds that the majority of the "reviewers insisted on typifying atypical gender presentation as a reaction to the powerlessness of 'woman', rather than affirming female-to-male transsexual identification by understanding the premises of gender-variant self-presentation" (Wijewardena 2008:213). Moreover, her examination of an archive of reports from Sinhala newspapers on incidents involving transgendered people, reveal that the newsworthiness of the incidents were primarily based on their sensational value and not on any desire to raise awareness on the plight of the queers in the country. Indeed, the very attempt to rationalize these occurrences in terms of the gender binary - as amazing incidents of men turning to women and vice versa - signals the absence of any conception of the very existence of the queers.

Moreover, in observing the predicament of the queer community in Sri Lanka, Sherman De Rose, the founder of Companions on a Journey, the first organization in Sri Lanka devoted to espousing the cause of queer sexualities, declares that rather than an attitude of "overt, organized hostility ("Gay bashing")", Sri Lankan society to a large part entertains a homophobic attitude of "inflexible indifference and ridicule which is however uncompromisingly suppressive in its own way because it signals an attitude of stubborn refusal to acknowledge the existence of homosexuals or treat them seriously" (De Rose). Despite the absence of overt hostility towards queers, same sex relationships are still a subject so taboo in the Sri Lankan society that it is not named in the general discourse; the penal code itself referring to it as, "any act of gross indecency with another person" (SL Penal Code. Act 22. sec. 365A). Although it is difficult to speculate on the treatment of queer sexualities in precolonial Sri Lanka due to the lack of concrete evidence, it was the British who decidedly criminalized homosexual relationships in Sri Lanka during the 19th century, under the "obscenity law", which subjected the accused to a penalty of a prison sentence not "less than ten years and not exceeding twenty years" (SL Penal Code. Act 22. sec. 365A). The repressive policy of the country towards homosexual relationships has been such that there was no attempt to decriminalize homosexuality until 1995 when an attempt was made to repeal the law criminalizing homosexuality. Yet, ironically, rather than granting legal recognition to sex between two consenting adults of the same sex, this attempt only succeed in including lesbian relationships under the category of forbidden relationships serving thereby only to suppress same sex relationships more so than before. Furthermore, the complete nonexistence of any acknowledged organization devoted to the cause of the homosexuals till 1995, the complete absence of any organized Gay Movement as yet, the dismissal of same sex relationships as a teenage fad that one grows out of and more significantly the absence of any word in Sinhala to denote homosexuals except for the academic terms, 'samalingika', 'samakamini' and the colloquial derogatory term, 'ponnaya', illustrate the suppressive attitudes of the mainstream society that relegates the queers of the country to the margins, contributing to their voicelessness, invisibility and subsequent erasure. More importantly, the complete absence of even a derogatory term in Sinhala to denote lesbians, which contributes to their complete invisibility, highlights the mainstream

society's greater fear and rejection of the female queer. Thus, the woman as queer is doubly effaced.

However, while the mainstream society and its social and political discourses have served to make the queer community invisible, the Sri Lankan English novel, during the post-Independence period, when it came to acquire a distinct identity of its own, has become a site on which the queers have been visible. In fact, in the novels of both the pioneers of the Sri Lankan English novel, James Goonewardena and Punyakanthi Wijenaike, queer identity cannot exactly be seen as under erasure: in Goonewardena, we therefore have the faint traces of homoeroticism between Vijaya and Sunil in *The Call of the Kirala*, and in Wijenaike's *Giraya*, the overtly queer characters Lal and Lucia Hamy play a significant role in the plot. Nevertheless, in neither the early novels nor in the more recent novels (except perhaps in Selvadurai's novels where it occupies the foreground of the fiction) is the representation of queer identity the main theme. Nor has it been a concern or focus of the critical establishment. Therefore, a study of the representation of queer identity in the Sri Lankan novel could prove illuminating of the thematic preoccupations and the structures of representation of Sri Lankan English novel

**Methodology**

The present study will be based on an examination of the textual treatment of queer identities in the Sri Lankan English novel in the post Independent period. The novels include Punyakanthi Wijenaike's Giraya and Amulet, Romesh Gunasekara's Reef, Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy, and Susunaga Weeraperuma's Sunil, The Struggling Student.

