

# LITERARY JOURNAL

STELLA MARIS COLLEGE

(AUTONOMOUS)  
CHENNAI - 600 086

Vol.20

March 1997

## **Contents**

1.	Editorial	...	1
2.	Once Upon A Time . . . In hisSTORY	...	2
3.	Through the Eye of A Woman	...	5
4.	Face to Face with Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee	...	7
5.	Demythcizing a Mythology: Psychological Realism in the characters of Mahabharata in Bhyrappa's Parva	...	9
6.	David Henry Hwang's 'M. Butterfly' - The Last Laugh	...	14
7.	A Video, a Fridge and a Bride	...	16
8.	A Comparative Study of certain aspects of Anita Desai's 'Cry, The Peacock' & 'Fire on the Mountain'	...	18
9.	'Catcher in The Rye'	...	21

## From the Editor's Desk

The Golden Jubilee Literary Journal is a 'revisioning' of the Indian-English landscape - Parva, Anita Desai and Nirmala Anand - even as it spans global English cultures - Atwood, Salinger, the opera and the fairytale, together with an interview with Meenakshi Mukherjee. This completes the broad spectrum of responses. As in previous years, variety is the keynote and codified individual and original responses have been given greater credence than mere scholarship.

Dr. Mrs. Seetha Srinivasan

Ms. Agnes Fernando

Ms. Sheila Mathai

## Once Upon A Time . . . In hisSTORY

The sexual battle wages on . . . only now, instead of effecting the life of the new born child, it has entered the womb. With ultra-sound tests to determine the sex of the foetus, the female of the species is in more peril than ever before.

Yet, more dangerous than the pre-birth determination of sex, is the post-birth sexual conditioning that patriarchy enforces on women. One realises that, what appear as innocent fairly tales on the surface, are in reality, attempts at unconsciously forcing women to yield to patriarchal structures.

The most exploited tale, for women writers to demonstrate the effects of patriarchy, is 'Snow White '. Dominant male structures have attempted to classify women as monsters or angels. In the name, Snow White, we see a clear demarcation between white which symbolises purity and goodness as opposed to its counterpart black, which is symbolic of evil. Women are propelled to fit into one of these categories, irrespective of the fact that shades of grey may exist among them. To depict this, we find the image of the frame: Snow White's mother is framed by her window, and her step-mother is framed by a mirror.

Excluding the handsome prince, the only other male voice, is found in the guise of the mirror. Men have set standards for women's beauty and a woman can exist peacefully only when she conforms to these standards. The moment she is denied this reassurance, as in the case of the wicked queen, then men succeed in preventing the creation of a sisterhood of women, as they have set one woman against the other.

*"Mirror, mirror, on the wall,  
Who is the fairest one of all?"*  
She demands.

*"'T is true, my queen, you were a beauty,  
But Snow White . . . now there's a cutie!"*  
he responds.

Snow White is framed in her fragile glass coffin, when the handsome prince finds her; the image of the ideal, silent woman. One is not astounded, therefore, that he permits her return to the world of the living, on his terms of course, when he bestows on her his life-giving kiss. And the wicked witch? For Snow White to live in peace, she must either come to terms and absorb the witch into her being, or she must destroy this part of her self. She opts for the latter course, as the witch dies a painful death, falling off a cliff.

*"Sleeping Beauty"* works along similar lines. Here, the princess Aurora is cursed at her christening by an evil fairy who has been isolated from society. The "Mad Woman in the Attic" syndrome takes effect and she lashes out against innocent victims. Here again the evil fairy is killed by the prince, who releases the princess from her slumber with his kiss. Some versions of the story depict the princess as having slept for a hundred years, with her beauty intact. This could symbolise the immortal beauty of women as captured in literature, or it could mean that someone found the potion for eternal youth and forgot to patent it.

*"Cinderella"* studies the existence of communities of women - all at odds with each other. Dressing up for the ball becomes an effort to squeeze the female body into unrealistic standards of feminine beauty. The fairy god-mother, becomes symbolic of the female tradition. She is able to provide Cinderella with assistance, but her aid is limited in its power, and after a point, Cinderella must learn to survive on her own.

The most amusing aspect of this story, is the glass slipper. It is unbelievable that a woman would even venture to wear glass slippers, let alone walk in them. Cinderella takes this one step further -- she dances in them! If you were to ask a man what he thought of this, he would tell you that Cinderella is a cunning woman who wants to ensnare the rich prince. And how does he come to this conclusion? "Have you ever tried running down a flight of stairs and dropping a slipper? Forget about even trying to do it with a glass slipper!" You know, he is right about that. But you can come back with the rejoinder, "Then why didn't the writer of the story just make the slipper disappear at midnight? It must have been a man who wrote the story because he wanted to prove that a man could select a woman who corresponded with his idea of beauty, and therefore if the glass slipper fits, wear it!"

*"Little Red Riding Hood"* is the typical siren figure. Her mother is obviously up to something, or she just cannot tolerate her mother-in-law, as she sends her young daughter alone into the woods. Now, the little girl has been warned not to talk to strangers. But she is a tease, tempting the wolf with her destination. The poor creature, takes a short cut and arrives at grandmother's house.

