Chapter Three

Morality

“Elders have evolved a system under which a man and a woman cannot meet without witnesses. They have erected barbed fences to keep burning the fire of chastity. It is the land which found the easy way of protecting the wife’s fire of purity by thrusting her into the fire on her husband’s death” (Ramaswamy, “Thiraikal Aayiram” 352).

Guy de Maupassant and Sundara Ramaswamy alike seek to shake the whole scheme of conventional values to their foundations. Their progressive ideas tend to upset the complacency of conservatives by challenging their set mores and fixed modes of looking at reality. For them both modern intellectual life is barren because it is cut off from its affective roots. Modern emotional life is not healthy because it is smothered by inhibitive socio-familial conventions and institutions. These customs and conventions build up barriers between the intellectual and the sensual, the social and the personal, the male and the female or between the mind and the heart. What these writers aim to give out is their awareness of the fact that conventional rules of morality cannot bind the modern man or woman who needs and demands a larger latitude of conduct. Their belief is that human
consciousness needs to be widened, and not repressed, for release from the prison of limited false set of concepts. Human values that promote harmony and happiness in man-woman relationship are seen to be given primacy over religious edicts which regulate or restrict conjugal life. The French writer says through Jacques de Randal in “A New Year’s Gift” what he thinks of marriage without love:

“Therefore, when a woman, united by this lawful bond but having no attachment to a husband whom she cannot love, a woman whose heart is free, meets a man for whom she cares and gives herself to him, when a man who has no other tie takes a woman in this way, I say that they pledge themselves toward each other by this mutual and free agreement much more than by the ‘Yes’ uttered in the presence of the mayor.

“I say that if they are both honorable persons their union must be more intimate, more real, more healthy, than if all the sacraments had consecrated it. (868)

Ramaswamy makes one see in what a culturally regimented ambience a South Indian Hindu lives when the author makes the narrator of “Thiraikal” (“Many Masks”) tell his wife:

We met; but we could not have a long chat. This is the land of Bharath – particularly its southern part and I am the sole son of a
Hindu family governed by its eternal religion. It is a land which forbids one to take out even one’s younger sister. Those seeing her will take her for his wife. (352)

Maupassant’s close association with Zola and the Naturalist school and his explicit treatment of human sexuality prompted most western critics to point out that “Maupassant lacked one quality indispensable to the production of truly artistic work, viz: an absolutely normal, that is, moral, point of view;” but one has only to reread with an open mind his carefully written stories to see that they are “sermons more forcible [sic] than any moral dissertation could ever be.” Tolstoy is said to have commented on Uni Vie thus, “I find in the book, in almost equal strength, the three cardinal qualities essential to great work, viz: moral purpose, perfect style, and absolute sincerity.... Maupassant is a man whose vision has penetrated the silent depths of human life, and from that vantage-ground interprets the struggle of humanity” (“Guy de Maupassant,” Etext). In the interview held by G. David Milton, Sundara Ramaswamy says, “All along I have tried my level best to create a parallel culture giving importance to the basic values of life” (The New Indian Express 2). The culture that Ramaswamy rejects is the one conditioned by the ethos of the Tamils which seek to burn Khushboos of the fashionable film world at least in their effigies.
French Perceptions and Tamil Perspectives

A scrutiny of the stories of the French and the Tamil writers helps one not only to discern distinctive points of similarity but also striking differences in their perceptions of the repercussions of conventional ethical injunctions. An analysis of their moral viewpoints presented in their stories studied here brings out the occidental and the oriental cultures that shaped their attitudes towards human issues. An attempt is made in this section to bring out the similarity of their treatment of illicit sex by the mother and the filial fury it provokes. The trauma that an extramarital affair produces on the familial plane is viewed from two culturally different angles.

One sees that although perceptions of morality in the permissive Western society generally differ from those in the relatively strait-laced Eastern social milieu, the psychological trauma that children pass through when their mothers form different sexual relationships is seen to be similar. Maupassant in his story “Mother and Son” and Ramaswamy in his story “Akam” (“Mind”) demonstrate this fact of life through the furious flight of the seventeen-year old son in the former story and the fatal fulminations of the school-going daughter in the latter one. Their presentation of the situations is realistic and brings out their deep knowledge of the way children react to moral frailties of their parents. The traumatic moments in both the texts are so
dramatically contrived as to reveal adult sensuality and adolescent sensitivities.