My task is to investigate how the presence of the queer intervenes into the presentation of these heteronormative institutions. Does it signal a subversion by exposing their limitations or does it merely serve to reify these institutions by simply confirming/underlining the old prejudices? Does it call for a resigned acceptance of 'order' as we know it or does it invite a re-imagining? Indeed, it could be argued that the author's sexual orientation is of determinative importance in this respect. However one's sexual orientation is so shrouded in secrecy that there is no way of determining the sexual orientations of all the authors. Nevertheless, being the products of a patriarchal society, all are, as aforementioned, "always already subjects" (Althusser 2010: 243) of the overarching heteronorma-

tive ideology. Thus, all must negotiate with these deeply ingrained heteronormative screen ideologies. How the authors negotiate the, "perceptual screen provided by our patriarchal cultural conditioning" (Stanley qtd in Zimmerman 1985: 201) will be a key point of inquiry in studying the dialectical relationship between the queer and the heteronormative institutions that is carried out in these novels. This exploration will be carried out through an examination of the narrative strategies: is the queer the narrative focus or a narrative adjunct? Is narrative possibility subordinated to narrative plausibility so that imagination is curtailed from envisaging new possibilities? To what effect are the narrative strategies of contrasts, silences, visibility and invisibility used? Does the narrative consequently come to be riddled with ambiguities, discrepancies and paradoxes? Based on the insights thus gleaned, my analysis will investigate whether the queer presence serves to redefine or reaffirm these heteronormative institutions in order to see if there is indeed a signal for a divergence from the straight and narrow path that Sri Lankan English fiction hasgenerally followed.

**Textual Analysis**

In order to conceptualize these suppressed/effaced narratives of the tabooed relations between the members of the same sex, queer theorists propose the strategy of probing into what is called 'homosocial relations' – " a term used in history and the social sciences to describe social bonds between persons of the same sex" (Sedgwick, 1). According to Simpson, such homosocial relations as manifested in " the expression of affection through physical contact and demonstration of strong companionship between men…is widespread and fully accepted" (Simpson 2004:168) in Sri Lanka. Possibly as a reflection of this old tradition of male friendships in the Sri Lankan society, James Gonnewardena's An Asian Gambit depicts numerous scenes of sharply marked deep homosocial bonding among men, especially between the two principal characters, Deva and Ariya. From his very first meeting with Ariya at the inn, Deva, the dejected, brooding, world-weary artist, feels drawn to company of the intelligent Ariya with whom he is able to converse intelligently on an equal intellectual footing. In their conversation, the two men are able to finally give expression to their fears, anxieties, thoughts and dreams. Consequently, they find solace, support and security in each other's company that they are unable to enjoy in the company of a member of the opposite sex, "Deva sat with Ariya that evening,

out in the resthouse grounds, feeling the tropical night envelope him as the womb would protect a still unborn infant. He needed to feel this sense of security, of being in a sanctuary…and be with someone he could trust" (Gonnewardena 1985: 146).

However, rather than treating the homosocial in isolation, Eve Sedgwick in Between Men states the possibility of drawing, "the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire' of the potentially erotic… hypothes[izing] the unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum" she astutely notes, "whose visibility in society is radically disrupted" (Sedgwick 1985:1). This radical disruption of the male continuum is a characteristic of patriarchal societies. Patriarchy, Sedgwick notes, is to be understood as, "relations between men which have a material base and which …establish and create interdependence and solidarity among men, that enable them to dominate women" (Hartmann qtd in Sedgwick 1985: *3*). Patriarchal societies are therefore, built upon "obligatory heterosexuality". Thus, while the homosocial constitutes and reinforces "interdependence and solidarity among men" that serves to reify patriarchy, the homosexual tends to destabilize it by threatening the "obligatory heterosexuality" that it is built upon. Patriarchal/ heteronormative institutions therefore, necessitate homophobia because if patriarchal society ceases to be homophobic, its material base – the economic and political structures - will be destabilized. Therefore, Sedgwick theorizes that "patriarchies structurally include homophobia"(Sedgwick 1985: 4) causing a disruption in the visibility of the male continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual.