The scene near grandmother's bed is significant. When Red Riding Hood observes the size of the wolf's eyes, he responds:

*"The better to see you with, my dear!"*

reducing her to the "other" with his male gaze. When she comments on his large mouth, he replies:

*"The better to eat you with, my dear!"*

clearly an attempt to devour her identity. And when he proceeds to pounce on her, she shrieks; whether it is a cry of "rape", or whether she dislikes his invasion of her private space is left to the readers to deduce.

The woman most comfortable with her sexuality is *"The Little Mermaid"*. Ariel, escapes the womb-like sea, that engulfs her, and attempts to love a life in a pre-lingual state, after having sold her voice to Ursula, the evil mer-sorceress. She eventually returns to the sea, to come to terms with her split self, and returns, with her father's blessing and her voice, to the land of her beloved prince.

If one carefully studies the nature of these fairy tales, one almost always discovers the presence of a witch, shunned by society, who is subsequently killed or banished; a lowly girl, who always seeks marriage in high places; and, our beloved prince charming, without whom these fairy tales would mean nothing.

Is it really a surprise, then, that women today expect so much from men. When they have provided us with the knight-in-shining-armour image, why do they whine when they cannot deliver the goods?

*Ranjini Sathianarayanan*  
*III B.A. English*



## Through the Eye of A Woman

*" . . . . . imagine a world without stories!  
But that's exactly what you would have, if all the women were wise . . . . .  
Ah! The Eternal Stupid woman . . . . .  
If she escapes from anything, its by sheer luck, or  
Else the hero;  
this girl couldn't tear her way out of a paper bag ———  
Let us now praise stupid women  
Who have given us Literature."*

— Margaret Atwood

Atwood has hit the nail on the head. For ages, literature has dwelt upon women who are too good to be true - lovely 'angels' whom the heroes can protect from other women who are clever enough to look after themselves. The "Male Gaze" has looked at women through "spectacles of black and pink" (as Virginia Woolf puts it) and has created the mythical ideal-angelic-conforming woman and the non-ideal-monstrous - non-conformist woman.

It is to show the grossly distorted female characterisation that women's writing aims at, among other things. The protagonists in the novels written by women are more often than not, deliberate subversions of the existing social 'virtues' - Jane Eyre's thirst for seeing more of the world and her passionate love for Rochester mark her off as slightly 'un-Victorian'. Young Maggie Tulliver and Catherine Heathcliff are more obviously and more decisively un-Victorian. In fact, Emily Bronte negates the entire idea of the Victorian - Drawing Room-Decoration image of 19th century English woman by making Catherine's conversion to conformity seem a suicidal act. Ages later, Atwood's Marian is a deliberate subversion of the Happy-Housewife-Mother image prevalent in the 50s that Betty Friedan attacked in 'The Feminine Mystique'. In fact, both Marian and Jane Eyre react to their engagements in a similar manner - both realise that they would only be losing a part of themselves in the bargain and this reaction is totally different from the expected fulfilment that women in 'literary patriarchy' often see in marriage.

Miles away, Lalitambika Antarajnam's Tatri is very obviously a reversal of the ideal Namboodri woman who knows fulfilment only as a devoted wife. Tatri becomes a 'prostitute' to have her revenge on her husband.

Most of these characters are the products of a female mind rebelling against a patriarchal tradition that insists that women find wholeness only in self effacement - much like the Bonsai tree which is dwarfed and told that it is good to be dwarfed.

The 'female gaze' which permeates women's writings shows the women from the point of view of those who can understand them best - other women. Therefore it is, that the 'monsters' created by the male gaze speak in women's writings - with the result that the bony structured concepts of angels and monsters crash into pieces.

Atwood therefore, gives expression to the wicked stepsisters of Cinderella! "I've always been just the ugly sister . . . whatever I did, I couldn't be beautiful." and to the witches, who have come to represent everything diabolical:

"It's true, there are never any evil stepfathers. Only a bunch of lily - livered widowers . . . where were they when I'm making those girls drudge in the kitchens? . . . Passing the buck. Men! But if you think they knew nothing about it, you're crazy."

Even Shakespeare's Gertrude talks back to Hamlet, almost justifying her act of killing (for in Atwood's work, it is Gertrude who murders) her husband.

"Your dad just wasn't a whole lot of fun . . . The flesh, he'd say. You'd think it was dog dirt . . . And every time I felt like . . . warm (ing) up my ageing bones, it was like I'd suggested murder."

Retelling a story from the point of view of a minor character, especially a woman, allows for the expression of a female sensibility hitherto unrecognized. This very act of providing a different point of view is one of the objectives of women's writing - to provide expression to women whom the male gaze has reduced to silent shadows. Doing this would, perhaps naturally, require a deliberate subversion of the ideas and ideals concretised by 'literary patriarchy'.

### **Bibliography**

1. Atwood, Margaret: Good Bones, Bloomsbury; London - 1992
2. Bronte, Emily: Wuthering Heights, Wordsworth Classics, 1992
3. Bronte, Charlotte: Jane Eyre
4. Woolf, Virginia: A Room of One's Own
5. Holmstrom, Lakshmi: The Inner Courtyard. Writings by Indian Women
6. Atwood, Margaret: The Edible Woman
7. Eliot, George: Mill on the Floss. J. M. Dent & Sons, London - 1977

*V. Padma*  
*III B.A. English*



## Face to Face with Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee

Indian Literature has finally come into its own. Indian writers now find an international audience, and the list of recognised Indian writers grows everyday - Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra and Arundathi Roy - to name a few. The reasons for this prolific creative activity are being hotly debated.

Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee, invited by the English Department, Stella Maris, to speak at the National Seminar of Higher Education, later gave us an interview. Here, she discussed briefly some of the issues in Indian Literature, including expatriate writing, critical theories and their importance, translation and the criteria for literary prizes.

Dr. Mukherjee drew attention to several interesting features in Indian fiction today. She observes that more and more writers are presenting small communities in their novels, rather than any picture of India as a whole. She takes an example, Rohinton Mistry, the recent winner of the Commonwealth Prize, whose novels 'Such a Long Journey' and 'A Fine Balance' centre around the Parsi community of Bombay rather than a homogenous picture of India. There are now pluralistic perceptions of India and Indianess which she deems a positive factor. Abregating any attempts at blanket definitions, she prefers, on the contrary, a freedom from any one limiting idea or definition of what Indian Literature should mean or be.

According to Dr. Mukherjee, the varied perceptions of these novelists are revolutionary and certainly controversial. She believes however that self critiques are an essential part of these novels. Further, she regarded these radical self critiques as a 'symptom' of the new self confidence with which this new breed of novelists presented both themselves and their work; and was therefore, to be welcomed.

One aspect of international recognition is, of course, literary awards. Dr. Mukherjee is skeptical about the process of choosing a winner; she views these awards as being given to writers who employ a particular formula, which include magic realism and a large historical landscape. Commenting on Rohinton Mistry being awarded the Commonwealth Prize for his second novel 'A Fine Balance', she is of the view that this was partly due to the fact that he keeps to this formula. She therefore believes that these awards will not go to those 'unfashionable' writers like Shashi Deshpande, whose novels despite their high literary quality, lack this formula.

Dr. Mukherjee maintained that western literary theorists are still the shaping influence on Indian writers. She sees fiction as struggling to keep up with the new trends in criticism rather than the other way round. With such a big say in what is said, criticism can and does manipulate both the literary text and reader responses. To the question as to whether critical theory may not finally overwhelm the writer's creativity, she pointed out that there will always be writers like Rushdie, who succeed in incorporating critical theory into their work, thus presenting a literature that is both clever and distinctive.

One last area that Dr. Mukherjee touched upon was that of translations. She views the increasing number of translations available as a very encouraging trend. Believing that given time, a process of elimination will take place that will decide the value of translation. Dr. Mukherjee emphasized that there should be no attempt, as yet, to set up definitive literary standards for translations.

While stressing the fact that Indian literature is a field that is constantly expanding its creative boundaries, Dr. Mukherjee provided several crucial insights into the evolving trends in Indian Literature.

*R. Nitya*  
*I M.A. English*

# Demythicizing a Mythology: Psychological Realism in the characters of Mahabharata in Bhyrappa's Parva

(Paper presented at the Eighth Commonwealth Studies Conference  
held at the University of Poona - Nov. 21-23, '96)

The great Indian epic Mahabharata which has been popularly known as "Vyasa's millennial banquet" remains a living literary tradition today on account of its inexhaustible richness. Life in its infinite variety is what is revealed in the Mahabharata and this accounts for the fascination it has for readers both Eastern and Western. It has undergone several transcreative processes through the genius of various writers in various languages, including Jean Claude Carriere's transcreation and Peter Brook's dramatization of the epic.

The secret of the universal appeal of Ramayana and Mahabharata lies in the fact that the authors of these epics seem to have seized the mind of humanity as well as its working in different ways and presented it to their readers. Consequently, the characters who appear in these epics are not confined to the societies that the authors belonged to but appear and reappear throughout Indian history. It is this that leads to different interpretations and tellings of these stories and each interpretation and each telling of the story reflects the tastes, likes and dislikes of the society to which the interpreter or the teller of the story concerned belongs.

Bhyrappa's PARVA is at once a recreation and re-interpretation of the epic from a realistic perspective. The author proclaims in his article "Mahabharata: My attempt at recreation", that he has adopted a realistic form in terms of human experience (Dandekar 256). Such a spelt out aim necessitates an exploration of the psyche of the characters in the epic. In order to succeed in his mission Bhyrappa has undertaken an extensive research for eight years which involved a tour of the places associated with the events of the epic.

When the author purports to study the inner life of the character, the most suitable mode of narration is the "stream of consciousness" technique. This mode of narration unfolds different layer of meaning and thus enables the writer to portray the characters in relation to both individual and collective experience. In the process of re-interpretation Bhyrappa has destroyed many myths which were invented to explicate some facts and incidents. He has divested even the god-characters of their divine aura brought them down to human level. The author has dismissed myths and miracles from his world. For instance it was not owing to the miraculous



powers of Krishna to revive the dead foetus in Uttaras' womb that she got a son to perpetrate the Kuru lineage but that she also had to undergo 'niyoga' ultimately.

The scope of this paper is limited to a study of the narration of three women characters, Kunthi, Gandhari and Draupadi. A close examination of the interior monologues of these characters shows that the author has a poetic conception of his characters, contrary to a popular image. The marital unhappiness, disappointments and suffering of these women characters are highlighted by the author.