Maupassant presents the story from the point of view of an internal narrator named M. le Brument, who participates in the most crucial part of the story as an "illustrious advocate." It is after a dinner that the story is narrated by him to his friends. The story is said to be "one of those simple and ferocious dramas of ordinary life ..." which has to do with the disappearance of the protagonist's son under what the author calls "peculiarly terrible circumstances." Six months ago, the narrator was summoned to the house of a very rich, old and dying woman for the execution of her will. She entrusted to him the tiring task of finding her son after her death and told him her "horrible story." Before her marriage she had loved a young man, whose suit her parents could not accept as he was rather poor. Before long she married a rich man through what she calls her "ignorance, through obedience, through indifference, as young girls do marry" (819). Her husband died in the course of a few years after the birth of their son, Jean.

The man she had loved before marriage also got married to another woman, but he was sad at not being free to marry her now. He, however, sympathized with the widow and won back her heart. The woman confessed to the narrator on her deathbed, "What could I do? I was alone, so sad, so solitary, so hopeless! And I loved him still" (819). The man finally became
her lover. She asked the narrator in a candid tone, “Do you think it could be otherwise when two human beings are drawn toward each other by the irresistible force of a passion by which each of them is possessed?” She asks him if it is possible for a woman not to yield “to the prayers, the supplications, the tears, the frenzied words” of her lover on “bended knees.” The woman became his mistress yielding to the lust of her flesh and played the role of his mistress along with the pretence of his wife’s friend through what she calls her “greatest weakness” and “greatest piece of cowardice.” They together brought up her son into an intelligent man with “sense and resolution.” Her son “looked upon him as an old, loyal and devoted comrade of his mother, as a sort of moral father, tutor, protector” (820).

One evening all three of them were to dine together as it was one of the main festive occasions in her life. She waited for both of them to join her and wondered which of them would be the first. She told the narrator that the first to arrive was her lover whom she received with a hug and he “drew his lips toward” her “in a long, delicious kiss.” All of a sudden, her son came on the scene and stood there staring at them. There was “a moment of atrocious confusion.” The mother instinctively drew back, holding out her hands in what she later termed “supplication” (820). The boy left the scene and could never be seen or located. The mother sank into a mood of despair and wanted “to disappear forever” (821). Her lover stood looking at her scared and had no
courage to approach or speak to her lest the boy should return. Finally, the lover made up his mind to go in search of Jean and to make the situation clear to him.

The mother waited “in a distracted frame of mind” all night for the return of her son but in vain (821). She got terribly sick with brain fever and when she regained consciousness, she could see only her lover by her bedside. She forbade him to see her as he was not able to find her son. She never again allowed him to meet her as she expected her son to return at any moment. She poured out her suppressed emotions to the narrator saying, “Can you understand this monstrous punishment, this slow, perpetual laceration of a mother’s heart?” There is pathos in her words, “it is about to end, for I am dying. I am dying without even again seeing either of them” (822).

Maupassant’s profound insight into human nature is seen in his sympathetic treatment of the woman, whose son with his furious desertion of her virtually stones her to death with her intensity of anguish which he could scarcely figure out. In unbearable agony she asks the narrator if he sensed “into what depths of despair, into what tortures, he cast” her while she “was still in the prime of life.” The author’s knowledge of human sexuality could be seen in the words, “every day heaps of dramas like this are being enacted all around us!” The author’s sympathy for the condemned mother is
expressed when the narrator characterizes her fugitive son as "that criminal son" (822).

This kind of authorial comment is seen nowhere in the Tamil writer's story, but the cruel social condemnation of a morally regimented society is seen in it through the words of the housemaid, Kuppachi Paati, "Look here, Ambu, whatever you say, that black-skinned man's frequent visits here do not look nice. What business has he in a house where there is no male member. There's no end to the families he has ruined. It is an open secret. Society is a terrible gossip" (79). The housewife here, Ambujam, lives alone with her school-going daughter, Janu, as her husband works away in Calcutta. One of Janu's friends confides to her that she is forbidden to visit her house as her mother is a "bad woman" and the doctor going there is a "bad man" (93).