This homophobic disruption of the male continuum's visibility is apparent in Gonnewardena's presentation of the bond between Deva and Ariya: the writer appears to proceed along the straight and narrow, well trodden path of male bonding rather than diverging into avenues that would open vistas of how the homosocial can be drawn into "the orbit of desire of the potentially erotic". Moreover, the power of the pervasive heteronormative ideology that appears to govern the novelistic vision is such that the potential homoeroticism is countered/offset by the normative narratives of heterosexual romances between Deva and the women in his life, Amali, his dead first wife and Aruni, his new wife, that Deva finds enchantingly romantic, erotically exciting and carnally satisfying.

The same strategy of countering homoerotic and homosexual relations with a heterosexual romance is apparent in Romesh Gunasekera's novel Reeftoo.The novel portrays two explicitly queer relationships: the homoerotic attachment that Triton entertains towards his master Mr. Salgado and the brief, homosexual assault that Triton undergoes with his fellow homosexual servant Joseph. Indeed, the dramatic contrast between the presentation of the homoerotic and the homosexual is highly significant: the homosocial that serves to reify patriarchal/heteronormative structures is sanitized and even romanticized. But, as we shall see below, implied in the very manner of its presentation as an assault on an underage boy, the homosexual experience which threatens patriarchy, is stigmatized as dirty and defiling of innocence.

More significantly, in terms of romance, even the homoerotic is subordinated to the heterosexual: the clearly marked homoeroticism in Triton's attachment towards his master is countered by a more forcefully, more boldly marked heterosexual romance between Mr Salgado and Nilli that is played out in the narrative foreground. Moreover, although Triton is given the narrative voice, his homosexual tendencies hover in the narrative background. Shrouded in ambiguity, his sexuality can only be tentatively surmised from the intensity of his homoerotic attachment to his master,"Your cook?" "Your life, your everything", I wanted to sing pinned up on the rafters, heaven between my legs" (Gunasekera, 64). However, even the queer Triton is presented as undergoing a voluntary, erotically exciting heterosexual awakening instigated by Nilli's naked presence:

> "She was completely naked…I could see her nipples; her breasts were like faint ring marks. I could see her ribs, her small round stomach. Dimples. She looked up and I felt I was going to burst. My chest hurt…The blood pumping inside me made me deaf. I waited in my room. I don't know what I thought would happen, but it was the only thing I could do…I tried to retrace all my steps in my mind but I could not. And yet I could see her naked body distinctly. It was as if she were next to me, looming closer" (Gunasekera, 126).

Gunasekera thus presents Triton's sexual awakening prompted by a woman with connotations of excitement and allure. In fact, Triton's liking for Nilli is also depicted with positive connotations throughout the novel. However, it must be noted that the same terms

are not available in the local discourse on 'love' to conceptualize and express his tabooed desire for Mr. Salgado. This taboo denies him language. Moreover, although the narrative authority in this novel is given to a queer character, it must be noted that his sexuality, as made evident above, is presented in rather ambiguous terms, appearing to hover in some liminal space between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Indeed, it is doubtful if the narrator is in fact a queer. Triton's attraction towards Mr. Salgado could also be a result of his ambiguous sexuality as a young boy. He is, after all, a young boy who is at the age at which most people are attracted towards their superiors, teachers, masters etc. In contrast, the overtly homosexual character is delineated as a rank libertine, easily the most despicable character the novel portrays, "he [Joseph] had been born with a moral equivalent of a sweet tooth – no temptation was too small" (Gunasekera 1998: 9). Furthermore, this starkly unfavorable delineation of the homosexual character complements the presentation of the homosexual act: in sharply dichotomized contrast to both the homoerotic attraction as well as the heterosexual arousal, the one full blown homosexual experience in the novel is presented as an assault on innocence, with all the uncompromisingly negative, homophobic connotations of violence, unnaturalness, revulsion and abuse:

> Joseph had his mouth open and his tongue thickened between his teeth. I could see the spittle on his lips bubbling. He lunged forwards and grabbed me. I lashed out with my hand. If I could hit his jaw his tongue would fall out, but his arms were like steel belts around me. He pushed me on the big soft bed. He was on top of me, twice my size, squeezing the life out of me and the breath out of my chest. His fist digging in between my legs and punching a hole in me. The more I struggled the stronger he became. I bit his arm and he nearly broke my back. In the end I gave up and died. I let the life out of my body and he froze. Then with one hand he undid his sarong and pulled at his dribbling warped prick. He looked down at it and I slipped out from under him down on to the floor" (Gunasekera 1998: 36).

A similarly explicit depiction of a homosexual union can be seen in Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy. As Selvadurai is a self-acknowledged gay writer, there is a conscious attempt at promoting a counter-ideology which makes his novel different from all the

novels so far discussed. However, even Selvadurai's account must be acknowledged to be a re-presentation (language or other representational mode intervenes with the depiction, causing a slight 'distortion', so that there can be no depiction of the 'real'). Indeed, as expertly controlled as Selvadurai's narration is for the most part,an element of exoticism creeps into his hyper-visible, graphic description of the sexual encounter between Arjie and Shehan.Despite his status as a queer, he, like every other author, is forced to translate his queer experience into the existing normative discourse of 'love' the structures of which automatically serves to distort and exoticise this queer experience that does not fall under its discursive parameters. In other words, given the largely heteronormative context in which the novel is read, the fact that it is between two young boys serves to exoticise the whole sexual activity,its graphic detail appearing almost to satisfy the curious. Moreover, Selvadurai's stress on Arjie's effeminacy and his long, detailed almost obsessive description of the bride-bride performance create the impression that homosexuality is something weird and aberrant.

Indeed, this element of exoticism can be seen from the novel's very title as well as its content. It is in this respect that the 'connection' between language and ideology is of paramount significance. Although weather language and ideology are one and the same is a matter of contention, many theoreticians have pointed out that, "ideology is inscribed in language" (Stephens and Knowles as quoted by Jarrar 2009: *33*). Ideology, therefore, permeates language in expression, idioms, phrases, content and style. As Hurford observes, "there is limited language to describe sexual minority experience and identities within dominant discourses. This creates a category of "other" in our culture, which is rendered invalid, pathological or exotic" (Hurford 2009: 49).Since ideology has seeped into the very textures and structures of language itself, even Selvadurai's delineation inevitably, inescapably acquire this ideological coloring. The fact that the novel is lodged in most people's minds as a textbook on homosexuality, with relatively scant attention paid to its sociopolitical theme compared to the almost obsessive attention paid to its homosexual theme (Wijesinha, 1998:79), further points to the potency of this exotic dimension. The potency of the exotic element in the novel is in turn testimony to the power and pervasiveness as well as the inescapability of the overarching heteronormative ideology of patriarchal society.

As becomes evident from the discussion so far, the queer character in the Sri Lankan English novel appears to be riddled with paradoxes, discrepancies and ambiguities. Perhaps no other novel is more blatantly paradoxical in its ostensible mission and vision as Susunaga Weeraperuma's Sunil, The Struggling Student. To all intents and purposes the novel at first appears to advocate a more progressive, tolerant attitude towards queer sexuality:

> "I am not against gays although I'm not gay" I remarked. "Just because you are gay you haven't gone down in my estimation. I treat you with respect…If gays sincerely believe in tolerance, and therefore wish to live peacefully with straights, then gays shouldn't force straights to accept practices that they don't like doing," I declared. "Nor should straights force gays to do things that the latter don't want. This is the recipe for peaceful co-existence" (Weeraperuma 2010: 139-140).

