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# "Love was no sin": Negotiating Transgressive Desire and Colonial Specters in Sangeetha Sreenivasan's *Acid* (2018)

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**Abstract:**

In Sangeetha Sreenivasan's novel *Acid* (2018) the colonial specters are subtle, but loud. The research undertaken reveals how the narrative lays bare the failure of the post-colony as it proactively orchestrates the lives of the characters who find themselves to be at the mercy of biopolitical forces. As Sreenivasan weaves her tale around the lesbian affair between Kamala, a married woman and mother of two, and Shaly, a woman who belongs to no one, the postcolonial anxieties surrounding heterosexual constructs of femininity reveal themselves. Kamala is a deviation from the traditional trajectory of the Indian woman for she opts to live with a woman, is a neglectful mother, and struggles with substance abuse. Talking about the role of women in the postcolonial nation state, Suparna Bhaskaran (2001) notes that women are held responsible for "maintaining honour and purity, preventing shame" and for "reproducing national culture." In failing to do either, Kamala and Shaly are perennially pushed to the fringes of the post-colony, depicted via their displacements and move away from the former's ancestral home which itself is a concrete manifestation of the colonial hangover that pervades throughout the narrative. I argue that the lack of a stable home for Kamala and Shaly subtly reifies their position as outsiders who cannot be integrated within the postcolonial nation state. The study analyzes how the narrative exposes the rubric of gender power relations in the post-colony through the constant hierarchization of power as seen in the constant negotiation of invisibilized queer lives.

**Keywords: Post-colony, displacement, outsider, negotiation, invisibilized.**

**Introduction: The 'Indian Woman' in the Postcolonial Nation State**

Generally speaking, femininity is a socio-cultural construct very much intimate with the local cosmology guided by anachronistic binarizations. The Indian woman especially is bound by tradition and culture. They are effectively caught within insuperable essentialist notions that make it challenging for them to harmoniously survive within a discourse running counter to the socio-cultural diktats of the country. Such a conceptualization of femininity has been widely disseminated through popular discourses and overtime it has come to signify a monolithic image of the Indian woman. Consequently, the typical trajectory of an ideal Indian woman's life must look something like this: as a girl she is an obedient daughter to her parents whose obedience turns to subservience in taking up the mantle of the perfect daughter-in-law and wife, existing solely to appease societal standards and to bear children, preferably male, to protect the patriarchal lineage. It goes without saying that such a construct of femininity has played a significant role in sustaining patriarchy across ages.

It is the colonial intervention that altered the alchemy of existing social scripts pertaining to ideal femininity. Partha Chatterjee in his insightful article titled "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India" (1989) averred that the construct of the "Indian woman" as we know it today was born at the confluence of two very significant sentiments during the colonial era: firstly, the nationalist movement's attempt to uphold the Indian woman as a symbol of the nation, and secondly, for the need to prevent the Indian woman from resembling her white "other." In this way, Indian womanhood became increasingly intertwined with nationalist discourses and sentiments. Suparna Bhaskaran in her work "The Politics of Penetration: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code" (2002) also problematized the fact that even in the postcolonial setting, the onus of "maintaining honour and purity, preventing shame" and also "reproducing national culture" is on women. Hence, the framings of the Indian woman, which has over time gained legitimacy with repeated enactments, is a discourse produced and re-produced by the postcolonial nation state within the overarching cosmology of a patriarchy-driven society.

In Sangeetha Sreenivasan's novel *Acid* (2018) the colonial specters are subtle, but loud. The paper will attempt to understand how the narrative lays bare the failure of the post-colony as it proactively orchestrates the lives of the characters who find themselves to be at the mercy of biopolitical forces. As Sreenivasan weaves her tale around the affair between Kamala, a married woman and mother of two, and Shaly, a woman who belongs to no one, the


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postcolonial anxieties surrounding heterosexual constructs of femininity reveal themselves. Kamala is a deviation from the traditional trajectory of the Indian woman for she opts to live with a woman, is a neglectful mother, and struggles with substance abuse. This paper will explore how lesbians in the post-colony challenge the notion of homogeneity that has come to represent Indian femininity.