One could interpret the title of Ramaswamy's story, "Akam" as "Mind" since most of the story filters through the psyche of a little girl named Janu. The author strikingly portrays the terrible effects of her mother's extramarital relationship on her. The psychological trauma that the girl passes through at different stages is made discernible to the reader as the author lays bare the mind of the victim. The child's longing for full possession of her mother's love and attention is seen at the outset. Janu's search for her mother and her desire to be warmly received by her mother on getting back from school are
described. The mother’s denial of her usual maternal attention to her daughter and her gradual retreat out of the girl’s world are next seen.

The plot of the story progresses as the girl tries to win back her mother and fears her being snatched away by her lover. In the next phase, the girl begins to hate the doctor who monopolizes her mother’s mind. She refuses to accept a lift from the doctor. She tells him a lie to prevent his meeting her mother in the evening. When he offers to take Janu and her mother to the movies, the girl tells him, “Uncle! Mother will not be at home in the evening!” (88). On coming to know of it, her mother punishes her. But the girl fiercely talks back. When the girl refers to the scandal spread about her and the doctor, Ambujam begins to be jittery and hesitates to face the girl.

The climax is reached with the illness of the girl and the decision of the woman to give up her affair with the doctor and the man’s decision to quit the place. But the man is seen dragging the repentant woman upstairs for making love once more before leaving for good. The girl bolts the door behind them and sets fire to the car of the man to punish him for trying to grab her mother out of her world. In the end, the fire of her fury reduces the house to ashes and its occupants, including herself, to three skeletons.

Maupassant’s protagonist believes that passion is more powerful than reason and that humans are largely creatures of circumstances. The code of honour or morality helps the suppression of deeply felt human emotions but
when circumstances open the floodgates of passion, they could hardly resist it and remain restrained by rational or moral considerations. The self-punished and repentant woman asks the lawyer, "Do you believe, monsieur, that it is always in our power to resist, that we can keep up the struggle forever and refuse to yield to the prayers, ..." (820).

In either story there is a conflict between maternal love and sexual passion. The widow, here like the Tamil housewife, realizes that she "should not have let him come so often, seeing that he was married" but unlike the reticent Tamil woman, Maupassant's Frenchwoman admits that she "had not enough will power to prevent him from coming" (820). Whenever the lover returned in either case, they both forgot questions of right and wrong. In the midst of their loneliness neither woman could help straying into the territory of sex outside the limits set by society.

Similar in theme is Ramaswamy's story which, when juxtaposed with Maupassant's story, demands to be more appropriately titled "Mother and Daughter". One tends to ask if Ramaswamy sympathizes with the woman who finds herself in a similar situation seeking in her solitary life the companionship of a paramour.

In tune with the cultural values of the east, Ramaswamy apparently makes his protagonist out to be the transgressor, but the French writer, conditioned by the liberal cultural values of the west, makes his protagonist
out to be one more sinned against than sinning. Maupassant’s protagonist tells the narrator that a woman will only “drive to despair” her adored lover if she is “to be guided by a worldly code of honor” (820). In Ramaswamy’s story society views with pity the anguished girl and despises the violator of this code of conduct. The girl’s friend’s grandmother when restrained asks, “Did I ask anything wrong? She can keep a stranger in the house where there is no male member; but can’t I refer to it? There is One viewing the whole affair. Humans forget that. What a pity. The sight of the girl’s face saddens me” (95).

The maintenance or loss of chastity continues to make or mar a woman’s life in this land of Kannagi even today as it did in the France of Maupassant’s day. So a peep into the response of the guilty mother is not seen to be pertinent in the Tamil text. It is for the feminist reader to scrutinize the social structure that denies the sinning mother the space she needs for articulation of her viewpoint.