However, despite its ostensible progressive stance on queer sexuality, the novel does not even depict a queer relationship. Instead, it dramatizes a wealthy queer man's (Kelaart) unreciprocated 'love' for Sunil, the poor homeless heterosexual boy he picks up from the streetand takes under his wing. Although extremely generous, Kelaart, like Joseph in Reef, is presented as a libertine who engages in a determined pursuit of Sunil. Finally however Kelaart is checked by the heterosexual's indomitable self-control against his amorous advances. Humbled against his will, Kelaart meekly demands:

> "Sunil, can you suggest a solution that's acceptable to me?" he pleaded.
>
> "I remember something right now!" I exclaimed. "My father once gave an alcoholic a piece of advice. Father said that all your tendencies begin to drop once you start meditating. Kelaart, if you meditate, this addiction of yours might fall away…" (Weeraperuma 2010: 141).

Queer sexuality is therefore not in fact even deemed worthy of being regarded as a fact of life for some individuals, that is as 'natural' and 'real' as heterosexuality is to the majority. On the contrary, despite Sunil's assertion of tolerance for queer relationships, it becomes apparent that queer 'love' is not seen to carry the 'pure', positive, 'higher' dimension of emotional and spiritual fulfillment. Indeed, when juxtaposed with the muted but 'pure' heterosexual relationship between Sunil and Menika, Kelaart's idea

of a relationship appears even more grotesque by contrast. Queer 'love', the novel appears to suggest, is merely triggered by 'baser', uncontrolled sexual urges. Therefore it is a 'condition' – a mere "addiction" on par with alcoholism that could be 'cured' by rigorous mental discipline enforced through meditation. As Sunil on numerous occasions highly recommends meditation as an exercise that is, "a cure for all our mind based maladies" (Weeraperuma, 220) there can be no doubt that queer sexuality too is categorized as one of the so called "mind based maladies" that can be effectively 'cured'. Although Kelaart has not been able to engage in a queer relationship with Sunil, he appears to have benefited from his non erotic relationship with the heterosexual. In fact, the novel concludes with the impression of the homosexual having profited from the 'superior' wisdom of the heterosexual:Kelaart gratefully thanks Sunil for this piece of 'good' advice that hasresulted in curing him of his "fire of sexuality"(Weeraperuma 2010: 202).Thus, rather than projecting a picture of tolerance for queer sexuality, the novel closes on an image of a figuratively emasculated queer – a potent suggestion of a complete eradication of queer sexuality:

> "Sunil, finally a thousand thanks for introducing the houseboy to the world of meditation," said Kelaart. "I do meditate everyday".
>
> "Has it resulted in anything?" I asked with curiosity.
>
> "I've quietened down a great deal" observed Kelaart. "My fire of sexuality has burnt itself out" (Weeraperuma 2010: 202).

Thus, at its conclusion the novel too has been cured of its fixation with homosexuality. In fact, the same seems to be true in the case of almost all the novels already discussed here. The intervention of the queer love into the normative narratives of love that we set out to explore, appears to be riddled with contradictions, ambiguities and sharply dichotomized contrasts that serve only to show the normative narratives in a more favorable light at the expense of the 'other'. But so far, we have only looked at how the male queer love is presented vis-à-vis the normative narratives of love. It being only a partial exploration therefore, we must now investigate how the love of the female queer, whose ideological positioning greatly differs from that of the male queer, comes to intervene in these normative narratives. If the male queer is greatly feared in the patriarchal heteronormative society, then the female queer is doubly feared and doubly marginalized on account of her dual otherness in hetero-

normative society that is brought about by her 'deviant' sexuality as well as her 'deviant' gender ('deviant' because patriarchal ideology establishes the 'male' as the default gender). The case being such, how do these heteronormative ideologies intervene in the presentation of lesbian love?