A study of the flow of thoughts from Kunthi's mind reveals that she is just a normal woman with all passion, and prejudices. Kunthi is usually portrayed as an ideal spouse with remarkable devotion and loyalty to her husband. Such a portrayal overlooking her inner agonies denies the very existence of her problems. The disappointment of a woman married to an impotent husband is brought out by Bhyrappa. She has to conceal the revulsion she feels for her unattractive husband. With his unnamed skin disease. But Pandu living in a patriarchal society demands an impossible degree of devotion from her by citing Gandhari as a model to be emulated. But the reader is given a different picture of Gandhari.

Kunthi is a woman of flesh and blood who steals a few moments of pleasure during her 'niyoga' experience. Pandu wishes that she undergoes 'niyoga' to beget children to perpetuate the Kuru lineage with the stipulation that she should regard the 'gifter' as a parent. She felt like surrendering herself to the 'Deva-niyogi', thereby proving that the experience was very human. She could not keep herself away from the Deva-Niyogi the moment she conceived. "I whispered in his ear, 'Do not say it openly please. If once it is recognised, the king is sure to ask you to go back. He sighed and the embraced me with desperation' (77). Before her marriage to Pandu Kunthi had already been a victim of her adolescent passion and became an unwed mother. It was sage Durvasa to whom she bore her first-born Karna. Bhyrappa exposes the myth of immaculate conception resulting in the birth of Karna and views each and every incident in rational terms. Her temptations grew more when the second opportunity was given by the king. When Maruta, the army chief of Deva land was chosen to produce a mighty warrior son to Kunthi, she felt tempted to leave Pandu and live with Maruta (86). When Indra came to perform 'niyoga' on her she was fascinated by his incredibly handsome looks, and thought that "that handsome fellows' lechery would transport me beyond the mountain peaks into the skies above them' (94). She does not reveal her passion for Indra and makes Indra get consent from Pandu on the pretext of strengthening the ties between Devas and Pandu's sons.

Further Kunthi emerges as a jealous woman who would not let Madri have children outnumbering hers. Though by undergoing Sati to avoid a sense of guilt Madri willy nilly is elevated to the level of a devoted wife.

Kunthi is also seen as a prejudiced woman in her relationship with her daughters in law. She had contempt for the Rakshasa wife of Bhima and had a greater preference for Draupadi. Bima was urged to leave her in the forest and go the Aryan land with Kunthi. It was puzzling to Bhima "why mother who persuaded him not to reject Hidimbi's advances now had no sympathy for her". Bhima suffered from anguish that his "mother was unfair and even deceitful". Incidentally Hidimbi has to accept alien customs and practices including a change of her name thereby forgoing the identity her own name gave her.

It is an instance of irony that Kunthi who showed a marked preference for Indra over the other 'niyogis' expected Draupadi to treat her five husbands equally. Draupadi is forced to enter into a Time-share contract with her five husbands because of Kunthi's act of unfairness. The reader wonders if it is a vicarious sense of fulfilment to Kunthi that her daughter-in-law was in no way superior to her in having more than one husband or whether Kunthi is advocating the custom of the Devas who Bhyrappa sees as hill tribes. According to Devas a married girl is wife to all her husband's brothers Draupadi sees it as "an illusion natural for a woman who had seen the best part of her life without real marital life" (199).

Bhyrappas' delineation of Draupadis' character is quite realistic. To be the common wife of all the five brothers was a challenge to her, physically and mentally. Even in Vyas she is the first one to fall on the way to heaven because of her preference for Arjuna. If it is a sin to live one more than the other then Draupadi is a sinner. In Byrappa's handling of her character it is not Arjuna but Bhima who she loved more. She found Bhima to be her only refuge in her hours of need and they were many. He is the only one who can understand her half-expressed wishes thoughts and intentions "It was Bhima who worked himself to death to save her honour and modesty, after the game of dice when Dussasana stripped her saree, when Jayadratha wanted to carry her off in the forest and when Kichaka aspired for her" (135). The question of loving all her husband equally and all other related charges and accusations arise only in a patriarchal society. Draupadi is denied gender justice. Could Arjuna treat all his wives alike?

In Draupadis' reminiscences, the six years she had of 'normal' marital life is one of suffering. "Conception after conception. Children. Post natal period and again marital life". This "eighteen year old bubbling with life was transformed into an exhausted twenty four year old, a worn out cow". She recalled that it was "a suicidal onslaught on her body" to preserve the unity of



Pandava brothers. It is noteworthy that in Draupadis' revelations Yudhishtra does not emerge as an admirable character. Her unenviable marriage to five brothers is owing to Yudhishtra's weakness for dice-game and the unethical act of employing his wife as a stake in gambling. Dharmaraja supposed to be the embodiment of Dharma practically failed to uphold the values of Dharma. If he held up any Dharma at all it was the law of the dice game.

"this Dharmaraja who started his day with discussion with vedic experts didn't know this vedic dictum" fretted Draupadi.

"Who but Bhima could fathom my innermost desires ... this Dharma who had been the main source of all my miseries ceased to talk to me face to face of his own accord" (231).

Where was the question of following her mother in law's injunction to love all her husbands equally?