In “Thiraikal” the narrator’s wife, at the end of their chat about the sexual misconduct of the bigwigs in a local club, asks her man, “What do you think? Would these things ever continue to happen in the world? Or will the world transcend all these things and go up?” The narrator answers, “I don’t know what to say. I have been pondering over how we continue to be in this state in spite of all our moral sermons, and inculcation of virtues and loud
speeches on deeds of good and evil.” The narrator’s wife has no doubt that these oppressors will suffer terrible punishments. None of them will have a peaceful death. But the narrator points out that

Experience has proved the other way round. People like these blissfully die of heart attacks. Those who live saintly lives are afflicted with cancer, boils and leprosy, rot and become emaciated through death in life. Nothing can be said with certainty. There is confusion all around. (363)

Here Ramaswamy strips every man of his mask and exposes what male psyche in the area of sexuality is like. The story of Mariyamma agitates the narrator to such an extent as to make his writer friend comment, “This matter would not have agitated your mind so much if you had taken her out to a hotel somewhere at your first encounter with her” (374). This remark seems to be bitter to the narrator for long but he wonders whether it is something unforgettable since it is quite true. When he ponders over it now with his ego removed, he is not able to consider his criticism to be without any basis. He begins to doubt whether it is really true.

Ramaswamy, like Maupassant, recognizes the bestiality lurking in every human being, but unlike the French writer, he shies away from explicit treatment of human sexuality, although he condemns its excesses where the French writer would seem to condone them as in a French story like
"Hippolyte’s Claim". It is a typically Maupassant tale where conventional morality is abandoned. The protagonist here openly invites Hippolyte, a married man, to enter into an agreement for participation in a sexual union with her in order to help her bear a child within ten months of her husband’s death. Mme Luneau is desperate to have a child to prevent the return of her husband’s money to his family. Hippolyte keeps his promise but she breaks her part of the agreement to pay him one hundred francs on getting the doctor’s report of her conception. There breaks out a row and it is settled in a court. Her argument to the court is that six more people participated in her impregnation and she does not know for certain to whom the paternity of the child is to be attributed. Hippolyte, she claims, is not even the father of his own children and so he cannot be credited with it. Finally the court after hearing both the plaintiff and the defendant and the depositions of the six men, "condemns Madame Luneau to pay an indemnity of twenty-five francs to Hippolyte Lacour for loss of time and unjustifiable abduction" (340).

What is to be noted here is that the French court does not go into the question of "whether he had a perfect right to enter into such an agreement" to do her a sexual favour when he was already married and was legally bound "to remain faithful to his lawful spouse" (340).

Maupassant’s indifference to the question of morality in this case contrasts with the narrow conventional conduct displayed by the mourners
when the discovery of their mother’s unconventional sexual orientation is discovered in the story named “A Dead Woman’s Secret”. Her daughter, Sister Eulalie, a nun, and her son, a magistrate, decide to spend the night with their dead mother and so they send away the priest. They think that her old letters should be read aloud to revive all her life and memories of their grandparents. A few letters from their grandparents are read respectfully and “the motionless corpse seemed happy” (383). The nun suggests burying the letters along with the corpse.

Then another parcel of letters without a title is taken out. It has letters from a man who passionately loved and adored the woman. The magistrate snatches the letter from his sister and searches for the signature. The sender’s name was Henry. Rene was their father’s name. “And standing up with the severity of a judge passing sentence, he gazed at the impassive face of the dead woman.” The nun with tear drops waits to see what her brother means to do. He flings the letters back into the drawer and draws the curtain round the bed obviously to avoid sight of the sinner in the dead woman and when it is dawn he rises from his armchair and, without even a parting glance at the mother whom he has separated from them and condemns, he says slowly, “Now, my sister, let us leave the room” (384).

The “inflexible code of morality” inculcated in the two children by their mother and her “teaching them a religion without weakness and a sense
of duty without any compromise” are seen only to serve to empty their hearts of true love and forgiveness. As a magistrate he “wielding the weapon of the law, struck down without pity the feeble and the erring” (381). Her daughter “quite penetrated with the virtue that had bathed her in this austere family, had become the spouse of God through disgust with men” (381-82).