**Conceptualizing the 'Indian Woman' as a 'Lesbian'**

The conceptualization of the 'Indian woman' and the sexually deviant 'lesbian' has for long been irreconcilable in Indian society. The Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalized homosexuality was introduced by the British in 1860 and its legacy continued well into the 21st century. Given the convoluted rubric of femininity that governs lives in the country, this paper aims to map the figure of the Indian lesbian onto the country's socio-cultural matrix as portrayed in Sreenivasan's novel. Talking about the conception and representation of lesbians in the Western literary imagination, Patricia White (1991) stated that patriarchal discourses have traditionally constructed lesbians as monsters and grotesque aberrations. Bonnie Zimmerman (1981) writes how the articulation of lesbian love excludes men completely except as a symbol of danger. It is the possibility of a world without men that makes the lesbian a threat to traditional hetero-patriarchal discourses. In India, culture becomes a site of a complex amalgamation of issues ranging from the literary to the political, and the nationalist framings of femininity become the apotheosis of such cultural ideologies. It is culture, constitutive of beliefs and practices, that is the prime agency through which hegemonic forces are enacted (Panjabi and Chakravarti 2012).

Queer feminist scholars in India have analyzed the repercussions of locating the figure of the lesbian within the country's socio-cultural context and arrived at the conclusion that being Indian and Lesbian comes with politics of invisibility and a creation of independent feminine cosmogonies (Thadani 1996). In this paper, the 'lesbian' will also be utilized as an investigative tool to explore how that affects the interpretation of the text. This line of methodological inquiry is absent in the current body of lesbian criticism existing in India. French lesbian theorist Monique Wittig (1975) averred that the lesbian body as a signifier deconstructs and even replaces the phallocentric subject in texts. A lesbian standpoint (Harding 1991) will be undertaken to illustrate how the trajectory of lesbian lives uphold a unique vantagepoint for understanding the conceptualization of femininity in a heteropatriarchal setup. Hence, the research will illustrate how the very concept of the lesbian becomes a tool of textual inquiry.


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In the novel, the lesbians in question, Kamala and Shaly, are perennially pushed to the fringes of the post-colony which has been depicted via their constant displacements and futile attempts to move away from Kamala's ancestral home which itself is a concrete manifestation of the colonial hangover that pervades throughout the narrative. I argue that the lack of a stable home for Kamala and Shaly subtly reifies their position as outsiders and misfits who cannot be integrated within the postcolonial nation state. The research will reveal how the narrative exposes the rubric of gender power relations in the post-colony through the constant hierarchization of power as seen in the men's struggle for dominance over Kamala and in the constant negotiation of invisibilized queer lives.

**Kamala and Shaly: Lesbian (Non-)Subjects in the Postcolony**

From a Butlerian standpoint (1990), "the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation" (3). Sex and sexuality are taboo topics when they concern women and hence women's desires have gone unrecognized and unacknowledged. The de-sexed woman is the actual ideal Indian woman in this scenario and hence the perfect subject of the state. Consequently, it is the lesbian who becomes a non-subject in the post colony given the stark invisibilization suffered by them. Sreenivasan's narrative delineates the socio-cultural politics that renders the Indian lesbian a non-subject in the post-colony. In the novel, Kamala and Shaly are the two lesbian protagonists who find themselves complexly entangled within the murky mesh of desires, societal expectations, and personal inhibitions.