In the portrayal of Gandhari too, realistic dimensions are evident. Bhyrappa does not glorify her as an absolutely devoted wife of Dhritarashtra following the traditional husband - worshipping cult of Hindu women. Her marriage to Dhritarashtra was by force and not by consent, as all the Kuru marriages were. It was a race propped up by Bhishma's desperate efforts for his weak, sickly and handicapped brothers. From her reminiscences emerges the idea that Bhishma was unfair to women. To Krishna she expresses her inner - anguish, "The marriage was fixed; I thought of running away from home - even if I had fled I was sure that Bhishma and his soldiers could have razed our city to ground, alleging that my father had deliberately hidden me".

It is reported that Bhishma sent a large contingent of soldiers and cartloads of grains, utensils, ornaments and jewellery with the message that "these are token of friendship. But if you refuse to offer to my blind son a bride, there is the army, a token of my enmity (814)". Since their military strength could not match that of Bhishma's in Hastinavati, Gandhari's father was forced to consent to the marriage. Besides the bride-price he offered was irresistible. Incidentally the author evokes sympathy for Sakhuni who tried to avenge the wrong done to his sister.

Gandhari out of revulsion and bitterness took a strip of cloth and declared "if you insist on giving me away to that blind fellow, I shall never set my eyes on him". It is this vow that she kept up till the end. In the eyes of the world it created an illusion of impossible devotion to her husband. She recalled, that by heaping praise after praise a legend was built around her. (815). Intoxicated by the glory of the legend spun around her she forgot the real reason behind her self-imposed blindness. Yet, a grouse, very painful to

her was that her husband had never once asked her to remove the band and enjoy the gift of vision. Such a denial went only to nourish the ego of her husband.

Referring to the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra, she says "who can count the piglets, I bore only fourteen sons and a daughter. The rest were the sons borne by the servants". This is yet another instance where Bhyrappa uses the technique of demythologizing and dismisses the superhuman phenomenon of hundred sons springing to life from a hundred pots.

It is a matter of consolation to Gandhari even in moments of grief at the death of Kauravas.

The count of hundred is to the Maharajahs' credit. That is his account. But the sons borne by this servant-maid with the name Gandhari only fourteen. This is the size of my sorrow, a small one. Not as large as the Maharaja's (813).

Gandhari's voice of protest, quite significant, would have gone unheard in a society, used to hearing a voice of acquiescence from a woman.

The author has recreated these characters by presenting them in a new light. The word PARVA which is used by Vyasa to divide his monumental epic into different chapters has the implication of periodic change. The deeper implication of this is that Vyasa has portrayed the Life of humanity and types of characters keeping in mind the periodical changes that take place in them. Bhyrappa must have been surely aware of the meaning of the title he chose for his re-creation of the epic, strikingly appropriate.

Bhyrappa has admitted that he wanted to understand the Mahabharata with his 20th century mind. "I am sure writers of the coming centuries will also write on the Mahabharata and they will try to give a different interpretation of the Vyasa Bharata as if they know better than Vyasa did. This is the choicest, way in which any creative writer can pay respects and tribute to an earlier writer".

*Mrs. Prema Jagannathan*  
(Dept. of English)

### Bibliography

Primary Source — Bhyrappa S. L. Parva Trans. Ragavendra Rao K. New Delhi : Sahitya Akademy, 1994

Secondary Source — Dandekar, R. N., ed., The Mahabharata Revised New Delhi : Sahitya Akademy, 1990

## David Henry Hwang's 'M. Butterfly' - The Last Laugh

The final embarrassment of the west by the east has manifested itself in a deconstructivist reading of Giacomo Puccini's famous opera 'Madame Butterfly' (1904) David Henry Hwang's play revises Puccini's opera and deglamourizes the numerous fantasies that the western traveller possesses of the east. These fantasies have become stereotypes that fascinate through travel guide images, post card pictures, movies of James Bond and the farcical 'carry-on' series of Britain.

Puccini's opera installs the myth of the eastern woman as 'Butterfly' - the passive, slavish female. In his opera the heroine Cio Cio San is a sentimental tragic eastern woman who helplessly awaits the return of the western lover - Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton. Numerous romances of the east and west are woven around this fantasy - the demure, obedient oriental woman who embodies the perfect 'wife' for the imperial, adventurous, Occidental Lover. In Hwang's play Puccini's opera becomes a subversive instrument that tantalizes the west of its won creation. The play reinforces Edward Said's perspective of 'orientalism' as a philosophy of the occident that consequently dehumanized the east and the eastern woman. The play amalgamates the myth of the opera with a real life incident of a French diplomat whose liaison with a Chinese actress led to one stupefying revelation that the actress was not only a spy but a man ! Thus the play's strategic perspective is not expressed by a woman but by Song Liling, a Chinese actor disguised as a woman. In this Song Liling resembles Alexas of Dryden's play 'All for Love' who represents powerful androgynous discourse from the orient.

Song Liling's mask as the oriental woman awards him privileged access into the eastern and western, male and female spheres. This aspect is reinforced in the play when Song Liling states that an oriental "could never be completely a man". Song Liling's presence in the text as an 'actor' particularly in the opera affirms Edward Said's perspective of the east as theatre and spectacle and the west as the spectator and judge. The orient thus becomes a space where the occident plays with its imagination and expands its egotistical fantasy.

