Feminine Desire Is Human Desire

Women Writing Feminism in Postindependence India

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The 1950s and 1960s short stories of the Hindi woman writer Mannu Bhandari (1931–) and the Tamil woman writer R. Chudamani (1931–2010) candidly portray female characters who possess the same desires for freedom of sexual expression, economic independence, and human equality as their male partners. Both writers began publishing at a time when few women writers had gained prominence in the Hindi and Tamil literary spheres or were considered to possess the same literary merit as their male contemporaries. Yet despite introducing characters who broke with or challenged social and sexual mores of their time, the two escaped prevalent criticisms that women writers were too didactic, social reformist, or sentimental or that they were primarily interested in producing “shock value” or entertainment.¹ Bhandari and Chudamani have consistently been published in the same elite venues as canonical Hindi and Tamil male authors and translated and anthologized in nationally and internationally circulating volumes of Indian literature and women’s writing.²

Written at a moment of decline in feminist politics and paucity in the production of “literary” women’s writing, what insights might Bhandari’s and Chudamani’s novel articulations of feminine desire offer into how we understand the genealogies of feminism and women’s writing in India? In this article, I suggest that within their historical and geographic contexts, Bhandari and Chudamani broadened the scope of feminist thought and women’s literary expression in the immediate postindependence moment. They did so through the rhetorical use of a language of rights and entitlements—*adhikār* and *āpanatva* in Hindi and *atikāram*, *urimai*, *niyāyam*, and *kaṭamai* in Tamil—a language that universalizes feminine desire by expressing it in distinctly humanist terms. At least since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such common terms have designated liberal understandings of individual freedom, rights, and entitlements that by the 1950s had become mainstays of national political discourse. Yet these terms of entitlement also describe longer-standing relations of power within frameworks of kinship, patronage, and religious community in the Hindi and Tamil contexts. Hence, while associated with rights

1. See Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere*; Orsini, “Domesticity and Beyond”; Orsini, “Women and the Hindi Public Sphere”; Sreenivas, “Emotion, Identity, and the Female Subject”; and Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines*, 94–119.

2. See Gupta and Bhandari, “Śodhārthini kā Mannū Bhaṇḍārī Jī se Kiyā Gayā Sākshātkār”; D. Kumar, “Tokuppurai”; Lakshmi, “Loss of a Crest

Jewel”; Lakshmi, *The Face Behind the Mask*; Mangaiyartilakam and Chudamani, “Kavarccikkāka Inṇi Tarattukkāka Eluta Vēṇṭum”; Narayanan and Seetharam, “Narratives That Linger”; Rangra, “Mannu Bhandari”; and Roadarmel, “Theme of Alienation.” Two well-known anthologies of women’s writing in India that include Bhandari’s and Chudamani’s work are Mohanty and Mohanty, *The Slate of Life*, and Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, vol. 2.

and entitlements in the legal sense, they are also concepts embedded in several affective and moral frameworks—ones that sometimes sustain conflicting conceptualizations of the self. In their fiction, Bhandari and Chudamani employ a language of entitlement to portray female desires, duties, and commitments as human desires, duties, and commitments. In doing so, the language of entitlement enables their expressions of feminine desire to be read in the canonical terms of literary humanism of the time, even as these expressions also gesture toward a discourse of gender equality and women's individual freedoms and rights.

Thus what I find novel about Bhandari's and Chudamani's rhetorical uses of a language of entitlement is the way in which they combine a liberal narrative of women's ownership of the self with a nonliberal narrative of women's self-surrender to communities of kinship.³ In the two exemplary stories this essay considers, the language of entitlement stakes out a place for the articulation of women's desires within structures commonly considered antithetical to women's and individual rights. Comparing Bhandari's and Chudamani's distinct uses of this language allows us to more deeply understand the role of the literary in shaping feminist thought and to more broadly conceptualize evolving forms of Indian feminist discourse in the immediate postindependence moment. At the same time, the conversation between their stories provides insight into diverse ways in which individual desire is not always the same as the desire for individuality. To the contrary, the different types of feminine desire Bhandari's and Chudamani's female characters express suggest that even when feminine desire can be equated with the liberal desire for self-ownership, such a desire simultaneously partakes in other, nonliberal ways of being.

The first sections of this essay consider the categories of feminism and women's writing in India, examining what the literary might bring

to the theorization of feminist thought. The next sections closely examine Bhandari's and Chudamani's uses of a language of entitlement in their short-story writing. In the concluding sections, I offer a few reflections on how Bhandari's and Chudamani's literary work might open up current understandings of postindependence women's writing and Indian feminism.

A Genealogy of Indian Feminism

It is generally understood that feminist politics underwent a period of "lull" in the two decades following Indian independence (1947).⁴ Once the goal of achieving independence no longer unified regions and communities, women's organizations, so it is argued, laid aside their struggles for freedom and equality to support the state's aim to establish national integration. Furthermore, the enactment of formal citizenship rights through the constitution (ratified in 1950), legislations such as the Hindu Code (1955–56), and state-driven social welfare programs (exemplified by Prime Minister Nehru's Five-Year Plans, 1951–66) led many organizers to believe that it was no longer necessary for an active women's movement to press its demands. The movement placed the fight for women's rights and social equality in the hands of the state, and it was not until the civil unrest of the 1970s that Indian feminism underwent the rebirth that has since developed into the vibrant and nuanced movement that is so well regarded today.⁵

The postindependence silence in Indian women's activism was strengthened by a standoff between those activists advocating for the supremacy of state-enforced secular law and those advocating for the autonomy of various sectarian community laws. The question at hand was whether women's rights should be determined and legislated by the state discourse of liberal humanist rights and individual freedom or by community discourses of cultural continuity and spiritual salvation. The dilemma was not a new one. During

3. I borrow this phrasing from Rochona Majumdar to describe the ways in which women's rights and interests have been discussed in the Indian context. As will become clear in what follows, in following Bhandari's and Chudamani's portrayals of feminine desires and freedoms, I suggest a reading of women's rights

and interests that is different from this binary treatment. See Majumdar, "'Self-Sacrifice' versus 'Self-Interest.'" See also Macpherson, *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*.

4. R. Kumar, *History of Doing*, 97.

5. See Desai, "From Accommodation to Articulation"; Forbes, *Women in Modern India*; John, "Gender, Development, and the Women's Movement"; and R. Kumar, *History of Doing*.

the 1920s and 1930s, considered the second phase of Indian feminism, a number of new women's organizations mobilized for state recognition and protection of women's rights separately from those provided by the personal laws of religious and ethnic communities: they argued that the state should grant rights and freedoms to women on the basis of their identity as women rather than their identities as members of the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Parsi communities, et cetera.⁶ In doing so, they founded what Mrinalini Sinha has identified as the agonistic liberal universalism of early Indian feminism, "a discourse of individual rights that arose not so much from women's relation to men but from women's relation to the collective identities of communities."⁷ This form of Indian feminism prevailed in the late colonial period, providing a platform for the nationalist articulation of the need for an independent Indian state that could understand and protect Indian women's and communities' interests better than the existing (culturally foreign) colonial one.

However, communal tensions exacerbated by Partition and coupled with regional identitarian opposition to centralized state control quickly splintered the women's movement in the lead-up to and aftermath of independence. During the constitutional debates that ensued after 1947, some

activists embraced state legal intervention to protect women's freedoms, while others adhered to a narrative of communal belonging. For the latter, Indian religious traditions, which held women's roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives as the bedrock of social order and cultural posterity, took precedence over their identities as women and individuals. "At issue," writes Rochona Majumdar, "was a tussle between a modern, liberal idea of the individual as bearer of interest and an equally modern romanticization of the sentiments of the extended family."⁸ Ultimately, the authors of the constitution tried to resolve the issue by including the guarantees of freedom of equality and nondiscrimination, on one hand, and freedom of religion on the other, while also writing in a directive principle aimed at establishing a Uniform Civil Code. The purpose of the proposed Uniform Civil Code was to replace community-specific personal law so as to bring all Indian citizens under the state's liberal legal framework. But including the Code in the constitution as a (still unrealized) directive principle only deflected into the future the struggle to achieve women's rights and has meant that they have continued to fall secondary to community interests in postcolonial India.⁹

I rehearse this narrative of the failure of the women's movement to establish a stronger founda-

6. See Forbes, *Women in Modern India*; R. Kumar, *History of Doing*; and Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*.

7. Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 228; see also Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India"; and Sinha, "Historically Speaking." The continued incompatibility between individual and community rights in the Indian context stems in large part from the colonial administration's decision to cordon off personal law from civil and criminal law in 1772. In effect, this division created two types of subjects to be regulated by law: individuals in relation to their religious community, on one hand, and individuals in relation to the colonial state on the other. Thus from the very outset of the modern Indian legal system, the category of the religious community has received special status with regard to the state—in name, beyond the reach of the state but, in practice, produced and regulated by the judicial arm of the state (see Agnes, *Law and Gender Inequality*; Cohn, "Law and the Colonial State in India"; Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India*; and Parashar, *Women and Family Law Reform in India*). By unifying under the cat-

egory of women, women's organizations during the 1920s through 1940s were able to separate women's interests from those of religious communities and claim protection for women's rights and freedoms directly from the newly forming Indian state. The agonistic liberal form of feminism to which they gave shape differs from the sameness/difference paradox of classical liberal feminism in that it is concerned not so much with the problem of adhering to women's separate identity as women while simultaneously claiming equality with and sameness to men as with the problem of maintaining affiliation with the category of women while simultaneously retaining one's identity as part of one's religious or ethnic community (Sinha, "Lineage of the Indian Modern"; Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India"; Sinha, "Historically Speaking"; and Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, esp. chaps. 4 and 5).

8. Majumdar, "'Self-Sacrifice' versus 'Self-Interest,'" 20.

9. Records of the constitutional debates on the Uniform Civil Code reveal that lawmakers saw the task of ameliorating communal tensions as

more pressing than the achievement of gender equality at the time. They could not agree on the creation of an overarching legal framework that would replace existing personal laws and be administered across religious communities without bias. Including the Uniform Civil Code in the constitution as a directive principle thus represented the hope that such a framework would someday be instated. In lieu of the Uniform Civil Code, lawmakers passed a series of laws in 1955–56, together known as the Hindu Code. These laws revised Hindu personal law and brought it under the jurisdiction of the state, enabling those women who overtly identified as Hindu to seek justice from the state concerning matters of marriage, divorce and maintenance, inheritance, and adoption. Women who identified otherwise were required to seek justice from the personal law courts of their communities. This legal framework is still in place. See Majumdar, "'Self-Sacrifice' versus 'Self-Interest'"; Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*; Parashar, *Women and Family Law Reform in India*; and Som, "Jawaharlal Nehru and the Hindu Code."

tion for women's rights in the immediate postindependence moment because it persists in shaping contemporary Indian feminist debates. Despite the widely acknowledged "new beginnings" of feminist thought in the 1970s and the flourishing of feminist organizing that has followed,¹⁰ the unresolved 1950s and 1960s standoff between activists supporting women's self-interest as individuals and those supporting women's self-sacrifice for the betterment of their communities has continually resurfaced and raised tensions in the struggle to achieve women's rights in postindependence India.¹¹ Yet prominent literary writings of the time portray subjects for which there is no such purely binary conflict. I therefore take up Bhandari's and Chudamani's fiction as a terrain of feminist theorizing to move beyond this bind pitting a liberal understanding of individual rights against a "nonliberal" understanding of community belonging. Turning our attention to the literary sphere allows us to see that the liberal universalist claims of 1920s to 1940s Indian feminism did not simply vanish or become ineffectual in the postindependence moment. Rather, as I hope to demonstrate below, the labor of singular women writers such as Bhandari and Chudamani reveals how the agonism of Indian feminism persevered as well as evolved during this "period of lull." Including women's writing as part of the genealogy of Indian feminism and attending to the turns that it took during the 1950s and 1960s offer us alternative ways to think about the impasses between self-interest and self-sacrifice, individual and community, and liberal and nonliberal. They also help us identify the persisting influence of Indian feminisms past and the imbrications of liberal and nonliberal thought in shaping contemporary Indian feminism. I thus propose reading the language of entitlement that Bhandari and Chudamani use in their fiction not just as a

literary-rhetorical strategy but also as an inroad for conceptualizing more broadly the problem of gender justice in postindependence India.

The Category of Women's Writing in India

Viewing Bhandari's and Chudamani's writing as sites of feminist theorizing aligns closely with the established understanding that the first two phases of Indian feminism went hand in hand with the first two phases of women's writing in India. The first phase of Indian feminism, spanning the 1850s to the 1910s, took shape in the context of debates surrounding the women's question. Social reform issues such as widow immolation, widow remarriage, child marriage, and women's health and education became key cultural battlegrounds upon which Indian nationalists rallied against colonial rule.¹² The rise of "women's writing" helped fuel this nationalist activism by constructing images of Indian women and expectations for their behavior. This writing mainly consisted of *strī upayogī* (useful for women) literature—namely, advice columns and didactic fiction written by male authors for women's self-improvement—and a handful of autobiographical accounts by women.¹³

The second phase, what Francesca Orsini calls the radical-critical phase of women's writing, is characterized by the entrance of women writers and editors into the public sphere from the 1920s through the 1940s. For the first time, women publicly voiced their views in popular print form on social and family norms and nationalist politics as well as on what Orsini identifies as their "right to feel."¹⁴ As a result, women's writing played a crucial role in the "rhetorical invention of new subject positions for women" that facilitated the emergence of the Indian women's movement and its liberal entreaty for women's rights that I describe above.¹⁵ The dovetailing of women's articulations of their

10. See John, "Gender, Development, and the Women's Movement," and John, "Introduction."

11. See, for instance, Majumdar, "'Self-Sacrifice' versus 'Self-Interest'"; Menon, *Recovering Subversion*; and Sundar Rajan, *Scandal of the State*.

12. See Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 10–31, and Sangari and Vaid, *Recasting Women*.

13. See Dalmia, "Generic Questions"; Orsini, "Domesticity and Beyond"; Orsini, "Women and the Hindi Public Sphere"; Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, 95–134; and Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, 1:145–86, 2:43–116.

14. Orsini, "Women and the Hindi Public Sphere," esp. 274–89. See also Orsini, "Domesticity and Beyond." Although Orsini discusses women's writing exclusively in Hindi, others have described similar developments in other

languages such as Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu. See Bannerji, "Fashioning a Self"; Kosambi, *Women Writing Gender*; Minault, "Urdu Women's Magazines"; Sreenivas, "Emotion, Identity, and the Female Subject"; and Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines*, 94–119.

15. Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 210. For discussion of the intersections between the rise of women's writing and the women's movement,

“right to feel” with women’s activism was most explicitly exemplified by key leaders of the Indian women’s movement, such as Rameshwari Nehru (1886–1966) and Sarojini Naidu (1898–1949), who also developed widely recognized careers as editors and writers.¹⁶

However, while this period saw an immense increase in the number of women writers as well as the growth of a vibrant publishing market for women’s magazines, very few women were considered to be “literary”—as opposed to social reformist, feminist, political, entertainment-oriented, or simply “women”—writers at the time. In the Hindi and Tamil literary spheres, for example, only two notable writers come to mind: the Hindi writer Mahadevi Varma (1907–87) and the Tamil writer Vai. Mu. Kothanayaki Ammal (1901–60). Varma’s early poetry was critiqued for being too sexualized and romantic, and it was only in the late 1930s, when she took on editorship of the influential Hindi magazine *Cāṁd*, that she began to establish a place among Hindi literary greats.¹⁷ Kothanayaki Ammal’s literary reception, on the other hand, has been lukewarm, and her social reformist activism continues to be more highly regarded than her prolific fiction writing and editorship of the Tamil women’s magazine *Jakaṁmōkīni*.¹⁸

Orsini argues that the rise of literary women’s writing meant the taming of its radical-critical edge, a development marked explicitly by Varma’s editorship of *Cāṁd* from 1935 to 1938.¹⁹ In her efforts to appeal to a more literary readership, Varma

censored overtly political or social-reformist texts. She emphasized fiction and poetry and sought to replace challenges to social norms with an ideology of womanly *maryādā*—which in Varma’s case signaled upper-caste, Hindu, and middle-class notions of women’s correct behavior, decorum, and honor within the family and community. For Varma, the task of literature was to convey not society’s problems and possible solutions but rather the experiences, insights, and transformations of the individual.²⁰

However, the shift Varma enacted in what constituted women’s writing through consolidating such views must be situated within the broader schism between “literary” and “political” literature occurring in the 1930s Hindi and Tamil literary spheres. In both cases, younger generations of “high modernist” writers, deeply embedded in national and international discussions on the function of literature, began to critique the social reformist tones and overtly political messages of the dominant literary trends of the time.²¹ Although these Hindi and Tamil writers were responding to very different literary, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts, their views coincided with each other’s and with Varma’s position on women’s literature insofar as they all undertook the project of elevating “literary” messages focused on linguistic innovation and psychological introspection above “political” ones focused on social change and nationalist progress.²² The overwhelming result of defining themes of womanly *maryādā* and individual

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see *ibid.*, 49–50; Orsini, “Women and the Hindi Public Sphere”; and Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere*. For an overview of the rise of the Indian women’s movement during the 1920s through 1940s, see Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, and R. Kumar, *History of Doing*.

16. See Alexander, “Sarojini Naidu”; Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere*, 37–48; Orsini, “Domesticity and Beyond”; and Orsini, “Women and the Hindi Public Sphere.”

