Chapter Five

Summation

“Today we can no longer deny him an honourable place in the aristocracy of letters” (Jackson 302).

Guy de Maupassant and Sundara Ramaswamy are men from different countries and cultural backgrounds and they are writers with different dispositions but what brings them together is their materialist view of reality. In line with their materialist paradigm of knowledge these writers are seen to conform to the rational-empirical tradition stemming from eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Their men and women are so conceived as to be concretized. Their personalities and the events of their lives are wholly shaped by the larger social forces in which their existences are situated. In their realistically fashioned fiction one sees individuals in conflict with their social system, their family structure and their cultural mores.

The investigation done here impels the scholar to see the necessity for modern contemporary readers to place Sundara Ramaswamy on a par with Maupassant and place them among our classic writers. In the latter half of the nineteenth century Maupassant, guided by Gustave Flaubert, rose to the stature of global writers like Merimee or Moliere and possessed profound
knowledge of French society and culture which is testified by the comprehensive gallery of the portraits provided by his fiction. In the latter half of the twentieth century Ramaswamy, pursuing the path paved by Pudumaipittan, nurtured his literary talent as to rise to the rank of a genius and gained a deep insight into the ethos of Tamil society which is seen by the kind of fiction he has produced and the complex characters he has created. The emphasis here has been on the striking similarities between the thematic choices in the stories of the two writers. Their greatness lies in the portrayal of emotions of people one meets everywhere – the same sensibilities, the same curiosities, the same inclinations, moods and responses, to say nothing of one's half-formed thoughts expressed and confirmed. The thesis seeks to point out that Maupassant has not become passé with the passage of time and that Ramaswamy really counts as a literary giant despite the denial of recognition which he is due for. The success of their writing is largely due to their ability to analyse experiences without the aid of sentimental stuff and expose the realities of life without exaggeration of any kind.

One could disagree with the materiality of the life they portray and its primacy over morality but even their detractors have to admit that as portrayers of life these two writers are “In search of width and depth,” to borrow the words from the title of a prose work by Ramaswamy. They are seen to have an equal capacity for introspection and external observation
which enables them to present their vision of reality without a biased slant. The naked reality of human sensuality is brought out with sympathy by Maupassant and with humour by Ramaswamy. The characters they depict are borrowed from real life and one sees how they are subjected to psychological scrutinies. Ironies in life and human situations or shifts in viewpoints have fired the imagination of both the writers. What the two writers seek to achieve are clarity of thought, logic in argument and perspicuity and persuasiveness of manner. But when one compares them in terms of the themes they deal with, one finds that there is simplicity in the French writer while there is complexity in the Tamil writer. Ramaswamy’s stories are mostly more intellectual in their appeal and open ended leaving room for more than one interpretation, which “Oru Storyin” bears out. Maupassant, unlike Ramaswamy, does not use fiction as a vehicle for social criticism. His interest is seen rather in human relationships and individual lives, human follies and foibles. Maupassant’s situations and characterization might lack the kind of subtlety and depth seen in Ramaswamy’s fiction, but their power to entertain the reader is quite astonishing.

Maupassant obviously expects to be viewed as a realistic but delightful analyst and reporter of life’s realities whereas Ramaswamy assumes the role not only of an analyst or reporter but of an educator as well. When one reads the stories of the two authors and gets to know their private lives and cultural
milieux, one gets the impression that most of the incidents depicted by them are transferred from their own lives or the lives of persons with whom they have moved on intimate terms. The two writers are seen to converge again on the point that their stories evoke an ironic vision in their readers rather than pity even in the worst of situations, as "Thiraikal" or "Ball-of-Fat" goes to prove. Maupassant in the nineteenth century was initially despised by academic critics but admired by lowbrow readers, but Ramaswamy's case is different in that he has been recognized by academic critics while ordinary readers tend to shy away from his work which they obviously feel is beyond their comprehension. However, the tide is turning with the common reader gaining a sound knowledge of Ramaswamy's fictional output and making a fair assessment of his work in comparison with those of his peers.

In the introductory chapter the title of the dissertation is first explained. The genesis of the short story at the global level is then touched on. Next this chapter surveys French as well as Tamil short fiction and profiles contemporary French and Tamil literary backgrounds of the two authors. Thereafter Maupassant and Ramaswamy are profiled with their major publications. How their respective audiences received them is shown along with a note on the school the two writers belong to. A note on comparative study and its relevance is also given as a study of this kind falls within the domain of comparative literature.
As the two authors here have a materialist view of life and as they situate their characters in a worldly milieu, the second chapter has been titled "Materiality". It has three divisions subtitled "Kama and Carnality", "Sensual Obsession and Sexual Orgy", "Loneliness and Lovelessness". The subjective and objective presentations of the French and Tamil writers here gain through realism greater sensitivity and immediacy.