Kamala is a married woman, a mother to two sons, who had been manipulated into marrying her cousin by her uncle out of a sheer mercenary interest. Shaly, unlike Kamala, is not tied down by domestic responsibilities as she refuses to carry such a tedious burden. The novel is a powerful testament to the divergent personalities of these two women who find themselves embroiled in a relationship that stands counter to their own precarious existence as lesbian (non-)subjects in the post-colony. Kamala's involvement with Shaly turns her life topsy turvy; Shaly, on the other hand, is surprised to see the lengths that she can go to for Kamala's sake. This section of the paper explores the dynamic between Kamala and Shaly and how society, including Kamala's sons, her estranged husband, and her relatives respond to her open affair with Shaly.


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In their relationship, it is Kamala who is torn between pursuing her true desires and acting out the roles of the perfect daughter, the obedient wife, and the responsible mother. While all the central protagonists of the novel come across as confused about their personal trajectories, it is Kamala who bears the brunt of expectations the most since she is persistently being moulded into the figure of the ideal Indian woman. Trapped within the frame of archaic essentialisms, Kamala becomes the spokesperson for the plight of the lesbian (non-)subject in India. At one point in the narrative she ventriloquizes the imprisonment to which her femininity has subjected her: "I am not free like you, I have responsibilities, I am responsible for the two souls I brought on earth. They need me and I need them" (122). Simultaneously she is also unable to let go of Shaly completely, even though she takes sadistic pleasure in tormenting her with her emotional withdrawals: "Kamala knew that if Shaly ceased to exist, she would grieve the most" (152).

The central defining problem of the narrative is the conflict between Kamala and Shaly's approach to their lesbian identity. Shaly, younger than Kamala, openly flaunts her sexuality and does not shy away from discussing it, but Kamala is reluctant to own her sexual identity, primarily because of her own inhibitions, and also because she had entered into a heterosexual union which resulted in the birth of her two sons before whom she constantly struggles to maintain the image of the perfect mother. It is the narrator who underscores the issue: "Kamala was never willing to come out of the closet" (169). Kamala, then, is a failed subject in the post-colony – she lingers on the margins because of her failure to enact the role of the ideal Indian woman mostly because she chooses to live with a woman and bring up her sons with her. In Kamala one can find the relics of postcolonial femininity as she struggles to find her way out of society's entangled mesh of expectations. In co-habiting with a woman, Kamala flouts societal conventions, and thinks that she has escaped the stronghold of patriarchy that had had a chokehold over year throughout her life.

Shaly, unlike Kamala, is more accepting of her sexual identity, although she loathes playing house with her partner. However, like Kamala, she is also a failed subject in the post-colony, because of her sexual orientation. Shaly is free-spirited, independent, and is not the biggest advocate of the postcolonial family unit consisting of mother, father, and children. She does not believe in the suburban dream like Kamala, and is at times unwilling to babysit Kamala's sons. Shaly even questions the role that she plays within the complex nexus of Kamala's familial unit: "Why should I accompany them, she asked herself, what will be my role in such a house? What if I say outright that I am not going?" (110). The web of relational ties thus


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emerging is incredibly complex and is further complicated by Kamala's estranged husband's aversion for Shaly as he sees her as a homewrecker and for her sexuality deems her to be a "female vampire" (99).

Further dissecting the aspect of lesbianism in the text, complexities arise when even Shaly is in denial of her sexual identity. Despite having sexual relations with Kamala, Shaly admits, "Kamala, I am not a lesbian", to which Kamala replies, "I am not a lesbian, too" (171). Even though Shaly admits to exploiting Kamala for professional furtherment (199), nothing that she does justifies this admission. Instead, she stays by Kamala's side at her lowest moments, coming back again and again to check up on her (224). In Shaly's dedication towards Kamala and her two sons, Shaly's love is revealed, and the narrator writes in defence of this love labelled as an aberration by society: "Love was no sin to be hidden, to be kept away, nothing sinful, but somewhere, somehow, it had got stoned to death, hanged and burnt" (224).