17. See Orsini, “Women and the Hindi Public Sphere,” and Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma*.

18. For example, most canonical histories of Tamil literature do not touch upon her work. Furthermore, as far as I know, Kothanayaki Ammal has not been translated into English or anthologized, both of which are important markers of a writer’s canonical status within the Tamil literary sphere and beyond. See Guy,

“Icon in Her Time,” and Lakshmi, *Face Behind the Mask*, 67.

19. See Orsini, “Women and the Hindi Public Sphere.”

20. See Anantharam, “Mahadevi Varma”; Orsini, “Women and the Hindi Public Sphere,” 273, 304–8; Orsini, “Domesticity and Beyond,” 158–60; and Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma*.

21. Two exemplary “high modernist” Hindi writers are Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsayayan “Agyeya” (1911–87) and Jainendra Kumar (1905–88). Both situated their work against well-known Marxist-nationalist “progressive” writers, such as Dhanpat Rai Srivastav “Premchand” (1880–1936), for whom idealistic realism and historical materialism were literary fundamentals. In the case of Tamil, a group of “high modernists,” including writers like B. S. Ramaiah (1905–83) and Cho. Viruthachalam “Pudumaipittan” (1906–48), founded the

literary magazine *Maṇikkōṭi*. The stated aim of the magazine was to offer an alternative to the social reformist didacticism of existing modern Tamil literary trends and to elevate readers’ aesthetic tastes through attention to language and generic form. See Dalmia, *Hindi Modernism*; Kennedy, “Public Voices, Private Voices”; Ramaiah, *Maṇikkōṭi Kālam*; and Yadav, “Kahāni: Nāi Kahāni Tak.”

22. It is also important to note, however, that these writers viewed their literary turn to domestic concerns as a highly political response to the distinct linguistic nationalisms and identitarian politics prevalent in Hindi and Tamil contexts at the time. In other words, through their emphases on linguistic innovation, psychological innovation, and the examination of the home and the family, these writers offered a politics of the literary.

experience as “literary” was that the home and the family became the central subject matter of high literature from the late 1930s onward.²³ Thus Orsini’s observation that women’s journals turned, quite conservatively, to domestic concerns after independence pertains not just to women’s writing but also to postindependence high literature more generally.²⁴

It was only in the postindependence moment, in the wake of this turn to the literary, that women writers like Bhandari and Chudamani began to be considered on a literary par with men.²⁵ Indeed, only two other Hindi women writers, Krishna Sobti (1925–) and Usha Priyamvada (1930–), achieved this status alongside Bhandari during the 1950s and 1960s.²⁶ Although all three have been described as part of the canonical *Nayī Kahānī*, or New Story, movement of the period, only Bhandari participated in the otherwise all-male discussions that came to define the movement’s characteristic literary techniques and philosophical outlook.²⁷ Similarly, Chudamani’s only “literary” female contemporary in the early postindependence moment was Rajam Krishnan (1925–). However, literary critics have been less laudatory of Krishnan’s writ-

ing, viewing it as lacking sophistication and overtly polemical.²⁸ Conversely, Chudamani has consistently been viewed as a representative of the Tamil literary canon. She was, for instance, the only woman writer to have her work published or short-story writing reviewed in the journal *Eluttu*, which ran from 1959 to 1972 and served as a key venue for cultivating an aesthetic sensibility that continues to shape contemporary Tamil understandings of literariness.²⁹

In light of the argument that ideas of literariness became limited to domestic and personal concerns in postindependence India, I argue that Bhandari’s and Chudamani’s rhetorical articulations of feminine desire within the sphere of the literary need to be seen as a considerable achievement.³⁰ I thus urge us to look beyond the latent criticism of postindependence women’s writing, which echoes the narrative of the postindependence Indian woman’s movement that I outline above. Characterizing postindependence women’s writing and activism as “failures” that lacked political edge leads to viewing the two decades following Indian independence as nothing more than a period of “lull”—an embarrassing mo-

23. While no figure like Varma, who sought to make women’s literature more “literary,” quite emerged in the Tamil literary sphere during the 1930s and 1940s, a similar shift in Tamil women’s writing did take place, such that by the postindependence period, the radical-critical politics of women’s writing became circumscribed by domestic concerns. See Sreenivas, “Emotion, Identity, and the Female Subject,” and Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines*, 94–119.

24. For instance, the short stories of the *Nayī Kahānī*, or New Story, movement in which Bhandari participated, as well as the *Eluttu* writers who praised and published Chudamani’s work, focused almost exclusively on man-woman relationships within family.

25. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita call the few “literary” women writers emerging at this time the “eleventh among ten.” See *Women Writing in India*, 2:93–97.

26. See Jain, *Kathā-Samay mem Tīn Hamasafar*, and Roadarmel, “Theme of Alienation.”

27. Based in the capital of the new nation, Bhandari and other *Nayī Kahānī* writers turned to the short story to address the specific sensibilities of loss, disconnection, and ethical and

moral disintegration that accompanied decolonization and Partition. They were also deeply embedded in debates concerning what a modern, independent India should look like and the role the new nation would play on the world stage. These writers thus took on the project of developing a literary Hindi that could best represent the everyday experiences and concerns of ordinary Indian men and women. They sought to move away from caste and religious prejudices, focusing instead on the tensions characterizing modern, urban, middle-class life. See Bhandari, *Ek Kahānī Yah Bhi*; Jain, *Kathā-Samay Mem Tīn Hamasafar*; Roadarmel, “Theme of Alienation”; and Yadav, “Ek Duniyā Samānāntar.”

28. See, for instance, Lakshmi, *Face behind the Mask*, 133; Sundarajan and Sivapathasundaram, *Tamilil Cīrukatai*, 227–28; and Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, 2:205–7.

29. Chudamani and other writers based in Madras at this time were responding to a political atmosphere riven by Tamil anti-Brahmin ethnic nationalism and language politics. C. S. Chellappa’s publishing house *Eluttu* and its self-titled literary magazine provided a forum for popularizing the work of a group of mainly Brahmin short-story writers, poets,

and critics (among whom Chudamani is recognized). While these writers subscribed to multiple literary styles and philosophies, they broadly defined high Tamil literature in opposition to large-scale efforts to return Tamil language and literature to its classical roots and cleanse it of Sanskrit- and English-derived vocabulary. They used *Eluttu* as a venue for modernizing Tamil through translation, linguistic innovation, and the development of a literary critical tradition. In contrast to the *nayī kahānī* writers, the writers who published in *Eluttu* drew extensively from Vedic and Brahminical philosophical concepts, religious customs, and family life, which they felt represented the realities they knew best, while also gesturing toward the more universal “Indian,” rather than specifically Tamil, nature of their content and themes. See Chudamani, “*Eluttarāṅkam* (Periyavaṅkatai)”; Chudamani, “*Periyavaṅ*”; Chellappa, *Tamilil Cīrukatai Pīrakkīratu*; Sundarajan, “*Cūṭamaṇi Kataikal*”; Sundarajan and Sivapathasundaram, *Tamilil Cīrukatai*; and Vallikannan, *Eluttu: Ci. Cu. Cellappā*.

30. For discussions of a comparable anxiety surrounding women’s desires in the realm of film during this period, see Prasad, “State-in-of-Cinema”; Srivastava, “*Idea of Lata Mangeshkar*”; and Uberoi, *Freedom and Destiny*.

ment of disinterest to be stricken from the history of Indian feminism, as it were. Rather than treat Bhandari's and Chudamani's ascent into the literary as a form of lofty retreat from the political,³¹ I want to ask what work the "literary" performs in the production of feminist thought. Considering the postindependence trajectories of Indian feminism and women's writing together rather than as distinct "political" and "literary" spheres enables us to more deeply acknowledge their colonial intersections and grasp the changing postindependence dynamics of each category in more nuanced ways.³² I now turn to Bhandari's and Chudamani's expressions of feminine desire within a language of rights and entitlements to identify the way literature might offer insights into postindependence feminist thought.

The Truth about Feminine Desire

Bhandari's short story "Yahī Sac Hai" ("This Is the Truth"), first published in 1960, is written in diary form in the first-person voice of Deepa, a young woman living alone in the provincial north Indian city of Kanpur while completing her postgraduate degree.³³ As the story opens, Deepa is waiting for her lover Sanjay's evening visit. She is irritated because he is late, as usual, and insensitive to her time, which she desperately needs to spend writing her thesis. Deepa is also particularly anxious this day to tell Sanjay about her upcoming job interview in Calcutta. When Sanjay finally arrives and the fragrance of the *rajnigandhā* flowers he customarily brings takes hold of her, Deepa's anger melts away into caresses. As the story progresses, however, we learn that Deepa's love and longing for Sanjay are not as permanent as she initially seems to express. Indeed, a "truth" that Deepa comes to understand is that of vacillation or, rather, the ability of her

feelings to suddenly shift back and forth between Sanjay and her former boyfriend, Nishith, whom she meets again during her Calcutta interview.