What the French writer wants to drive home here is philosophically phrased by the narrator of “Thiraikal” in his chat with his wife on Mariyamma, a woman at the centre of a gossip. He advises his wife not to believe that what is unseen would not happen and not to think that what is seen alone is true. “We can comprehend only a little. When we see the mountain, we do not know what is behind it. If a lime is held before our eyes, the mountain goes out of our view” (351). He asks her not to be deceived by appearances of things or persons. He says:

“What is visible is also true. But it is one truth. There is a higher truth over which there is yet a higher truth. Thus truths come one after another. Don’t think that the snake alone casts off its skin. All living and non-living things keep shedding their outer skins. The more you see the more aware you become of their removal of skins”. (351)

What he wants her to understand is this, “Even if you don’t see with your eyes, know that many things do happen and will happen” (351-352).
In the French story the sudden transformation of the mourning son and daughter into judgemental foes and their filial love and sympathy into aversion and antipathy goes to prove here how harmful and destructive prudery and priggishness could turn out to be. The nun here displays no Christian charity but merely acquiesces in her brother’s pharisaical condemnation of their mother’s sexual misconduct. They do not take into account that their father “had made their mother unhappy”, lonely and loveless in her marriage (382). The woman kept up the pretence of being moral to guide her children on one side, and sought to satisfy her sensual needs on the other. In other words she did “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21).

Ramaswamy’s story “Baktha Thulasi” (“The Devout Thulasi”) provokes a lively discussion on issues like devotion and sexual purity. It reminds the reader of the gulf between male fantasies of chastity and realities that one witnesses in life. The morally priggish women of the place circulate several rumours of Thulasi’s moral laxity and claim that there is in her only a pretence of piety. Ramaswamy here makes one pause to ponder over whether there is a correlation between piety and the practice of sexual purity. Whenever the narrator praises the devotion of Thulasi, the womenfolk of his house will collectively rise up in arms against him saying, “‘Fie! Great
devotion’ ... ‘Shut up: What do you know about the goings-on?’ ... ‘The whole place is agog with those tales’” (252).

The pictures of the deities hung with their backs facing the viewers apparently confirm the genuineness of Thulasi’s devotion. Hindus like her believe that indulgence in sex should not be carried on before sacred icons. It is this evidence of Thulasi’s devotion which gladdens the heart of the narrator, Ramaswamy Aiyar. Thulasi, employed as a maid in auditor Thanu Pillai’s house, has no scruples about having an affair with a stranger who makes nightly visits to the garage where she is put up. She is a plain woman condemned by Mrs. Grundy as a whore, but one seems to hear the authorial voice as the narrator says, “I regretfully admit that I not only failed to discern her devout soul but also, seeing only her external appearance, hated her thinking her to be ugly. I could perceive her devotion and faith only in the course of time” (254-55). One continues to be told, “How easily we are deceived by external appearances” (255). “Is there any correlation between lust and loveliness? Or else how could they float so many rumours about Thulasi” (254). No complaint is lodged with the police against Thulasi as the narrator feels that “Some women have sexual purity. Some do not have it. And some women are thought to have it” (259).

It is interesting to recall in this context Ramaswamy’s ruminations on the theme of female infidelity in “Thiraikal” thus:
“Well, women stay at home; men believe that nothing wrong takes place. Lots of wrongs have been committed. Many clinging to this belief get ruined. They don’t learn from experience. Men still think, ‘No, my wife would never do such a thing’. The next-door neighbour’s wife, the wife of the man behind my house, or the wife of the man opposite my house could act thoughtlessly. It could be with half their knowledge or without it. ‘My wife is Sita herself. I married her after breaking the bow. Don’t mention it’. So they believe to the end. (349)

What the two authors have fictionally fashioned in their stories are the Western and the Eastern concepts of sexual ethics in tune with the ethos of the French and the Tamil people. Maupassant is seen to be morally radical in that he explicitly shows himself to be disdainful of outdated modes of thinking. Ramaswamy is less explicit in his treatment of rebels who resist moral tyranny but he is verbally scornful of repressive religious and moral codes. What they concur with is their basic view that sexual purity or its absence does not necessarily make an individual moral or depraved. Traditional images of women as angels or whores are shown to be far from true.