**Daughter, Wife, Mother: Kamala and the Maze of Essentialisms**

Kamala's character breathes life into one of the central arguments of this paper that addresses the image of the ideal Indian woman as a problematic construct built upon essentialisms. I argue in this section of the paper that even more than a character, Kamala is an investigative tool that launches an inquiry into the discourses that constitute the framings of postcolonial femininity. Further, by deploying a lesbian standpoint, the colonial specters shrouding the text become clearly evident. As discussed previously, it is solely the responsibility of the Indian woman to ensure the production and reproduction of the nationalist agenda which is to be attained by stepping into the roles of ideal daughterhood, wifehood, and later, motherhood. Sridevi K. Nair in the introduction to her thesis titled *Writing the Lesbian: Literary Culture in Global India* (2009) comments upon the relationship between nationhood and femininity in the post-colony:

> In constructing woman as the emblem of culture, nationalism elides the fact that what it does is homogenize the category even as it selects which women get to represent culture. The lesbian's banishment as an inauthentic cultural subject by nationalists certainly illustrates this. (15)

Nair further makes the significant argument that, "Lesbian relationships do not merely function as a site of pleasure but also, crucially, as a site of critique of, resistance to, and disengagement


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from the very premises of the category of 'woman'" (16). Sreenivasan's narrative invites a critical discussion on how taking a lesbian standpoint makes visible the subcutaneous layers of gender oppression. Being a lesbian relieves Kamala from the tumultuous burden of postcolonial femininity that weighs her down time and again. Like a true compatriot, Kamala had danced to the tunes of patriarchy and societal expectations by marrying Madhu, her cousin. However, the heterosexual reality that she is made to face leads her to realize her incompatibility with the system. Both Kamala and Madhu find themselves stuck in a loveless marriage, which is further compounded by Kamala's unplanned pregnancy. Unwillingly, then, Kamala is now responsible for reproducing national culture and the gravity of the situation intimidates her as she dreads her impending motherhood: "That night she dreamed that she had delivered two golden snakes; a coiled pressure lifted her breasts, purple mouths opened at her nipples, tails trailing down into her navel or down to the place from where they had emerged" (93).

Kamala's anxieties pertaining to motherhood manifest themselves in her nightmares, but is also significant in a much larger context. Kamala's predicament shows how women in the post-colony are thrust into conventional roles without even a passing consideration of their personal choices, preferences, and preparedness. Kamala becomes a failed subject in the post-colony when she separates from her husband and starts living with a woman, riddling her mind with guilt. Kamala often "wondered if she had ever been a good wife or not. When she was good and obedient, when Shaly had not become a part of her life, Madhavan was lenient and generous…" (302). She even questions whether she had been a "good mother" to Adi and Shiva (307). It is interesting to note that her estranged husband Madhu's infidelity during their marriage was never scorned at by Kamala's relatives who openly bashed her affair with Shaly. Already having failed ideal wifehood and motherhood, Kamala teeters close to edge damnation when she fails to live up to the image of the ideal daughter.

When Kamala arrives for her mother's funeral, her relatives are quick to notice that she was not accompanied by her husband: "Is her husband with her? Have they separated?...Why didn't they come together?" (135) While readers are made privy to how Kamala is internally torn asunder, her physical display of mourning, marked by the absence of an overtly emotional response, becomes a source of criticism from relatives, and the narrator writes: "They wanted Parvathi's daughter, sitting somewhere on the floor, head down, wracked with an occasional sob, for they believed that would give meaning to the funeral rites, to the relatives lingering in the house of the dead" (140). Her husband is able to escape all accountability for their failed


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marriage, leaving Kamala to untangle his betrayal: "Madhu loves himself, only himself but he announced his love for us in public, cunning fox, and he portrayed me as a woman, a dyke, who followed her pleasures neglecting her husband and children" (139-140).