Deepa's narrative explicates truth through a language of entitlement. Specifically, it develops the meaning of truth through the types of authority and rights Deepa possesses over Sanjay and Nishith and they over her. In this way, truth and entitlement are interlocking terms that constitute Deepa's selfhood. For example, when Deepa tells Sanjay about her upcoming trip to Calcutta, she is delighted that he feels happy for her and that he expresses a willingness to transfer to Calcutta if she gets the job. But she also worries that he suspects she still has feelings for Nishith, who lives there now. She thus quietly appeals to Sanjay in her heart that he is her only love and the center of all her future plans:

Sanjay thinks that I still have a soft spot in my heart for [Nishith]. Chi! I hate [Nishith]. . . . Sanjay, think about this: if such a thing were the case, would I have surrendered myself [*ātmasamarpan karna*] like this to you, to your every proper, and improper, gesture? Would I have let myself dissolve in your kisses and embraces? You know that no woman gives someone all these entitlements [*adhikār*] before marriage. But I've given them. Isn't it only because I love you, I love you very very much? Have faith, Sanjay, that our love is the truth [*sac*]. My love for Nishith was simply a fraud, a confusion, a lie.³⁴

In a time and place where women are prohibited from consorting with men outside their families, Deepa entitles Sanjay to treat her as only a husband should. She does this by surrendering herself to him (literally, handing her soul/self over to him) in a physically intimate way. Her own willingness to go against the social norms of womanly propriety

31. See Eagleton, *Function of Criticism*.

32. This is not to overlook the pioneering work on women's writing and Indian feminism of scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Rajeswari Sundar Rajan, Susie Tharu, K. Lalita, and others. But I would like to push the argument further by suggesting that it is not enough to consider women's writing as an avenue for understanding the lives and experiences of women and other minorities or the sociocultural dynamics of postindependence

India. Rather, I would like to urge us to view postindependence women's literary production as a site of feminist theoretical discourse. See Sundar Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*; Spivak, "Literary Representation of the Subaltern"; Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, vols. 1 and 2; and Tharu, "Citizenship and Its Discontents."

33. This story was first published in the June 1960 issue of the popular Hindi magazine *Nai Kahānīyām*. It was also the title story of Bhandari's influential 1966 collection. Following its publication, "Yahī Sac Hai" was praised in popular Hindi magazines and interviews as well as adapted into the award-winning 1974 film *Rajnigandhā* (dir. Basu Chatterjee). See Bhandari, *Ek Kahānī Yah Bhi*; Gupta and Bhandari, "Śodhārthini kā Mannū Bhandārī Jī"; Rangra, "Mannū Bhandari"; and Rakesh, "Bakalam Khud."

34. Bhandari, "Yahī Sac Hai," 264–65. All translations in this essay are my own.

convinces her of the basic truth that Sanjay is the man she desires and Nishith no more than a foolish and painful mistake.

Once in Calcutta, however, Deepa finds herself drawn again toward Nishith, whom she runs into at a coffee house on the evening of her arrival. Nishith takes it upon himself to assist Deepa in securing her new job, though he never once mentions their past or why he had suddenly abandoned her. Deepa accepts Nishith's offer to contact a few influential people in her field, even if hesitantly, realizing, "I had become quite hopeful [about getting the job] after [Nishith's] day-long efforts. How necessary it was for me to get this job, if I did, how pleased Sanjay would be, how happily we would spend the first days of our married life!" (268). Deepa initially justifies her interactions with Nishith as time spent toward achieving her own goals.

But things quickly change after Deepa gives a successful interview. She and Nishith make plans to go out to celebrate, and again, the question of entitlement begins to trouble Deepa:

I remembered, Nishith really likes the color blue, I put on precisely a blue sari. I got dressed with eagerness [*cāv*] and meticulousness. And repeatedly I stopped myself—all of this was happening to please whom? Wasn't this absolute madness?

On the stairs Nishith said with a soft smile: "You look so beautiful in that sari." My face became flushed; my temples reddened. Truly, I wasn't prepared for this statement. . . . I wasn't at all in the habit of hearing such things. Sanjay never noticed my clothes, nor did he talk this way, even though he had every right [*adhikār*] to. And [Nishith] said such things without any right [*adhikār*]? . . .

But whatever it was, I couldn't get angry with him; rather I felt a delightful thrill [*pulakamaya siharan*]. . . . My heart, thirsting to hear such a comment, felt washed over by pleasure [*ras se nahā jānā*]. But why did Nishith say such a thing? What right [*adhikār*] did he have?

Did he really have no right [*adhikār*]? . . . None? (268–69)

The same shivers Deepa earlier felt at Sanjay's touch now arise with Nishith's words, and she

begins to wonder whether Nishith possesses the right to notice and say the things she wishes Sanjay would. In Kanpur, Deepa had entitled Sanjay to be intimate with her based on the pleasure she felt from his caresses and gifts of flowers as well as her excitement about their future plans together. Now, in Calcutta, she slowly gives Nishith these very same entitlements to intimacy as he becomes more and more involved in her career plans and she, in turn, grows more and more passionate toward him. Soon, it is her feelings toward Nishith that become true—true as Deepa's love for Sanjay was earlier—and by the end of her Calcutta trip, Deepa fully revokes Sanjay's rights to intimacy and places them in Nishith's hands. She surrenders herself fully to Nishith, wanting nothing less from him than the commitment of marriage: "I glanced at him full of deep submission, compassion, and imploring, as if saying, why don't you tell me, Nishith, that you still love me, that you want me by your side always, that you want to . . . marry me. Despite all that happened, maybe I still love you—not maybe, I truly [*sac muc*] love you" (272). As Thomas de Bruijn notes, scenes such as this from "Yahī Sac Hai" evoke the medieval poetic trope of the *virahinī*, "the woman waiting for her husband or lover who is far from home" that was used to "symbolize the longing for reunion with the divine" and that has a "strong connotation of unfulfilled love and sexual desire."³⁵ This reference to longer-standing literary representations of sexual desire underscores the way in which older and newer forms of feminine desire converge in constituting Deepa's selfhood: her pining for Nishith simultaneously evokes a longing for reunion with the divine as well as a liberal sense of self-ownership and mutual reciprocity between lovers.

On her last day in Calcutta, Deepa finally receives the reciprocation she yearns for. Nishith turns up at the station and momentarily clasps her hand as her Kanpur-bound train departs. Surprised and elated, Deepa silently screams:

I understand everything, Nishith, I understand everything! This momentary touch has conveyed everything you couldn't during these past four

35. de Bruijn, "Under Indian Eyes," 207.

days. Believe me, if you are mine, then I, too, am yours, only yours and yours alone. . . . I feel that it is this touch, this happiness, this moment that is the truth [*satya*], all the rest was a lie; an unsuccessful attempt to forget myself, deceive myself, trick myself.³⁶

This feeling of possessing Nishith and being possessed by him is integral to the way in which Bhandari's language of entitlement emerges. As soon as Deepa returns to Kanpur, she writes Nishith a letter explaining that she had been intensely angry and hurt when he abandoned her several years ago, but the way he treated her as his own during her recent visit drew her to him again. She tells the reader: "As soon as I saw him, it was as if all my anger melted away. Being possessed this way, how could my anger possibly remain?" (275). The word Bhandari uses that I have here translated as "being possessed" is *apanatva*—a word that signifies ownership, of being "one's own"—and through it, Deepa expresses the intimate, even family-like manner in which Nishith behaved with her in Calcutta. Deepa sees this treatment as the type of possessiveness that exists between partners, and she accepts it in a gesture of complete surrender. *Apanatva*—the feeling of possessing and being possessed by one's lover—goes hand in hand, here, with the *adhiḥkāra*—or entitlement to intimacy—that she gives him and seeks to receive in return.

It is important to note, however, that this sense of *apanatva*—possession or ownership—that Deepa reads into Nishith's treatment of her is more than a symptom of her desire for him: Nishith's ownership of Deepa is tantamount to her ownership of her own self. Day after day, Deepa awaits Nishith's response, pining for the postman's delivery. Unable to bear the waiting, she wanders the streets, thinking to herself: "Where should I go? I seemed to have lost my way, lost my destination. I myself didn't know where I should end up. Nevertheless, I wandered aimlessly. But how long could I roam this way? Defeated, I turned back" (276). Without Nishith's confirmation of their shared entitlements and possession over one another, Deepa experiences confusion and a loss of self-assurance.

She finds herself directionless and thwarted, uncertain of her desires and life goals.