The effacement of the female queer is immediately perceptible in the considerably fewer number of texts depicting a female queer identity. Indeed, whenever one thinks of the female queer character in the Sri Lankan novel, the text that inevitably comes to mind is Punyakanthi Wijenaike's Girayathat famously depicts a queer relationship between Adelaine, the matriarch of the walauwe and her sinister servant Lucia Hamy. The influence of the overarching heteronormative ideology is quite obvious in this narrative: the voice of the queer is completely suppressed and the narrative authority of representing the queer is given toKamini, the married woman who had attained her normative role as wife and mother as decreed by the heteronormative ideologies. As in the case of Gunasekera's Reef, the queer relationship in this novel too comes across as one that confirms the worst homophobic prejudices of a heteronormative society – as abhorrent, unnatural, deviant, grotesque and repulsive:

> Lucia Hamy kneels at the foot of the bed stroking the naked soft fair skin of her legs…I can feel the skin of my body prickling…The relationship between mistress and servant is not a normal one. True, Lucia Hamy is considered almost a part of the family. But she is warped, strangely evil. Her emotions are as abnormal and ugly as her body (Wijenaike 2002: 59).

The modern conceptualization of lesbianism, however, is not restricted to sexual experiences alone. Adrienne Rich has proposed imagining lesbianism in two ways: both as "lesbian existence" that "comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life" (Rich 2010: 649) as well as "a lesbian continuum" that includes, "a range…of women-identified experiences…including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support…" (Rich 2010: 649). Although the relationships between Adelaine and Lucia Hamy and Kamini and Manel in the Giraya can be seen as occupying various stages of the lesbian continuum, this female bonding is more markedly foregrounded in the intense, psychic bond between Shyamali, Senani's estranged wife and Anula, his dead sister in Wijenaike's Amulet, "It was Anula's eyes that made me rebel, give

vent to my hitherto suppressed feelings and thoughts…She wants to challenge Senani's authority by making me aware of my rights" (Wijenaike 2002: 41).

However, Shyamali's "women-identification" has made no change in the normative role assigned her by heteronormative dictates. There is no doubt about her 'innate heterosexuality' which serves to reaffirm the heteronormative conceptualization of 'love', "Although he bullied and battered me, I had begun to grow and love my husband in a strange dependent way…On nights when the moon was full I positively craved sex with him" (Wijenaike 2002: 42). Nevertheless, Rich finds that this, "double life – this apparent acquiescence to an institution founded on male interest and prerogative – has been characteristic of female experience" (Rich 1980: 654) and identifies LeSueur's The Girl and Toni Morrison's Sula as "novels of women identification…that reveal the lesbian continuum" (Rich 1980: 656). In this respect, due to its highly marked depiction of female survival relationship between Shyamali and Anula, Wijenaike's Amulet can be regarded as a "novel of women identification" that explores the "double life" of the woman.

However, the play of heteronormative ideology can be seen in the sharp contrast in the presentation between Lucia Hamy, the character who had embraced what Rich terms as the "lesbian existence" and the other women in non sexual "survival relationships" : in stark contrast to Shyamali, whose psychic, survival relationship with Anula poses no threat to the heteronormative order, Lucia Hamy comes across "as deviant, as pathological as emotionally and sensually deprived" (Rich 1980: 652). It is significant that her partner Adelaine, who, in spite of her queer relationship with Lucia Hamy, has proved her innate heterosexuality in her affairs with two men, is not painted so negatively. Thus, although non sexual 'love' between women is treated positively in the novel, same sex 'love' that has sexual implications is treated negatively. As seen in the favorable portrayals of Kamini, Shyamali and even Adelaine – all the women who have proved their innate heterosexuality despite their strong women-identification – compulsory heterosexuality is valorized and heteronormativity is consequently reified. Nevertheless, the lesbians are not the only queer characters in Wijenaike's work. There is Lal, the male queer, whose ideological positioning is different from the female queers. How is he presented, especially in relation to the female queers? Why is he present? Unlike in some of the

aforementioned works, all the heterosexual relationships in Giraya and Amulet are far from romantic. Is this significant difference from the works of the previously discussed writers, finally indicative of a critical probing of heteronormativity? Indeed, is there and if so, how far is there a subversive potential in Wijenaike's work?