**Male Callousness and Female Distress**

Maupassant and Sundara Ramaswamy are seen to depict with deep sensitivity the distress of women who get a raw deal due to the callous or cruel
demeanour of men. The atrocities perpetrated on defenceless women make up the narrative strands of their stories like “Rosalie Prudent”, or “Fecundity” on the French side, and “Pattuvaada” (“Disbursement”) or “Pillai” (“Child Spoiling Place”) on the Tamil side. In these stories they present women who are in what Elaine Showalter calls “the feminine phase” (13). They delineate the dynamics of phallic violence in the social system which is patriarchal and the suffocation that women suffer psychologically even when there is little physical torture. In their differently phrased stories they map alike the double moral standards practised by men and the mistreatment meted out to women. Women who live or stray outside the accepted sexual laws are sought to be brutally punished. “As a matter of fact, the privileged position of man comes from the integration of his biologically aggressive role with his social function as leader or master”, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it (114-15).

The woman, Rosalie Prudent, is a servant at the house of the Varambot family who are said to be “severe on the subject of morality” (335). Their nephew, Monsieur Joseph Varambot, an under officer in the artillery comes to their house to spend the summer. As Rosalie has no one even to talk to, she is pleased with Joseph and falls a prey to his temptations.

One evening he asks Rosalie, the poor orphan, to go down to the river where he says they “might talk without making so much noise” (335-36). She goes there as he has cleverly won her confidence. There he seduces the
innocent maid and he carries on with her for “three weeks” until he goes back to work. The poor woman confesses to the compassionate judge, “I would have followed him to the end of the world. But he went away, and I didn’t know that I was enceinte – I didn’t! I didn’t know it until the month afterward.” The realization that she is pregnant puts her in a painful plight. She makes up her mind to bring up the child. But to her shock, she gives birth to twins whom she has no means to rear as her earning is “twenty francs a month” (336). Poverty and fear of losing her job drive her to do away with the babies by putting a pillow over them and lying on it.

It is written, “During her speech half of the jurymen had been wiping their eyes over and over again, trying to hide their emotion. All the women in the courtroom were sobbing” (337). It is their social conscience, and not legal or religious scruples, that prompts them to look at her crime from a humane angle and to avoid awarding any punishment to this poor victim of male insensitivity and inhumanity. The Varambots do not condemn the conduct of their callous nephew but “They would have liked to have seen her guillotined at once without trial, and they overwhelmed her with insults, which in their mouths became accusations” (335).

Men seem to violate moral injunctions of society with impunity. Women in the prime of youth like Rosalie are seen to be sexually pliable as they evidently seek male companionship to overcome their loneliness or
isolation. A poor woman named Thayamma in Ramaswamy’s latest story, “Pillai” similarly finds herself to be alone with her intellectual and academic attainments in the midst of unlettered people in a hamlet in the vicinity of Villukuri. The history of the hamlet called Pillai Keduthal Vilai has been studied and researched for a decade by Thangakan, a freedom fighter, who had courted arrest and got jailed during the revolt of 1942. He would talk fervidly of his sacrifice as a patriot. His fight for the land is a thing of the past but what now engrosses him is the investigation into how the hamlet came to be known by its strange name behind which there hangs the doleful tale of a woman. In addition to his research he works on a local daily named Sooravashu (Whirlwind). Showing his notebook to his tailor, Chelladurai, he proudly says how it contains “the matter for three persons to obtain doctorates” (12). Thangakan is one who tends to exaggerate a bit but there is no doubt that the findings of his research on a woman would make any stony heart melt with sympathy.

At the beginning of the last century there was no hamlet to the south of Villukuri. The region was just a jungle. Beyond it were Maadakuzhi and Maankuzhi. There lived people who made a living selling the lotuses from the pond there. Their staple food was tapioca and palmyra jaggery coffee. The G-string was their attire. Womenfolk would wear no upper garment. Not even boys went to school; how could girls get there then? It is through the
dialogue between Thangakan and Chelladurai, the narrator, that the story of Thayamma gets told. There used to live a German priest at Alloor named Andrews who imparted literacy to the people that dropped in on him. The woman’s exact name could not be retrieved. Some remembered her name as Thayamma while others thought it was Pechiamma. Thangakan would say, “What difference does a name make? That has a female existence: she would attain puberty; she would love man; would sleep with him; would bear him children; and would love them till death” (12). Thayamma used to help her father, Rasaiah, collect flowers from the pond. What surprises one was her undying desire to gain literacy. Who could have told her about the German priest? The fire of learning lighted by the German spread and a spark fell on her heart too.