Hwang in his play envisages the Imperialist invasion in terms of racial and gender issues. He employs rape as Sara Suleri states, "the trope for the act of Imperialism". The final triumph of Song Liling coincides with the political and military victory of communist China over the U. S. forces in Vietnam. Rene Gallimard in the play represents the abashed Imperialist - the victim of his own discourse - 'Orientalism'. He belongs to the class of numerous Raj officers in India, the G. I.s in Vietnam and the perverted white



landowners of Africa. Gallimards' seduction by Song Liling is the seduction of the west by its own child - 'orientalism'. Song Liling gives Gallimard his own game of illusion - a game that every Western lover demands of the eastern woman - 'the Butterfly'. Song Liling in the play delineates the code and norms of the Occidental Imperial traveller:

"Song : ... as soon as a Western man comes into contact with the east - he's already confused. The West has sort of international rape mentality towards the east ... The West thinks of itself as masculine - big guns, big industry, big money - so the East is feminine - weak, delicate, poor ... but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom - the feminine mystique.

Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated - because a woman can't think of herself.. you expect Oriental countries to submit to your guns, and you expect Oriental women to be submissive to your men. That's why you say they make the best wives.."

Despite the fact that the play stretches its credibility, it is necessary to comprehend this tour de force as a representation of the shameful entrapment that all fabricants of myth eventually find themselves in.

The myths of the orient and the eastern woman tease and embarrass their own creators. The clever victim thus wins by playing the game of its oppressor. The innocent Cio Cio San reverses her innocuous stance to become the diabolical manipulative, androgynous spy in Song Liling and Pinkerton dwindles to become the ridiculous 'Monsieur' butterfly in Gallimard. This subversion exposes the dangerous, humiliating lapse that awaits all dominating, imposing philosophies and ideologies.

Hwang himself as the child of first-generation Chinese American parents asserts the need to establish the truth of relationships. The true nature of relationships not merely at the level of 'inter - cultures' and 'inter-nationals' but more necessarily at the level of man and woman.

Aparna John  
I M. A. English

### Bibliography

1. Henry Hwang, David., *'M. Butterfly'*, Marcia Registrata., U. S. A., 1989.
2. Said, Edward., *'Orientalism'*, Penguin Books, London., 1991.
3. Suleri, Sara., *'The Rhetoric of English India'*, The University of Chicago Press., U. S. A., 1992.

## A Video, a Fridge and a Bride

In the post - Sobha De world of Indian literature in English where sex, angst, glitzy life-styles and psychopathic caricatures are dragged into every narrative with grating regularity, Nirmala Aravind's 'A Video, a Fridge and a Bride' comes as a welcome respite from the resultant monotony. With no claims to being 'racy', 'passionate' or 'path-breaking' and without suffering in the least for not being so, the novel offers an experience although a limited one, of the highly insular world of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala. It is this genuine attempt at documenting an authentic experience that is the greatest attribute of Aravind's first novel.

The focus is in on the elaborate ritual of matchmaking with its concomitant degradation of the prospective bride, in this case Lissy, and the revolting system of exorbitant dowries which is no less reprehensible for being accepted and submitted to. Through this emphasis Aravind has laid bare the irony of the so-called progressive Syrian Christian community's narrow attitudes towards issues such as women's rights, dowry, marriage and individual freedom. Aravind's skill lies in the diffused, deflected and yet effective depiction of these social ills by using Lissy's life as the outer framework.

In its portrayal of Trivandrum and Travancore and the nitty gritty of daily life in a middle class family set up, 'A Video, a Fridge and a Bride' falls just short of being a social document. The looming, all pervasive presence of the church, the daily rituals, the celebration of Christmas and other traditional festivals, the various social gatherings and even the delicacies described, all add up to create an authentic picture of Syrian Christian family life.

Inspite of this awareness of the larger background of the community, the reader is never allowed to become distanced from Lissy and her immediate concerns. It is she who is the core from which emanate all the issues dealt with in the novel. Her simplicity and her innocence are so endearing that the later mingling of poisonous strains of world-weariness and cynicism in the quiet pool of her existence are all the more saddening. The loss of her innocence is almost heart-breaking even though it is inevitable Lissy comes across as a very credible character, able to take on the collective identity of the thousands of Malyalee girls one comes across in Kerala. Even the other characters in the novel especially Cheriachen, Kuttiamma, Lata and the outspoken Rengi are very well-defined and believable. They come together to create a world that seems so real that at the end of the story one is left with a feeling of having actually been a part of it.



In retrospect this effect becomes very mystifying when considered in the light of the language of the novel which is far from perfect. In fact at times the narrative is very choppy, bursting forth in a staccato rhythm as though it were a series of sporadic outbursts of a preoccupied mind. Many a time, the numerous instances of minor errors in the syntax and grammar jar the reader out of her absorption. At times the narrative tends to drag, though this is justifiable considering that Lissy's is a normal humdrum existence which cannot be sustained on a peak of feverish excitement and hence there are bound to be passages of time when nothing seems to be happening. Yet the overall effect is one of mesmerising beauty, though it would be in order for Aravind to polish her skills further.

Not the least among the novels attraction are the enchantingly vivid pictures of Kerala and its natural landscape. The living images of various social customs and the loving depiction of a traditional way of life serve to forge a bond of identification with any reader who has even a passing knowledge of Kerala and her customs.