Certainly, although Wijenaike's almost obsessive depiction of family, marriage and gender roles in very orthodox terms has exposed her to accusations of being a traditionalist who, "falls into the trap of self conscious idealization of indigenous habits and traditions" (Wijesinha 1998: 56), it is significant that in none of the novels does she present 'family,' contrived in terms of orthodox marriage and gender roles, as an institution that has brought about mutually fulfilling emotional and spiritual union between the sexes. On the contrary, an examination of Giraya and Amulet reveals that Wijenaike portrays 'family' as a site of multiple structures of powerthat constitutes and reinforces male domination with the sexual submission of women through marriage, childbirth and child-rearing. Thus, she exposeshow the family in patriarchal society is constructed in terms of unequal relationships which privileges the heterosexual man and victimizes the woman.

For instance, Senani's self-righteous, sadistic abuse of Shyamali, and the helplessness of their respective mothers before the grief and humiliation meted out to them by the adulterous conduct of their husbands in Amulet; Kamini's inability to question Lal's deliberate, pitiless alienation of her and even the powerlessness of that formidable matriarch, Adelaine, in her role as a wife, in Giraya,signal the deep concern of the two novels with the limitations of the patriarchal conception of 'family' that ruthlessly disempowers the woman. Thus, Wijenaike's work appears to fall under what Adrienne Rich terms as novels that are:

> "favorably reviewed as feminist…that take as basic assumption that the social relations of the sexes are disordered and extremely problematic, if not disabling for women; all seek paths towards change…each one might have been more truly a force for change had the author felt impelled to deal with lesbian existence as a reality, as a source of knowledge and power available to women…But in none of these books is compulsory heterosexuality is never examined as an institution or the idea of 'preference' or 'innate orientation' even indirectly questioned" Rich 1980: 633).

Although Wijenaike's novels do not overtly propose lesbian existence as an alternative, her novels do trace paths of change. Closer scrutiny reveals that the terms on which this change is traced is rather ambiguous, "when I choose to marry it will not be in the conventional traditional way…Mine will be a marriage of mind as well as body, of two people not horoscopes and property. We will be two people who need each other for support through life" (Wijenaike 2002: 63). These words spoken by the independent, impetuous, progressive Manisha, the representative of the 'new woman' in Amulet, images marriage in gender neutral terms - of two persons as opposed to the term man. Thus, it remains ambiguous if change is posited in terms of changed terms between the 'sexes' or a complete change from the heterosexual terms in which conventional marriage and family is imagined.

Although, initially one may doubt if Manihsa's words indeed has any such radically progressive implications, it must be noted that the non heteronormative suggestions implied in the ambiguity of Manisha's words complements the previously discussed strongly marked survival relationships between women depicted in both novels. These relationships between Shyamali and Anula in Amulet, Adelaine and Lucia Hamy in Giraya are portrayed as fulfilling and life-affirming for the women. In the character of Lucia Hamy at least, the idea of "the innate orientation" is overtly, if not sympathetically questioned. Yet, sadly, undeniably this recognition of female life affirming relationships appears to be seen through heteronormative screen ideologies: the undeniably grotesque manner, in which Lucia Hamy – who embodies the idea of "lesbian existence as a reality" is delineated, is strongly suggestive of the intervention of the pervasive influence of the overarching heteronormative ideology on representation. The society's greater fear of the female queer is reflected in the macabre manner in which she is represented. This obvious, undeniable, biased presentation of the overtly queer female sadly serves to undercut the progressive, radical potential in Wijenaike's work.