In his long-awaited reply, Nishith fails to acknowledge his feeling of possession over or right to be intimate with Deepa. But Deepa has no time to react. Just as she finishes reading Nishith's letter, she looks up to find Sanjay standing at the door with a fresh bouquet of flowers. Overcome by joy, Deepa suddenly realizes another truth: that along with physical intimacy, she also needs emotional stability and support, something that only Sanjay provides. She thus comes back to the "truth" of Sanjay: "I couldn't speak. I simply clasped my arms around him tightly, more tightly. The scent of the *rajnīgandhā* flowers slowly washed over me. Just then I felt Sanjay's lower lip brush my forehead, and it seemed to me that this touch, this happiness, this moment, this is the truth [*satya*], all of that was a lie, it was false, it was a confusion" (277). In this final moment of the story, Deepa professes her loyalty to Sanjay: despite everything, it is he who fulfills her after all. Even though Deepa has had passionate feelings for and premarital physical relationships with more than one man, through her experiences, she learns to love, respect, and feel commitment toward the one man she will marry. In such a reading, "truth" is the truth of the conjugal bond, which Deepa affirms ultimately and wholeheartedly. It is an interpretation that corroborates the postindependence narrative of women's self-sacrifice that I discuss above: just as women's self-sacrifice for the betterment of community values and interests took precedence over women's self-interests and individual freedoms, so too does Deepa surrender her unpredictable and continually changing feminine desires for a community-approved, stable, and mature future married life. At every turn in the story, Deepa's desire for physical intimacy is matched by an equally intense desire for self-surrender, conjugal allegiance, and the broader structure of the family of which these are necessarily a part. Deepa intimates more than once that Sanjay provides her with the support her brother, sister-in-law, and father would have given her had they been present, alluding to the extended family terrain in relation to which

36. Bhandari, "Yahī Sac Hai," 273.

she understands her relationship with Sanjay.³⁷ In light of the prominent debates on marriage, family, and community in the political and cultural spheres at the time, I read Bhandari's meditation on Deepa's vacillation between two lovers as an exploration of the extent to which feminine desire might be accommodated within a communitarian family model.³⁸

However, directing our attention to Bhandari's use of a language of entitlement allows us to simultaneously read otherwise. By considering her desires in the terms of *adhikār* (rights and entitlements) and *āpanatva* (ownership and possession), Deepa is able to push the boundaries of what constitutes a normative man-woman relationship; her language of entitlement allows her to articulate and claim her womanly right to experience multiple loves and fidelities that are situationally specific and equally constitutive of Deepa's selfhood. In those moments when Deepa is most moved by desire, she claims possession of her self-interests in the very act of entitling Sanjay or Nishith to them. In this way, even as the outcome of Deepa's actions conforms with a "nonliberal" worldview that "romanticiz[es] the sentiments of the extended family"³⁹ and in which it is men who exercise rights over female bodies, it does not negate the ownership of feminine desire that Deepa articulates.

Bhandari herself commented on the radicalness of her portrayal of Deepa, even in 2007: "Now, a woman being torn between two men is an extremely taboo [*gopanīya*] topic in our society. Taboo and also prohibited in a way, so it seemed necessary to me to take recourse to the diary form

to illuminate [Deepa's] internal conflict."⁴⁰ Popular and critical reception of "Yahī Sac Hai" demonstrates that this literary strategy has been overwhelmingly successful. In a 1978 essay, for instance, Hindi writer and critic Rajendra Yadav (1929–2013) interpreted Deepa's expression of feminine desire in terms of the *Nayī Kahānī* movement's literary project to portray the inner turmoil that individuals experienced in the postindependence moment:

When I expressed another type of interpretation of Mannu's story "Yahī Sac Hai"—that it wasn't a story about love and emotional contradiction or a girl who accepts two lovers; that it was a story of the fragmented mentality of the 50–60s, when the Indian mind perceived itself as divided in two mental states at the same time, on the one side was her past (the story's first lover) that still today remained true to her, and on the other side was her present; both were equally true to her and she had to choose one—at that time Mannu said this interpretation was "a long shot" and made fun of me. But the truth of my interpretation seems apparent to me even today.⁴¹

Here Yadav reframes Deepa's novel understandings of feminine choice and desire in the more universal terms of individuals' conflicted affiliations to the past and the present. His comments demonstrate just one example of how Bhandari's work has been understood through a canonical Hindi lens while simultaneously expanding what could be expressed within it. "Yahī Sac Hai" accomplishes this expansion of expression by, at every instance, dually inflecting the meanings of *adhikār* and *āpanatva* with the affective ties of com-

37. For example, see *ibid.*, 274. Bhandari chose to give Deepa's extended family a more prominent role in the 1974 film adaptation of the story, for which she wrote the script. In the opening scene of the film, viewers learn that Deepa lives with her brother and sister-in-law and that her sister-in-law approves of Deepa's relationship with Sanjay and encourages her to pursue it further. Moreover, in several of Bhandari's other stories examining feminine desire, the extended (Hindu) family figures prominently in how her female characters define marriage and conjugality. See, for example, Bhandari, "Ek Kamzor Ladkī ki Kahānī," and Bhandari, "Tin Nigāhom ki Ek Tasvīr."

38. The postindependence dilemma of defining women's freedoms and desires in terms of either individual choice or community val-

ues took shape most explicitly in discussions on whether marriage should be viewed as an expression of personal right (i.e., individual choice) or community right (i.e., ordained by divine sacrament and arranged according to community norms). By retaining the personal-law category, the new postcolonial state endorsed a communitarian model of marriage while also offering citizens the option of selecting a secular model through the Special Marriage Act (1954). For discussion of family, community, and conjugality in modern India, see, for example, Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*; Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines*; and Uberoi, *Freedom and Destiny*. For discussion of postindependence juridical debates on marriage, see, for example, Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*, 206–37; Parashar, *Women and*

Family Law Reform in India; and Uberoi, "When Is a Marriage Not a Marriage?"

39. Majumdar, "'Self-Sacrifice' versus 'Self-Interest,'" 20.

40. Bhandari, *Ek Kahānī Yah Bhī*, 47.

41. Yadav, *Premacanda ki Virāsata aur Anya Nibandha*, 107. Bhandari met Yadav while teaching in Calcutta in the late 1950s. They married, and Bhandari followed Yadav to Delhi in the mid-1960s. The two are considered founding members of the *Nayī Kahānī* movement, along with Mohan Rakesh (1925–1972) and Kamleshwar (1932–2007). The couple officially separated in the early 1990s. See Bhandari, *Ek Kahānī Yah Bhī*, and Yadav, *Mud-Mud ke Dekhtā Hum*.

munity relations of kinship, on one hand, and liberal conceptualizations of self-ownership on the other. The two meanings cannot be parsed out. It is precisely when Sanjay and Nishith express kinship-like affection toward Deepa—offering emotional, financial, or career support—that her other truth—self-affirming sexual desire—is most intensely aroused.

Thus the novelty of Deepa's expressions of feminine desire is not that they challenge the sexual mores of their time but rather that they do so on literary terms. To put it differently, Bhandari's portrayal operates on the level of realism—wherein Deepa's expressions of sexual desire appear contentious, transgressive, and liberal in the context of existing social norms—as well as on the level of metaphor, wherein these expressions craft a literary aesthetic defined by the ubiquitous postindependence struggle to make sense of the tensions between past and present and tradition and modernity. Accomplishing this rhetorical simultaneity is the very thing that allows Deepa's expressions of feminine desire to substantiate both the narrative of women's self-interest (the story read as realism) and the narrative of women's self-sacrifice (the story read as metaphor), folding these narratives into one another in inseparable ways.

Feminine Desire Becomes Human

While the premise of Chudamani's story "Maṇitaṇāy Māri" ("Becoming Human"), published in 1964, diverges significantly from Bhandari's "Yahī Sac Hai," it shares a literary concern with the entitlements that men and women possess over one another.⁴² Putting the two stories in conversation thus enables us to track the broader formation of something like a language of entitlement that these women writers employ. "Maṇitaṇāy Māri" problematizes the entitlements that a husband has over his wife from the very outset, suggesting that some other type of husband-wife relationship might be possible: "Vanita worked outside the home to help her parents; she also did the

housework for her husband's sake. But his sense of entitlement [*urimai*] and selfhood [*tanmai*] stood in the way. And so . . . ?" asks the opening teaser, leaving us to wonder what will happen next—what, that is, Vanita will do to remedy her situation.⁴³ The plot centers on Vanita's struggles to satisfy her husband and maintain her household while also working to support her sick parents. Vanita's husband Shekar is resentful of her financial independence and responsibilities to people other than him, and Vanita is torn because she cannot find a balance between her commitment to her natal family and her domestic requirements as a good wife. Ultimately, the story critiques Shekar's sense of entitlement in light of the necessity of "becoming human," or developing sensitivity, compassion, and respect for others.

Because Chudamani's story portrays an already-married couple, its stakes are somewhat different from those in Bhandari's story: Deepa's flirtations with premarital relationships create unsettling ripples in the institution of marriage by raising the possibility that women possess and sustain preexisting romantic desires other than those they promise their husbands. Vanita, on the other hand, destabilizes conventional understandings of marriage by contending that women continue to maintain strong affiliations and loyalties to their natal families even after marriage. Considering the still-existing disputes over dowry and inheritance—the Hindu inheritance laws that were passed just ten years before "Maṇitaṇāy Māri" was published continue to remain contentious today⁴⁴—Chudamani's suggestion that modern Indian daughters are obligated to care for their elderly parents just like modern Indian sons was certainly bold for its time. Vanita's most pressing desire in the story is for Shekar to understand her love of her parents and recognize her freedom to fulfill her responsibility to them.