It is Thangakan’s hunch that she may have threatened to starve herself to death if she was not sent to receive her lessons from the priest. He asserted that he had evidence to show that stubborn women of those days would thus fulfil their desires (13). She is known to have fainted at the sight of the priest who laid her on a bench and revived her with tender coconut juice. Rasaiah would take his daughter every morning to the priest’s house where the priest would take from them a half-blown lotus and place it on his table.

When Thayamma attained puberty the people of her hamlet resisted her going out to get lessons from the German priest. One morning the priest
himself visited Thayamma's hut to find out why she had ceased to attend her learning session. He offered to go there and coach Thayamma under a coconut tree there. Impressed by his earnestness to teach her, all the women shed tears and they all asked him to take her and teach her as long as he pleased. "It was not for a day or two but for a whole decade that she was taught by him," says Thangakan (14). English, Maths and Science were taught to her. The priest at the end said that she had attained the level of a graduate in Europe. When her father wanted to know what they should do with her next, the priest offered to send her to Germany for higher studies. But her mother opposed it forcefully with tears and she remained idle at home but the fire of learning continued to burn in her. There was none to admire her attainment. Children of the place began to be sent to the school at Alloor but none of them dared to approach Thayamma for learning. Unlettered women could get husbands with ease but none came forward to marry Thayamma due to fear of the fire of learning in her.

The researcher thundered to his listeners that time would neither stand still nor sleep but would move on bringing changes over everything (15). There sprang up a school in Maadakuzhi, and Thayamma was appointed its head teacher on the insistence of the freedom fighter Mohandas, who threatened to walk out if that low-caste woman was not given the post. She was the first woman to wear a sari and use powder which her father had got her braving her
mother's resentment. Thangakan makes her out to be a charming woman although she was black in complexion. Thayamma worked with dedication. The school was upgraded into a high school. Her salary was hiked to three hundred rupees and her life style excited everybody's envy. The whole region came to be named as "The head teacher’s place" (17).

"Why did time bring in its wake new sorrows thus?" (17). Disgrace was brought upon Thayamma. Manikandan was a pupil in standard four. His father was an influential politician making a fast buck. As Manikandan was weak in Maths, Thayamma gave him private tuition after school hours. She had likewise helped many similar pupils to get over their weakness. One day Manikandan left school in tears and what he told his mother with a swollen face could not be found out. Where the management met and what they decided to do was not known. The decision they had taken, although brutal, had to be carried out to protect the school they had built up.

The next day after school hours Thayamma continued to do her work there late in the afternoon but she was in for a rude shock. The school peon, Pichandy, had not gone yet. He wanted to get from her the bunch of keys. When she got out, she was stunned to find the front door of the school closed. She was surprised to find the sudden appearance there of the school teachers and the elders of the place. They stood there wearing long faces. The elders hid behind them clubs. They asked her what had taken place the previous day
and started thrashing her on the lips. They abused her asking if she came to
the school “to open her blouse.” They beat her on the bosom asking “Now
shall I suck it” (18). She could not jump over the wall but bore all the blows
and fell to the ground speechless and without screams. They threatened to
strip her.

Thayamma disappeared the next day and nobody knew where she spent
the next fifty-three years. She came back only last year and the place had
acquired the notoriety of being called “Child Spoiling Place”. She came back
senile like a skeleton with a staff in hand and begged for a place to lie down
and die. It is written that some of those who had punished her were now in
their deathbed, “but they had the duty to protect morality until death.” “They
turned her scars into wounds” by forbidding her to go out in the daytime or
talk to anybody and children were forbidden to go near her (19). When the
listeners to the tale narrated by Thangakan offer to help her, he tells them that
Thayamma left the world more than a fortnight ago.