The first section of the chapter brings out the deep insight of the two writers into human sexuality. While Maupassant seems to accept human carnality and celebrate its predominance in the naturalist ambience created by Zola, Ramaswamy in the modernist context of realism seems to dwell satirically on its excess and sometimes to expatiate on its negative outcome. Their stories like "Magnetism" and "Oru Storyin" drive home their view that most people are basically sensual not only in their instincts but in their ideations as well. Both the writers here seek to discredit the "incredible things" of the spirit and marvellous appearances which are attributed to forces beyond the laws of nature and science (522). However, the French writer's story here demonstrates the veracity of Freud's theory that the suppressed segment of the mind which he identifies with "id" finds its disguised outlet in dreams. The sexual instinct or libido is seen to be analogous to hunger. How id or kama dominates the dreamer here is seen as the narrator of "Magnetism" goes on to say how he instinctively sought fulfilment of his irresistible drive.
"Oru Storyin" creates the context to portray modern humans' propensity to sexualise everything they see. The apparition reportedly sighted at Munivar Santhippu can be seen as an image of the sensually bosomy woman, if one is to interpret it on the basis of Freudian symbology. The elderly educated man in the Tamil story who reports his strange experience and those who gather to witness the apparition are the victims of a culture which has obviously rejected sex as a natural part of one's physical and mental constitution, a culture whose moral concepts suppress too severely natural human impulses. The Freudian id could be identified with what the Hindus consider to be Kama. When the ego or reality principle does not serve as the intermediary between the id and superego or what the Hindus term Dharma, a kind of imbalance results between the head and the heart.

The second section seeks to point out that humans are no better than animals when they are obsessed by erotic images or when their basic passions dominate. Owing to cultural divergences one finds that some of Ramaswamy's protagonists like the nameless narrator in "Bodhai" are seen to be obsessed with sensual or salacious visions or images while most of Maupassant's central characters like Wanda von Chabert in "In Various Roles" are seen to revel in sexual orgies. "There is a void in every human being", as the Tamil writer says. Some seek to fill it with "sexual adventures, while others fill it with the pursuit of religious studies, incessant prayers or
some other extreme activity” (already cited). The French characters are seen to enjoy paradisacl pleasures provided by Kama and Artha, two of the four goals of human life, according to Hindus. In the senile hero of “Muttaikaari” one could see the conflict between the lustful longing of the mind and the powerlessness of the body to find fulfilment. But one does not find in the French fiction this kind of elaborate psychological analysis of a mind’s craving for gratification of an unfulfilled wish as this kind of hankering is instantly gratified because the social system in France is much less regimented. The unnamed heroine in “Graveyard Sirens” could be dubbed the female counterpart of the Tamil womaniser.

In the third section one could see how loneliness in the midst of lovelessness inevitably breaks out in the course of certain French as well as Tamil stories here. Most of the men pursue pleasures perceiving in them the highest goal of their earthly existence but they finally realize that their search for satisfaction through material pleasures is only an illusion, for Maupassant says, “Each one of us forms for himself an illusion through which he views the world . . . .” (“Guy de Maupassant,” Etext). So in the end one sees how isolation assails the introspective individuals in their fictional world and how some of their protagonists prefer to end their existence rather than to endure their lonely and loveless plight is seen. Maupassant’s story “He” and Ramaswamy’s story “Vazhi” read like the reflections of existentially lonely
men on their own inner life. Both the texts make their readers re-experience the fears that their imaginative minds subject them to. Lovelessness in its more unbearable form leads its victims in "Kolam" and "Suicides" to end their existence. Both the writers are known to have turned to their mother in their loneliest hours, as is evident from Ramaswamy's stories like "Jannal". Stanley Jackson writes of Maupassant, "His mother alone understood his loneliness and it was to her he turned when Paris saddened and depressed him" (49). Jackson adds that Maupassant's "despair went deeper than a mere horror of loneliness. Lacking all faith in the hereafter, he was obsessed with the thought of death" (211).

The Tamil writer, like the French writer, apparently shakes the whole scale of traditional values to their foundations where man-woman intimacy is concerned. This aspect of their fiction is focussed in chapter three entitled "Morality". Its three divisions are subtitled "French Perceptions and Tamil Perspectives", "Male Callousness and Female Distress" and "Social Prescriptions and Individual Responses". The two writers converge in their view that modern emotional life is not healthy because it is inhibited by restrictive familial and social customs, which build up barriers between the head and the heart. These writers drive home through their protagonists the fact that old rules of morality fail to bind the modern man or woman who needs and demands a larger latitude of conduct. However, basic human values
that promote harmony and happiness through male-female relationship are seen to be given primacy over religious edicts. The French writer makes his hero in "A New Year's Gift" say "Marriage, which has a great social value, a great legal value, possesses in my eyes only a very slight moral value, taking into account the conditions under which it generally takes place" (868). Ramaswamy makes one see in what a culturally regimented ambience a South Indian Hindu lives when the author makes the narrator of "Thiraikal" tell his wife, "It is a land which forbids one to take out even one's younger sister. Those seeing her will take her for his wife" (already cited).