Yet sexual desire also enters into the terrain of parental love. Vanita and Shekar are just as modern a couple as Deepa and Sanjay in the sense that they, too, have come together on their

42. Chudamani's story was published in *Kalaimagal*, one of the most well-known Tamil magazines of the immediate postindependence period, and has been recognized by regional

literary awards and academic studies as part of her larger oeuvre of high fiction examining everyday Tamil life. See Lakshmi, "Loss of a Crest Jewel," and Lakshmi, *Face behind the Mask*.

43. Chudamani, "Maṇitaṇāy Māri," 77.

44. See, for instance, Basu, *She Comes to Take Her Rights*.

own terms rather than through a family arrangement: “The factory where she worked was on the way to his office, and the two took the same bus daily. Their mutual feelings of connection and their [eventual] marriage were the result of those meetings.”⁴⁵ At various moments in the story, such as this one, the narrator makes it clear to us that Vanita and Shekar share an attraction for one another, that they desire each other equally. Phrases like *ācai mayakkam* (the intoxication of desire) and *tāmpattiyam inimai* (the sweetness of conjugal life) characterize Shekar’s feelings for Vanita,⁴⁶ and passionate physical responses illustrate Vanita’s attraction to Shekar. For example, when Vanita and Shekar are talking after dinner, they begin to flirt with each other, reminiscing about how they used to go to evening films when they first began courting. Shekar whimsically asks:

“Shall we go to a movie tonight?”

He gently joined his hand with hers. There was a feeling of entitlement [*urimaiyuṇarcci*] in his desire [*aṇḇu*], a pride steeped in his right [*atikāram*] to think, ‘she’s mine.’

“Sure, let’s go!”

“Vanita!”

“Hmm? Tell me, what is it? What’s the meaning of your staring at me like this without saying anything?”

“Meaning? How can I tell you its meaning, Vanita? You look so beautiful today.” A pressing pleasure [*itam*] from the invigorating depth of his grasp. Her heart was also moved, and her cheeks reddened and shone.

“Shall we go to the cinema? What do you say?”

“Anything you say.”

“Yes! That’s precisely the proper quality [*laṭṭaṇam*] of a good wife [*nalla maṇaivi*].”

He took pride in the thought that she, from the depth of love [*aṇḇu*], had surrendered herself to him.

For a while, time stood still. He felt as though he were wandering in a kind of heaven. She was sitting in the chair beside him, her head resting on his shoulder. A few soft whisperings. And finally, silence between them. Even in silence his

heart was absorbed, intoxicated by pleasure [*iṇḇu mayakkamāy*].⁴⁷

Here, the words *urimai* (an etymologically Dravidian word meaning rights or entitlements) and its synonym, *atikāram* (an etymologically Sanskritic word cognate with the Hindi word *adhikār*) underscore the deeply intimate way in which Shekar’s physical desire for Vanita is heightened by the sense of entitlement and possession he feels over her. Vanita, in turn, happily participates in the romantic exchange, demurely bewildered by Shekar’s ogling, blushing at his touch, assenting to his every word, murmuring softly while leaning on his shoulder.

Vanita responds to Shekar’s advances through an idiom of surrender that, at first glance, may seem to possess a lesser sense of ownership and entitlement than Deepa expresses in her relationships with Sanjay and Nishith. Shekar views Vanita’s uncontested self-surrender as an essential quality of being a good wife, and she willingly, lovingly accedes. Nonetheless, Vanita’s pleasure stands out in those brief fragmentary moments when the narration blurs Shekar’s perspective with Vanita’s rather than strictly taking Shekar’s perspective or the form of direct dialogue.⁴⁸ Notice how the passage progresses unexpectedly from Shekar’s direct speech (“You look so beautiful today”) to a sentence fragment with no verb or object (“A pressing pleasure from the invigorating depth of his grasp”) to Vanita’s physical response (“Her heart was also moved, and her cheeks reddened and shone”). This discursive movement allows the narrative voice to give way to the expression of Vanita’s physical desire, marking an equal narrative terrain on which the two relate to each other, even if it is Shekar who wields the language of entitlement and Vanita who reacts to it.

Chudamani’s rhetorical technique of moving between direct dialogue, the omniscient voice, and Shekar’s point of view is central to how her language of entitlement takes shape in the story. This is because the story’s shifting third-person

45. Chudamani, “Maṇitaṇāy Māri,” 79.

46. See, for example, *ibid.*, 80.

47. *Ibid.*, 81.

48. See Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 162–94. Genette uses “external focalization” to describe the omniscient third-person narrative voice and “internal focalization” to describe a

third-person narrative voice focused only on a given character’s point of view.

voice enables the narration to produce a contrast between the terms of reciprocity defining Vanita and Shekar's conjugal relationship and Shekar's contradictory sense of entitlement over Vanita. It leads the reader to rhetorically and negatively insert Vanita's desires and the injustice of her position into the forefront of the story, even while the entitlements are Shekar's. Take, for example, the following scene, in which the story turns seamlessly from a dialogue between Shekar and his father that is unmediated by narration to Shekar's internal rumination punctuated by third-person omniscience. Together, these subtle shifts in narrative voice highlight Shekar's unbending, patriarchal illogic. When Shekar suggests Vanita cares more for her parents' well-being than his, Vanita does not respond. But, Shekar's father does:

"I earn a pension. But if I didn't, wouldn't you take care of me?"

"How could I not? It's my duty [*kaṭamai*] to take care of you. That's what is right [*niyāyam*]," [said Shekar].

"Because you're my child, right?"

"Right."

"Vanita is her parents' child, too. Don't forget that." The old man quickly walked out.

Shekar stood without moving, seething and confused. Vanita was her parents' child—was he the only one who didn't get this? Still, he felt despair in his heart. Gangrene and ill will [*puraiyoḷ um pukaiccal*]. Was it a disgrace to his manhood? It wasn't even that. What Vanita earned never entered the house. Even the smallest things she needed, she bought with his salary. She had always given her husband that respect. So why did he feel so enraged inside?⁴⁹

In the opening lines of this passage, the narrative uses Shekar's father's voice, not Vanita's, to articulate a notion of gender equality. He authoritatively yet compassionately expresses humanist reason on Vanita's behalf, explaining that Vanita is no different from Shekar when it comes to the responsibilities they have toward their parents. But Shekar is paralyzed, overcome with confusion and irrational anger. "Gangrene and ill will," interjects an omniscient narrative voice, characterizing Shekar's human compassion gone awry. The

fragment operates as an interpolation that further accentuates the odious way in which Shekar's entitlement over Vanita conflicts with what his father tries to convince Shekar to see as Vanita's duty to do what is right. The very mention of Vanita's separate salary suggests the possibility of her independence from Shekar and his inability to fulfill his role as man of the house. In this way, the narrative exposes the threat Shekar feels, even though he himself cannot put a finger on why he is so angry. In contrast to the despair eating away at his heart, the words Shekar uses in response to his father—*kaṭamai* (duty, responsibility) and *niyāyam* (justice, what is just, what is right)—belong to Chudamani's language of entitlement. They gesture toward rights and responsibilities that both he and Vanita possess but that are not determined or dictated by their conjugal bond. These rights and responsibilities are simultaneously liberal and nonliberal: Vanita and Shekar's right to work and earn independently of each other is also their duty toward their families and their well-being.

As the story progresses, Shekar becomes more and more incapable of bearing the idea that Vanita's energies are directed toward her job as much as toward him. The narration, too, becomes more polemical, even as it remains centered on Shekar's perspective:

His anger continued to grow. [Vanita] was his possession [*uṭaimai*], and she was straining herself. Why? Laboring for someone else.

She belonged to him [*avaḷ avanuṭaiya conta poruḷ*]. Yet, she was so tired that she couldn't share in his pleasure [*ullācam*]. He raged; it was as if a thing that he had paid for was now damaged and useless to him. (81–82)

Shekar views Vanita as someone he possesses—as his *uṭaimai* (property) and his *conta poruḷ*, or his "own," a phrase with similar connotations to Deepa's sense of *āpanatva*. Here, however, the phrase is reduced to its basest meaning: Shekar sees Vanita as an object, a bought good no longer serving its advertised purpose. Although Shekar feels that Vanita manages their household well in spite of her job, he has no sympathy for Vanita's working-woman lifestyle. The sense of ownership he ex-

49. Chudamani, "Maṇitaṇṇai Māri," 77–79.

presses in this passage stands in stark contrast to the moments of pleasure the couple experience as well as the respect and love with which Vanita treats Shekar.