Kamala and Madhu's marriage is a match made in hell. Madhu's father conspired to get the two married so that his son inherits Kamala's deceased father's wealth. In the absence of her father, the patriarch, Kamala's uncle fills in the empty seat, making her mother give in to his will. In the novel, family politics works closely together with Foucauldian biopolitics and biopower to entrap Kamala within the snares of heteronormativity. Foucault (1978) averred that biopolitics operates in society "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put life in this order". Further, Foucault postulated that biopower focuses on the "species of the body" which is imbued with the "mechanics of life" and serves as the "basis of biological processes", namely, "propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity", and their supervision is guaranteed through "an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population" (139).

In a similar vein of thought, Michael Warner, in the introduction to his edited work *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1991) observed how heteronormative codes are embedded deeply in social institutions: "In the everyday political terrain, contests over sexuality and its regulation are generally linked to views of social institutions and norms of the basic sort" (xiii). Heteronormativity is the order of the day and in the narrative it is manifested through the family politics that contrive to bring together Kamala and Madhu against their wishes, and they realize it once the damage has already been done: "It had taken them decades to understand why they grew up like that, him arrogant, and her, submissive. 'The families,' she said. 'The families,' he said" (115).

**Precarity of Queer Kinship**

Butler (2004) theorized extensively on the state of precarity, postulating that "we continue to live in a world in which one can risk serious disenfranchisement and physical violence for the pleasure one seeks, the fantasy one embodies, the gender one performs" (214). Of particular interest to this paper is how Butler (2009) ties together the conceptual framework of precarity with gender performativity and sexuality, stating that precarity is "directly linked with gender norms, since we know that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence" (ii). The idea is that whether one performs gender


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as per the socially sanctioned codes or not determines "who will count as a subject, and who will not" (iv): "The performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be read or understood as a living being, and who lives, or tries to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility" (iv).

The precarity of queer kinship is seen when the homosocial familial unit of Kamala, Shaly, and the former's two sons, does not receive any kind of moral support anywhere. They find it difficult to stay at any place for one reason or another and the constant shift of 'home' subtly drives home the fact that in society there is no space for a family that operates outside of the heterosexual family structure. Even Kamala's sons are aware of the peculiar family structure in the household, although they refrain from openly saying anything about Shaly's presence. Adi, however, is more vocal when it comes to expressing his feelings: "I don't want to be her son, whatever happens" (133). Both of Kamala's sons refuse to see Shaly as a mother figure despite knowing well that it is Shaly who takes care of the dysfunctional family. Such a conscious dismissal of Shaly could be motivated by their knowledge of her sexual orientation, but it is never clarified.

It is also imperative to discuss the quest for home and sexual citizenship as they take shape against the backdrop of the novel's investigative inquiry into the social, political, and cultural repercussions of same-sex desire in the post-colony. In the novel, Kamala and Shaly are constantly on the move – looking for a place that feels like 'home' for their (queer) family, but fails to find one. Kamala's ancestral home, the place where she and Shaly feel the most uncomfortable, is also the source of all contention. It is also out of greed for this palatial property that Kamala's uncle pestered her into getting married to her son. In the narrative, this ancestral home comes across as a colonial relic whose presence becomes claustrophobic for Kamala, Shaly, and Madhu. At one point in the narrative, Shaly is haunted by Kamala's mansion: "Shaly feared that this old property, this land, this house which was no longer a house but a place that kept vigil for the dead, would tie her down forever" (152). On a symbolic plane of interpretation, the ancient house becomes an echo of the colonial past that intrudes postcolonial spaces so brusquely.


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**Conclusion**

To conclude, I would like to point out how Sangeetha Sreenivasan's text is a very intimate and intricate study of femininity, sexuality, and the biopolitical forces in society that orchestrate people's lives. Sreenivasan's portrayal of postcolonial femininity and its complex intersection with sexuality reveals how women are still pawns in patriarchal politics even today. The narrative raises significant questions about queer citizenship, the quest for home, and the possibility of forging queer kinships in India. The death of Kamala at the end of the narrative can be viewed as a dissolution of all these critical questions raised in the course of the narrative. However, Sreenivasan has ensured that these questions still remain alive and pertinent even when the story gets over.

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