In the final analysis, A Video, a Fridge and a Bride can be said to be a work that, if not of any lasting value, is still very definitely a good read.

*Reshma M. Trenchil*  
*III B. A. English*

### Bibliography

A Video, a Fridge and a Bride - By Nirmala Aravind (Rupa & Co. 1995)

## A Comparative Study of certain aspects of Anita Desai's 'Cry, The Peacock' & 'Fire on the Mountain'

Anita Desai, one of the most distinguished among the Indo-English writers is identified as a modern woman novelist. Being a post independent novelist, her concerns lay with the problems faced by women in the modern context of society. Women are portrayed in stifling conditions and though they are modern women, they are unable to reject wholly the mould they are cast into, by the society.

In "Fire on the Mountain" we have Nanda Kaul, the central figure on a journey of self-identification and self-realisation. "Cry, the Peacock" relates the story of a young girl Maya, obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster which cannot be averted. Both novels carry the story of marital discords. In "Cry, the Peacock" Maya and Gautama have opposing natures and attitudes to life and are not able to relate to each other. In the novel we have other couples like Mr. and Mrs. Lal, Leila and her husband who paint a very dismal picture of married life. Women seem to always be the ones putting up with their spouse's infidelities, inadequacies or failures. In "Fire on the Mountain", Nanda Kaul had to suffer with the humiliating knowledge of the fact that her husband carried on a life long affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian.

Nanda and Maya pass through similar ordeals, in life; they pretend to revel in loneliness yet secretly yearn to be loved and cherished. They are both running from a past that haunts them till the very end. They live in a world created entirely by their imagination. Maya had been from childhood wayward and high-strung. She herself says,

"My childhood was once in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural, and in which I lived as a toy, Princess in a toy world. But it was a pretty one" (Pg 89)

When the novel begins, Maya is seen at the brink of insanity. Her extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of loneliness. There is a strange melancholy which haunts her and is seen to haunt Nanda Kaul too. As Darshan Maini Singh points out, in Anita Desai's writings, loneliness is chiefly a lyric emotion, innocent of philosophical significance. Nanda Kaul seeks and retreats into a world of solitude and complete loneliness; Maya at several points in the novel, yearns for company to rid her of her insecurities. While Nanda Kaul's loneliness is a reaction to the previous over crowding in her life, Maya's is due to her inability to reach out to her husband, Gautama.

Nature plays an important part in both these novels. Images from nature form an integral part of the novel. Bird imagery is also prominent in both the novels. While Maya identifies herself with the peacocks whose cries remind her of the impending death that awaits her, the cuckoo in "Fire on the Mountain" makes Nanda Kaul aware that she cannot shy from the duty calls of her life for long. Raka identifies with the Eagle, and is often compared to insects like the grass hopper, the mosquito etc. Ila Das reminds Nanda Kaul of cackling geese.

Anita Desai gives a lot of importance to the past in both the novels. We are given a detailed account of the history of Carignano which was sought out as a refuge by all its residents, but which only acted as a catalyst in speeding up their lives to a fatal end. Carignano situated on a ridge, is exposed to the perils of nature. We hear of the insane housewives and governesses with infamous tempers. It is a haven for Nanda Kaul where she wishes to spend the rest of her life in solitude. But with the arrival of Raka and the visit of Ila, her illusions are all shattered forcing her to face reality. In "Cry, the Peacock" Maya reverts to the past, her life in her father's house, and comforts herself with fond memories. However, it is the incident with the astrologer, a fragment from the past which causes a tragic twist to her life.

Renunciation features in both the novels. Nanda Kaul renounces the world of duty, responsibility, affections and love to one where as the novelist says,

"all she wanted was to be alone". (Pg 17)

Nanda Kaul herself asks,

"Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more,  
I want nothing." (Pg 17)

This renunciation as we later see is forced upon her and is not of her choice. But Maya is alive through all her senses and lives intensely for each moment. She says,

"of the vivid, explosive, mobile life that I rejoiced-in the world of  
sounds, senses, movements, odours, colours, tunes". (Pg 92)

Gautama her husband, is remote, detached and achieves an inner calm. Maya inspires the same stability and peace - wisdom combines with calm. But her approach is an intensely sensuous one. Both Nanda Kaul and Maya seem desperate for an ideal existence. While Maya's extreme sensitivity pushes her into insanity, Nanda wakes from the delusion that she has already achieved it and is completely defeated by the effort.

In both these lyrical novels, Anita Desai has juxtaposed the different characters to bring out the harsh realities of life. She tries to powerfully convey the feeling that people are not what they want to be. She has used the interior monologue effectively for this purpose. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar while speaking about Anita Desai says,

“her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensitivity rather than the outer world of action.”(Pg 64)

It is no wonder hence that Anita Desai has been recognised as a writer with an original voice. She uses symbols for aesthetic purposes but they also represent characters in the novel. Her characters are multi-faceted personalities. Maya the sensitive, responding soul becomes the reason for her husband's death. Her obsession for life becomes a self-consuming passion which ultimately destroys Gautama and her mental state of balance. Nanda Kaul is not an escapist as we initially see her, but is a very courageous and duty-conscious woman. Anita Desai through these novels has displayed an exceptional talent and has made readers world over sit up in acknowledgement and appreciation of it.