These writers might shock prudish minds but so did Emile Zola who was "accused of being a scavenger and a vulgar sensationalist" in the words of Stanley Jackson (95). One constantly finds not only human relationships breaking down but also values built on social consensus. Breakdown of society's traditional norms and established ways of life could be seen as one of the constantly recurring themes in their fiction. One can say that few other writers have written with less bias in favour of either good or evil and with less dominating theory — philosophical, ethical or social. Maupassant does not seem to preach anywhere; he simply reveals. Ramaswamy, on the other hand, makes his revelations sharply satirical or humorous. "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous,/ there shall be no more cakes and ale?" seems to be
their question to priggish persons like Malvolio in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (2.3.123-24).

The first section here seeks to highlight Maupassant’s view that the moral code helps one only to suppress one’s deeply felt feelings but the writer makes one see how the floodgates of passion are opened at times and how miserably they fail to be restrained then by rational or moral considerations. Ramaswamy in stories like “Akam” or “Thiraikal”, like Maupassant recognises the bestial element in human nature, but he, unlike the French writer, shies away from explicit treatment of sexual deviations from the norm. However, the two writers seem to subscribe to the view that sexual purity or its absence does not necessarily make an individual moral or depraved which their stories like “Ball-of-Fat” and “Bhaktha Thulasi” go to prove.

The second section seeks to show the two writers’ sensitive depiction of the distress of women who get a raw deal due to the callous or cruel demeanour of men. Stories like “Rosalie Prudent” on the French side and “Pillai” on the Tamil side bear it out. In both their stories they project the double moral standards practised by men and the mistreatment meted out to women. The woman in Maupassant’s “Useless Beauty” is seen to suffer marital captivity but the woman in Ramaswamy’s “Pattuvaada” experiences in official custody male sexual aggression. While the French writer with a feminist slant makes the marital prisoner emerge out of her “feminine” phase,
cross the “feminist” stage and pass on into the “female” phase, the Tamil writer with less feminist sympathy leaves the victimized woman in her helplessly feminine phase. Although the articulate female protest has not its parallel on the Tamil scene yet Ramaswamy seeks to correct some of the false perspectives which the Eastern assumptions about womanhood, sex, love and society have combined to create.

In the third section the two writers’ attempts to make their readers look at themselves critically from fresh and different points of view are seen. These writers do not accept any dogma or what one can term a “single truth”. They question the validity of traditional moral codes only to make the reader look for a higher moral truth that promotes human harmony. However, both the writers accept the materialist view that humans are not creatures of God but only earthly beings slightly above the animal level whom no moral prescriptions of society can completely rein in. They do not at any point preach but only reveal their familiarity with human life and their insight into human nature.

Both the writers are seen to have a profound understanding of the incongruities of human life – whether they happen to deal with the conflicts between husbands and wives, youth and age, artifice and nature, professional and domestic life, master and servant, nobleman and peasant, or even between moral principle and relativism. In the fourth chapter entitled “Ironic” the
scholar tries to define irony and identify three of its main forms in its three sections subtitled "Irony of Situation", "Irony of Life" and "Romantic Irony". The main features of the three kinds of irony are focussed with examples from the fictional pieces comparatively studied here. Irony is seen to make it possible for a writer to suggest meanings without stating them. Just by juxtaposing two discordant facts in the right place, a writer can cause a current of meaning to flow between them. One does not need to be told, for example, that Mariammal in Sundara Ramaswamy's "Thiraikal" is lustfully eyed and unconsciously coveted even by the narrator. Similarly, the reader of Maupassant's story "In the Moonlight", hardly needs to be told that the priest, Abbe Marignan, has so far been deceived by faith where beauty of life in this world is concerned.