On the other hand, as unattractive and unappealing as the portrayal is, Lal the homosexual is delineated in comparatively less macabre associations. It is significant that Lal is presented as a victim. Lal's very silence in the narrative is a poignant remark on the overarching heteronormative context, which suppresses the voices of those with different sexual orientations. Lal's frustration in be-

ing compelled to do what he personally finds revolting is poignantly brought out in his bitter outburst, "It is true our personal feelings meant nothing when this marriage was arranged. Have you ever thought that I might regret it the same way as you do.?" (Wijenaike, 2002: 83). Lal's outburst hints at the sense of victimization he feels at being forced to live in denial of his real needs and desires. Thus, it is subtly suggested that it is not only women who are victimized in the heteronormative norms that define the patriarchal family.

In both Giraya and Amulet Wijenaike presents patriarchal 'family' in dissolution and in both she posits the inevitability of 'family' formed outside patriarchal norms (Manisha's idea of 'family' in Amulet and the subversion of the patriarchal norms implied in a female heiress's marriage with a man of a 'lower' class on which Girayaconcludes). The patriarchal heteronormative logic upon which traditional 'family' is based on is questioned in both novels but it is highly doubtful if the novel at any point unambiguously invites imagining 'family' in non heteronormative terms. Nevertheless it must be noted that in the presentation of Lal as a victim, there is the recognition that patriarchal family is limited as well as limiting. Moreover, in the recognition of fulfilling relationships contrived in non heteronormative terms in the strong female bonds among the female characters in the families of both novels,there is a recognition of the potential of mutual fulfillment in non heteronormative terms. However, as aforementioned, this recognition is fatally undercut by its muted nature as well as by the macabre presentation of the overtly queer female. The deeply ambiguous effect Wijenaike's works consequently project, attests to the overwhelming, insidious influence of the overarching heteronormative screen ideologies.

**Conclusion**

This exploration of the queer presence in the Sri Lankan English novel, that sought new paths in Sri Lankan English fiction has now come to an end. But rather than finding significant divergences, it has more often found instances of the Sri Lankan English novel continuing in the old straight and narrow path.

The queer has appeared throughout time, in the works of the pioneers of the Sri Lankan English novel as well as in the works of modern authors, in the works of authors located in Sri Lanka as well as abroad. Yet, the re-examination of the themes that have come to be the staples in fiction has revealed that the mere presence of the queer character does not lead to a probing of how the most sacro-

sanct and idealized institutions of the heteronormative society like love and family are informed by an asymmetry of power that easily lends itself to abuse by stigmatizing and victimizing those who do not/cannot conform to their parochial norms. And who either do not have a voice or whose voices are easily suppressed or criminalized in the current homophobic context of Sri Lanka. These institutions are accepted as indisputable facts of life and the 'common sense', the immutability and the 'obviousness' of the 'rightness' of heterosexuality held/entertained by the patriarchal society is hardly questioned. The works of Wijenaike engage in a more pronounced dramatization of how the queer intervenes with the heteronormative institutions. It must be noted that Wijenaike's works, even though they were written during the more repressive early 70s and 90s, show a significant and profound awareness of the arbitrariness of these sacrosanct heteronormative institutions and their consequent inability to contribute to human fulfillment. Nevertheless, as elucidated in the discussion in the previous chapters, these narratives are riddled with numerous ambiguities, paradoxes and discrepancies. These ambiguities and contradictions as well as the narrative choice of the queer as an adjunct rather than as the central figure or protagonist, attest to how these works are nevertheless informed and influenced by the overarching heteronormative ideology. It must be noted that being written from the perspective of a self-acknowledged homosexual writer, Selvadurai's works differ in its more overt, critical rendition of the dialogue between the queer and heteronormative institutions. Even so, because this ideology of discrimination is woven into the very structures and textures of language itself, it is possible to see the insidious influences of heteronormative ideologies in the exotic texture his experiences inevitably acquire upon being translated into the available, restrictive heteronormative paradigms.

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