*K. Jayashri*  
*II B.A. English*

#### Bibliography

1. Iyengar, Srinivasa K.R, Indian Writing in English, Asia Publishing house 1962.
2. Mukherjee, Meenakshi, Twice Born Fiction, Arnold Heinemann Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1971
3. Verghese, Paul. C. Problems of the Indian Creative Writer in English, Somaiya Publications Pvt. Ltd. 1971.



## 'Catcher in The Rye'

When Mark David Chapman shot and killed John Lennon, he had two things in his hands. One was his gun and the other was a copy of J.D. Salinger's 'Catcher in the Rye'. Since its publication in the early 1950's, this novel has created and continued to create waves in the literary world.

When a reader first encounters Holden Caulfield, he appears to be just a spoiled, precocious American teenager. Therefore, perceiving the protagonist as thus, one is tempted to dismiss the novel all together. But, as the onion has innumerable layers, so do the protagonist and the novel, for the protagonist and the novel are one.

Caulfield tells his story from the confines of his sick bed, looking back on three days of his life. On the surface, his tone and narrative are those of a casual story teller, Salinger intends it to be so. But the very fact that it seems to be such an "ordinary mind on an ordinary day" compels the reader to probe deeper, to look for some meaning or for some reason as to why Caulfield acts and thinks the way he does.

Caulfield meanders through his narrative and his story in actuality spans a lot longer than three days. He recalls a roommate with battered suitcases, a schoolmate who committed suicide and more than once, experiences with his siblings Allie and Phoebe. Capturing the very essence of a stream of consciousness novel, Caulfield says that he likes digressions - he fails one component of an English class because he cannot bring himself to shout "digression" in the course of a class room exercise. Salinger's use of language is akin to the stream of consciousness technique for the reader witnesses the going on in Caulfield's mind. Salinger offers no authorial interference by editing these thoughts in any way.

The classic anti-hero, the essential quality of Caulfield's person is characterized by what his room mate, Strad later says, "You don't do one damn thing the way you're suppose to". Caulfield deliberately goes out of his way to alienate himself from his peers, he avoids all hint of responsibility, and fails as school fencing manager, when he leaves all the equipment on a subway.

Going beyond the surface, he is a fascinating character, he is an outcast, and an outcast is someone who always captures the readers attention and imagination. There is always some aspect of the outcast that the reader can identify with. Caulfield himself in the novel, suggests an empathy with an outcast from the Bible, with a lunatic named Legion, living in the tombs. Like



Legion, Caulfield has many an evil spirit to exorcise - the demons of fate and death, the demons of emptiness and meaninglessness, the demons of guilt and condemnation, the demon of despair and the demon of jealousy.

Caulfield is obsessed with death - the death of his brother Allie who died from leukaemia and of James Castle a boy from one of his former schools, who committed suicide. This is linked with the picture Caulfield has of himself as a Saviour ... a "catcher in the rye" who prevents little children from falling off a cliff.

In the course of a conversation with Phoebe, he reveals that the "catcher of the rye" is all he really wants to be in life. But Caulfield himself is tantalizingly poised on the edge of some cliff. He is not simply a precocious American teenager, but a disturbed one, who does not know where he is or where he wants to be headed. It is only Phoebe's extreme decision to go with him into the heart of the country that makes him change his mind - if not for his own sake, then most definitely for hers. Far from being a catcher himself it appears, ironically, that Caulfield is the one character who needs someone to catch him. In the persons of Phoebe and Antolini one wonders if he does have the people he needs, and Salinger, by his very inconclusiveness, leaves his protagonist still poised at the end of the novel.

Antolini expands his lecture to his former pupil with a quotation from Wilhelm Stekel, a psychoanalyst and a colleague of Freud. "The mark of an immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one." While standing on the edge of the cliff, Caulfield seems to be willing to sacrifice his own life in order to preserve all that he perceives to be innocent and good. The only characters in the novel that he genuinely cares for are Phoebe and Allie, both representing childhood, and therefore, all that is innocent and good.

The 'fall' in the "Catcher in the Rye" can also be a fall from childhood into adulthood, all that Caulfield terms "phony". Therefore by being the "catcher in the rye", he is preventing children from falling into adulthood. But Holder Caulfield as a sixteen-year old cannot stand on the edge of the cliff forever and be eternally a man-child. He has to fall into adulthood no matter how "phony" it is.

Caulfield becomes Salinger's weapon against society. His "phony" is a statement against all obscenity, absence of love and the pretensions in human relationships. Caulfield is a rebel. The language (though it seems harmless today) was profane by the standards of people in the 1950's and the book was even banned because of it. Salinger, however, by using profanity was

protesting against it. His language is authentic, characteristic of any teenager. It would have been unrealistic if Caulfield's had been the language of an adult for it would render his protest against "phony" society useless.

Holden Caulfield is not a role model parents may wish to have for their children; with his aimlessness and penchant for violence. But he is someone in whom many teenagers and even adults can find solace, for he articulates several common desires, passions, fears and inadequacies.

Salinger does not give his novel a concrete solution. His protagonist does seek psychiatric help, and is preparing to start school again in Fall and nobody, not even Caulfield himself, knows if he will cope. But everyone hopes he will.

*Meera Jacob*  
*Apurva Natraj*  
*II B. A. (Lit.)*