In the end, no amount of love and longing is enough to reconcile their opposing views. When Shekar puts his foot down for the last time, declaring that Vanita must quit work or else, she calmly decides she must leave him, which she does. In a singular and stunning instance of first-person voice in the story, Vanita explains her actions in a letter to Shekar, chastising him for disregarding her filial and financial duty to care for her parents: “When you heartlessly said, so what if my abandoned parents are ruined and destroyed, I couldn’t bear the shock, despite my love [*aṇṇu*] for you. It’s my duty [*kaṭamai*] to take care of my parents. I’m going there. You’ve got a lot of the qualities of a husband, but I don’t see the qualities of a human being [*maṇitaṇ*] in you” (82). Here, in a moment of clarity and self-realization, Vanita exercises her right to more fully commit to her natal *kaṭamai* (duty or responsibility), which for her are just as definitive of who she is as her love for her husband and her duties as a good wife. In doing so, she elucidates what it means to be human. Being human is a heart-fullness as opposed to Shekar’s heartlessness, a willingness to have compassion for others alongside a commitment to one’s own responsibilities. This humanity is something Vanita both expects and feels she deserves from her husband if he is to be her just and equal partner. In this way, Vanita’s letter conceives of the fulfillment of her duty toward her parents as interchangeable with her right to be treated as a human being. In other words, she makes an argument for gender equality through the idiom of self-sacrifice. When Vanita’s parents ask her worriedly if she has had a quarrel with Shekar, Chudamani ends the story with Vanita’s indictment of Shekar’s lack of humanity: “‘What fight? No, it’s nothing like that,’ Vanita said calmly. ‘One day for sure he’ll become human [*maṇitaṇāy māri*] and come here to take me home’” (82). Love and desire are not enough to sustain a marriage; also necessary are mutual respect and adherence to universal standards of humanity.

On one hand, Vanita’s final words rattle the stronghold of marriage no less than Deepa’s forth-

coming expressions of desire for more than one man. The terms of human relations (here, shared compassion and respect) trump the terms of conjugal loyalty and devotion, and Shekar’s failure to recognize this leads him to lose his husbandly entitlements over Vanita. Accordingly, we might interpret Chudamani’s ending as a liberal argument for the acknowledgment of women’s self-interests over women’s self-sacrifice. Despite the story’s focus on Shekar’s entitlements and desires, the narration gives the final word to Vanita and her right to retain her work life and natal family connection. The shifting third-person voice works to undermine Shekar’s authority, dehumanizing his perspective and ultimately writing it out of the story altogether. Conversely, it entitles Vanita to the respect and equality she deserves as a human being, giving utmost importance to her desires.

However, on the other hand, it is expressly Vanita’s dedicated, family-oriented feminine character that facilitates Chudamani’s language of entitlement. Throughout the story, Vanita adheres in all respects to the ideals of a conventional good wife. She skillfully performs her domestic duties, respects her husband’s authority, and even manages to look beautiful despite being exhausted by a long day at work. She furthermore expresses a stubborn commitment toward her natal family in terms that elevate her moral character and deem her admirable. When Vanita conclusively says, “One day for sure he’ll become human,” she indicates that Shekar will realize not just that Vanita is equally human but also that she has a right to maintain her role as a daughter to her parents alongside her role as a wife to her husband. In expressing this sentiment, Vanita endorses a narrative of women’s self-sacrifice for the interests of family and community no less than does Deepa. As is the case with Bhandari’s “Yahī Sac Hai,” Chudamani’s “*Maṇitaṇāy Māri*” thus complicates the binary between the narratives of women’s self-interest and women’s self-sacrifice. The story’s shifting third-person narrative voice corrects Shekar’s skewed understandings of *urimai* and *atikāram* (synonyms, both referring to rights or entitlements) and *taṇmai* (selfhood) by juxtaposing these with Vanita’s self-assured sensibilities of respect, compassion, and filial duty. In doing so, Chudamani’s language of rights and entitlements

articulates Vanita's affective ties to her community of kinship in tandem with and inseparable from her liberal conceptions of self-ownership.

The circumscription of Vanita's feminine desire within this particular framework of universalizing humanism—a characteristic move in many of Chudamani's stories—has enabled her work to be read as “literary,” placing her in the same category as other well-established writers of her time. For instance, in his review in *Eluttu* of one of Chudamani's early short-story collections, the influential literary critic P. G. Sundararajan describes the resistance to tradition and societal norms that her female characters display not as expressions of feminine choice or desire but rather as Chudamani's method of evoking a shared sense of human connection and feeling in her readers. Sundararajan finds this method exemplary of Chudamani's humanistic prose style. Commenting on her portrayals of the disconnections between husbands and wives, he writes: “[Her stories] are a reflection of the human nature of two minds separated by differences of mere opinion, affected and united by shared emotion.”⁵⁰ Here, Sundararajan tames the outspoken expressions of individuality that Chudamani's female characters voice by describing them as expressions of the varied opinions and shared emotions that all individuals—that is to say, husbands and wives alike—feel. Rather than reading Chudamani's articulations as part of a discourse of gender justice, Sundararajan situates them within the project of canonical postindependence Tamil short-story writers to portray the general human predicament of modern individuals. In doing so, his interpretation aligns neatly with the scholarly characterization of 1950s and 1960s women's writing that I discuss above as failing to go against the grain of mainstream canonical writing and thought.

On the level of plot, Chudamani's “Maṇitaṇṇai Māri” does indeed facilitate a literary humanist interpretation like Sundararajan's: centered largely on Shekar's point of view, the story illustrates his deep perplexity regarding Vanita's desire to work and the marital strife caused by the couple's irreconcilable difference of opinion. But on the level

of rhetoric, Chudamani's use of the language of entitlement simultaneously offers a different reading: her shifting third-person narrative voice powerfully authorizes Vanita to take full ownership of her desires and entitlements. Chudamani's language of entitlement thus demonstrates that readings such as Sundararajan's only get us so far. They preclude us from recognizing the innovative literary ways in which writers like Bhandari and Chudamani imagined the scope of women's entitlements and feminine desire at a moment when these issues were contentious and their definitions in flux.

Labeling Women Writers

Despite their bold examinations of women's desires and entitlements, one reason that Bhandari and Chudamani have not been included in the genealogy of Indian feminism is, perhaps, that they themselves have repeatedly expressed a deep ambivalence about speaking in explicitly feminist terms or being labeled as “women writers.” Bhandari, for example, describes feeling pleased that her photo was not printed alongside some of the first short stories that launched her writing career. She explains that when the stories came out, “My name wasn't clearly gender-specific, so most [readers'] letters arrived addressed to ‘Dear Brother’ . . . I laughed a lot, but I also felt a sense of satisfaction that this praise was absolutely not out of kindness because I was a woman.”⁵¹ In another instance, an interviewer asked Bhandari about the implication of her protagonist Darshana's extramarital affair in the story “Tin Nigāhoṃ kī Ek Tasvīr” (“A Picture of Three Perspectives”), which was published in 1958:

Researcher: In your opinion is Darshana's extramarital love acceptable? If it is acceptable, then what becomes of the institution of wifely allegiance and duty [*pāṭivratya dharma*]?

Mannu Bhandari: There's a difference between attraction [*ākārshaṇ*] and love [*prem*]. Because if attraction gives rise to expression then it would be love, but Darshana doesn't express it.⁵²

In this exchange, which took place in the early 2000s, Bhandari evaded the researcher's

50. Sundararajan, “Cūṭamaṇi Kataikal,” 53.

51. Bhandari, *Ek Kahānī Yah Bhi*, 39.

52. Gupta and Bhandari, “Śodhārthini kī Mannū Bhaṇḍārī Jī,” 284.

question about the acceptability of extramarital love. She refused to put Darshana's actions in transgressive terms, almost as if she were depoliticizing Darshana's affair by disallowing its articulation within a framework of morality. Similarly, in a 2002 interview, Chudamani was asked to shed light on the psychology of one of her female characters who, when her husband leaves her and later returns, discovers that she no longer wants to be with him. Chudamani replied: "It isn't necessary to completely describe everything in a story. Just as we can't understand a person fully in real life, so it is in literature."⁵³ Like Bhandari, Chudamani here interpreted her character's actions by appealing to human emotion and experience rather than by challenging gender or other social norms.

Bhandari and Chudamani are not alone in their seeming disavowal of feminist politics. Among their postindependence literary contemporaries, Anita Desai (English), Ismat Chughtai (Urdu), Krishna Sobti (Hindi), Saroj Pathak (Gujarati), and Triveni (Kannada)—to name a few—have all expressed a tension between the categories of "literary writing" and "women's writing." For these writers, literary writing signals a type of aesthetic universal humanism that conflicts with the feminist-political particularities of women's writing.⁵⁴ In their groundbreaking two-volume anthology *Women Writing in India*, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita write of the work of this new postindependence generation of women writers: "In many senses their well-crafted writing does not seem to be disputing the ground laid out for it any more than the mainstream writing [of canonical male writers of the time]. But it is also possible to read the women's writing of this period as engaged in a bitter and difficult debate about women and the kind of hospitality gender received within the universalist claims of the post-independence years."⁵⁵ That is to say, newly arising "literary" women writers—who were, for the most part, well educated, middle class, upper caste, and

Hindu—began to search for ways to resolve the question of how women (and women writers) have been, and could and should be, situated within the category of the human in postcolonial India. Bhandari's and Chudamani's uses of the language of entitlement illustrate one avenue through which some women writers worked out a solution by rearticulating feminine desire and freedom in the aesthetic terms of literary humanism.