The characters discussed in the first section here want things to happen the way they suppose, but the situations that arise go to prove how human intentions, delusions, expectations and sense of propriety clash with reality. Situational irony seen in the stories discussed here brings out the lack of human insight or foresight which accounts for the contradiction between human thought or word and deed or action. What a character says here is undermined by what he or she does or says elsewhere, as in Maupassant's story, "The Duel", and Ramaswamy's "Meikaathal". The fictional writer finds the irony of situation the most important tool to get across his perception
of life and human character. The reader of a situational irony sees the victim behaving in confident unawareness of the real state of affairs as in the case of M. Lantin in Maupassant's story, "The False Gems". The discrepancy between a fortune-hunter's desire and disappointment makes up the narrative strand of Maupassant's story, "A Fair Exchange". The ironic shift from the hero's experience of ecstasy to that of agony leads him to see that conjugal happiness does not come from mere possession of wealth, but from mutuality of love and absolute trust in marriage. In "Yethirkollal" Ramaswamy presents events and situations that turn out contrary to the expectation of the narrator and his wife. What the author drives home is the sad fact of life that the things humans expect to be most useful to them at critical junctures tend to be least useful and even most harmful.

The kind of irony dealt with in the second section refers to the limits of human meaning or vision. This kind of irony is seen where humans do not see what they do or the results of their actions or the forces that upset their apple cart. The ironies of life have greatly appealed to both the writers. This form of irony is demonstrated with dramatic effect by Maupassant in "The Necklace" where the wife of a clerk living in genteel poverty borrows a diamond necklace from a friend to impress the people at a ball, loses it, buys another to replace it, and is condemned to ten years of misery as the couple scrimp and save to pay off their debt only to make the distressing discovery in
the end that the original jewel was not diamond but a meretricious one "not worth over five hundred francs!" The very title of Ramaswamy's story, "Muthalum Mudivum" is indicative of life's irony. It signifies that the promise at the beginning of the story finds its fulfilment in a totally different fashion. The heroine's dream of marrying her wealthy lover ends ironically with her becoming his father's second wife. Thus her childhood wish of living in the palatial house comes true, but she never dreamt that she would be cast into the role of her Rasa's stepmother. The ironies of life seen in their stories here focus on the circumstances that turn out to be beyond human control. Both the authors make use of irony in this form to underscore human limitations in life.

The third section seeks to show how irony in its romantic form enables a writer to transcend subjectivistic barriers and view things from a different or an alternative viewpoint. The artist who looks at life from such an angle sees both the mean and magnificent things which humans do on earth. This, according to Goethe, "is the mark of a real artist," as Muecke reports in Irony and the Ironic (already cited). This kind of irony is not just showing the opposite of what is said or done. It is rather the expression of both sides or viewpoints at once in the form of contradiction or paradox. Maupassant's story, "Madame Tellier's Excursion", is an example of what one might call romantic irony. In it the romantic and the realistic or the spiritual and the
sensual commingle. The romantic ironist in Maupassant makes the priest in
the story called "In the Moonlight" realize that spiritual ardour and physical
passion are co-existent in God's scheme of things. Ramaswamy in stories like
"Mei + Poi = Mei" and "Kovil Kaalayum Uzhavu Maadum" resorts to this
form of irony. In the former story he shows the reader how truth, in order to
be saleable, has to be adorned with lies. He tries to hold that human values
have changed as human attitudes towards life and society have undergone
alterations. In the case history of the lawyers cited here, one is made to see
how Gandhian values are preserved in a rather paradoxical fashion and
practised in a parodical manner. What the romantic ironist here strives to do
is to prove that truth and falsehood are not only co-existent but
complementary at times. What the priest in "In the Moonlight" realizes
through an epiphanic experience is logically analysed in this Tamil story and
accepted as the reality of existence – contradictions do exist and demand to be
seen as parts of the whole. In the latter story referred to, the Tamil writer like
the French writer, believes that life cannot be contained within the boundaries
of human assumptions, for it defies all calculations. Here the author gets
across the ironic fact which militates against the morally reassuring allocation
of divine punishment to the indolent and reward to the industrious. Romantic
irony thus enables one to see realities on either side.

Irony is seen to provide the writers with the means to unify the apparent
contradictions of human experience. Irony provides the reader with the contrast between reality and the fallibility of human perception, which forms the basis of the fictional realms created by Maupassant and Ramaswamy. The reader with an ironic vision perceives here the reverse of what really appears to be at first sight. The unexpressed meaning delivered by the author is missed by the reader who is not "ironically developed," to borrow the words of Kierkegaard (already cited).

What the two writers have produced are shown to be the kind of fiction which calls for serious critical attention. It is hoped that this study will give its readers a deeper insight into Sundara Ramaswamy's mindset and enable them to make a rational assessment of his short-fictional output in comparison with the stories of global writers like Guy de Maupassant. There may be many readers like this scholar who instinctively compliment Ramaswamy on his literary art borrowing the words of the Russian lady who made Maupassant her literary idol and idolized him with this tribute:

"I read your works, I might almost say, with delight. In truth to Nature, which you copy with religious fidelity, you find an inspiration that is truly sublimer, while you move your readers by touches of feeling so profoundly human, that we fancy we see ourselves depicted in your pages, and love you with an egotistical love." (qtd. in Jackson 198)