Bhandari's and Chudamani's approach to the relationship between sexual difference and authorship—indeed, their attempt to erase sexual difference in the realm of the literary—might be interpreted as their resistance to one of the fundamental dilemmas of the category of women's writing: that it assumes an unbroken continuity between writer and text (female writer = feminine text), wherein the value of the text is determined by the signature of the author. Early theorists of women's writing did just this in the 1970s. In an attempt to reclaim the lost tradition of women's literature, American feminists turned to women's writing as a means of offering alternative images about women, by women, and for women.⁵⁶ French feminists, on the other hand, searched for ways to theorize the unrepresentable of phallogocentric discourse marked by the "feminine," which they considered "elusive, phantasmal, [and] . . . that can't be observed at the level of the sentence but only glimpsed as an alternative libidinal economy."⁵⁷ Both of these branches of feminist thought, however, invariably defined women's writing as writing by women, the "woman author as origin, and her life as the primary locus of meaning."⁵⁸

By contrast, theories arising in the 1980s and 1990s that emphasized the "death of the author," the primacy of the text, and the performativity of gender seemed to undermine the category of women's writing by deconstructing the very notions of authorship and gender that defined it.⁵⁹ These philosophical challenges to essentialism have vied

53. Mangaiyartilakam and Chudamani, "Kavarccikkāka Tarattukkāka Eluta Vēṇṭum," 46.

54. See Chughtai, *Life in Words*; Jussawalla and Dasenbrock, "Anita Desai"; Kuchedkar, "Introduction"; Rangra, "Krishna Sobti"; and Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, 2:285–86, 312–13.

55. Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, 2:94.

56. See Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*; Moers, *Literary Women*; and Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*.

57. Jacobus, "Is There a Woman in This Text?," 109. See Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa"; Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*; and Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader*.

58. Jacobus, "Is There a Woman in This Text?," 108. See also Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, and Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, 2:15–37.

59. See Barthes, "Death of the Author"; Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; Derrida, "Signature Event Context"; and Foucault, "What Is an Author?"

against the feminist project of working on behalf of women writers, bringing theoretical discussion on women's writing to a still-continuing standstill. As a result, Toril Moi argues, "the question of what the sex or gender of the author has to do with literature" remains unresolved. What we are left with instead are theories about how gender has been constructed—in other words, about "how gender is created or comes into being." But, as Moi goes on to say, "*Theories of origins simply do not tell us what we ought to do once gender has come into being.*"⁶⁰ In other words, how should a writer respond when she has already been categorized as a "woman writer"? What does the sex or gender of the author have to do with literature?

Nothing! At least, this is what Bhandari and Chudamani seem to say in interviews such as those I cite above, at those critical junctures when they have been called upon to speak not as "writers," but as "women writers." In those moments when they have been compelled to reconcile their writerly identities with a gender already come into being, Bhandari and Chudamani have responded by emphasizing the "human" rather than "feminine" emotions and actions of their characters, locating themselves and their work within the realm of the literary rather than the feminist-political. But I resist interpreting their responses as a championing of the death of the author or as an argument for the constructedness of gender, readings that lend themselves to seeing Bhandari and Chudamani as repudiating feminist politics. As I hope to have demonstrated through my readings of their short stories, emphasizing the humanist rather than the feminist dimensions of Bhandari's and Chudamani's writing does not diminish or undo the feminist aspects of their work. This becomes clearer, I believe, if we shift the stress we hear in the claim, "I am a writer, not a woman writer!" from the latter half ("not a woman writer") to the beginning half ("I am a writer"). That is to say, what if we understand Bhandari and Chudamani as struggling against the provocation not that they are women writers and therefore not "true" writ-

ers but rather that, as women writers, they cannot be "true" writers?⁶¹ I am suggesting, in other words, that Bhandari and Chudamani are trying not to erase sexual difference or eschew feminist politics but rather to demonstrate how feminine desire and experience are just as universal as their masculine counterparts. It is precisely this move, I believe, that enabled Bhandari and Chudamani to broaden the scope of feminist thought and women's literary expression in the two decades following independence.

Alternative Strains of Feminist Thought

I have argued that Bhandari's and Chudamani's language of entitlement achieves the universalization of feminine desire into human terms. It democratizes desire, locating Bhandari's and Chudamani's short stories squarely within the realm of mainstream literary humanism of the time. Deepa and Vanita's literary struggles to lay claim to their entitlements speak to the struggles of all individuals, to their "divided . . . mental states" (as Yadav writes) or to "the human nature of two minds separated by differences of mere opinion, affected and united by shared emotion" (according to Sundararajan). But I have also argued that in using a language of rights and entitlements to universalize feminine desire, Bhandari and Chudamani make an argument for gender justice: through this language, their female characters demonstrate that women and men possess the same types of ownership of the self and entitlements over their partners. This negotiation between feminine desire and human desire is precisely what allows Bhandari's and Chudamani's language of entitlement to evidence a new, postindependence engagement with the agonism of Indian feminism—that is, the problem of how women might hold on to their identities as individual bearers of self-interest while simultaneously retaining their affiliations to community values and norms. Both Deepa and Vanita come back to family and the institution of marriage, but not without also expressing their desires and asserting their own choices for how they will

60. Moi, "I Am Not a Woman Writer" (emphasis in original).

61. Moi is interested in how a women writer might maneuver within a discourse that has

hailed or called her into being as a women writer. I am differently interested in how our own commitments to feminist politics of varying kinds might lead us to misread the terms

upon which writers like Bhandari and Chudamani see themselves as being hailed in the first place.

interact with the world. Their negotiations thus demonstrate a much more complex engagement with the conflict between individual rights and community interests than would a standoff: both characters imagine feminine desire from within the framework of family and community, asking how modern man-woman relationships might be conceived on more equal terms. In doing so, Bhandari's and Chudamani's uses of a language of entitlement and rights theorize possible avenues for maintaining community norms while also inscribing new articulations of feminine desire within them.

In making this argument, I am not claiming that Bhandari's and Chudamani's fiction demonstrates a type of radical Indian feminism or that there exists a radical feminist subject that needs to be recovered. Rather, I am arguing that their expressions of feminine desire, which emerged within the particular political constraints of the time, provide an important basis for understanding enduring forms of Indian feminist thought. Recognizing these expressions helps us to move away from the contemporary feminist frustration with nonliberal idioms of self-sacrifice and toward a deeper engagement with how these idioms have been and continue to be mobilized in creative and productive ways.⁶² The 1950s and 1960s literary emergence of feminine desire exceeds the self-sacrifice/self-interest binary, illuminating the risks of treating this binary as a predetermined starting point for understanding postindependence Indian feminist thought.

Importantly, the comparison between Bhandari's and Chudamani's stories shows us that even when feminine desire is made interchangeable with human desire, it does not mean the same thing in every case. Deepa's sexual desire for two different men is not analogous to or transgressive in the same way as Vanita's desire to retain a connection with her natal family. The former explores the place of women's bodily freedoms in society, while the latter considers the nature of women's

familial affiliations following marriage. Indeed, depending on our own locations as readers, Deepa's sexual desire might seem more legible on the spectrum of a liberal feminist politics interested in individual rights, while Vanita's might read as part of a nonliberal metaphysical framework. Yet I have tried to demonstrate here that neither Deepa's nor Vanita's feminine desires can be situated solely within the categories of "liberal" or "nonliberal." Putting these characters' nonaligning feminine desires in conversation thus illustrates that the entitlement and universalization of feminine desires do not override the specificities of these desires within their distinct historical and geographic contexts. If recent critiques of liberal feminism have highlighted the way in which it effaces nonliberal desires and ways of being,⁶³ then, in tandem with such critiques, it is also worth our while to open up our understanding of existing strains of liberal feminist thought to give space for the nuanced rhetorical strategies through which women have taken up this framework in nonliberal ways (and vice versa). In the cases of Bhandari and Chudamani, narratives of women's self-interest and narratives of women's self-sacrifice are not so easily separated, but rather they are intricately intertwined and continue to shape literary-feminist women's writing in India to this day. ■■■■

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62. Majumdar exemplifies this frustration in her statement, "The task for feminist thinkers today must be to engage with this nationalism [of self-sacrifice] and explore its investment in ethics in order to bring the talk of rights and interests and the talk of ethics into conversation

with each other that helps promote the ends of feminist struggles." Majumdar, "'Self-Sacrifice' versus 'Self-Interest,'" 33.

63. See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

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