What the poor women of Maupassant’s day suffered in France are seen
to be the lot of their counterparts in Ramaswamy’s day. The patriarchal
structure of society exposed by the Tamil writer in its most execrable form
existed in Maupassant’s time which his stories like “Fecundity”, exemplify.
The author in this story realistically portrays male sexuality and male
mentality towards the sexual exploitation of poor women who are forced to
value their work more than their virginity. It is fear of familial ostracism and loss of job that prevents the maid here from shouting for help when she is molested.

Here two men, a senator and an academician walking in a garden during the spring, happen to talk about the fertility of nature and the fecundity of man. The senator comments, “Ah! My jolly fellow, if you were to count your children you would be woefully embarrassed. And behold! Here is one that accomplishes them easily, who lets himself go without remorse and disturbs himself little about it afterward.” He refers to the radiant ebony tree. His friend replies, “We do as much, my friend” (345). The senator thinks that man’s superiority to the tree propagating its species lies in his knowledge of it. The other man disagrees and points out:

there is scarcely a man who does not possess some unknown children, those children labeled of unknown father, whom he has created, as this tree reproduces itself, almost unconsciously.

“If it became necessary to establish the count of the women we have had, we should be, should we not, as embarrassed as this ebony tree, which you call upon to enumerate his descendants?

(345)

The number of women, he says which a man has had sex with usually runs up to “two or three hundred” (345).
The academician confides to the senator one of his encounters with a maid in an inn during a journey with a friend of his. His friend took ill and when they got to Pont l’Abbé where they had to stay in an inn for a few days. He says, “I spent the days near him, the little maid coming in frequently, bringing perhaps my dinner or some drink for him” (346). The maid was “large, pretty and fresh looking” with “sparkling eyes and fine teeth” (346-347). His teasing her seem to amuse the maid whose language was different from his.

The man goes on to recall how he stayed up late one night near the sick man and on his way to his room he saw the girl going to hers and impulsively he “seized her around the waist,” and he says, “before she was over her astonishment I had taken her and shut her in my room. She looked at me, startled, excited, terrified, not daring to cry out for fear of scandal and of being driven out by her master at first and her father afterward” (346). One sees here the silent attempt of the man “to possess her” and the woman’s valiant struggle to resist it and how at last “she fell, and I took her brutally upon the ground, upon the floor” (346-347). “As soon as she was released she ran to the door, drew the bolts and fled”. She would not let him approach her until the eve of his departure when, he tells his friend, she entered his room at midnight and
“She threw herself in my arms, drew me to her passionately and, until daylight, embraced me, caressed me, weeping and sobbing, giving me all the assurances of tenderness and despair that a woman can give when she does not know a word of our language. (347)

The man forgot all about his “adventure” in a week’s time. “Thirty years passed without” his “thinking of, or returning to, Pont l’ Abbé ” (347). Then one day he happened to visit the inn and heard the tragic tale of how the maid bore a child “eight months and twenty-six days after” his departure from Pont l’ Abbé and how the child was disabled and disowned by society and was left to the mercy of the innkeeper (348). The realization of his paternity pricked his conscience which, he thought, could be salved with the gift of some money to the unfortunate creature of his aggressive sexuality and the source of his mother’s distress and death.

Maupassant’s story entitled “An Unreasonable Woman” demonstrates that women are “unreasonable” in the sight of men, as the title suggests. The narrator, M.de Varnetot in it tells his fellow hunters, “As soon as they get love into their heads they understand nothing else. Wisdom is nothing; it is love above all and all for love!” (333). He had an affair with Rose, the housemaid of Deboulotot. Deboulotot was asking the narrator for two years for his black mare to be sold to him. As the woman pleased him a lot, he finally agreed to
the sale and got the woman. After some time he was growing sick of his affair with her when she one day upset him with the revelation that she was “large” (332). On the advice of his crafty uncle he got an unscrupulous young man, the son of Mother Paumelle, to marry Rose with an attractive dowry. It was with great reluctance that the woman agreed to part from the narrator. She, however, kept returning to him like Mirza, the dog he had sold to a Count. She was tortured by her husband and mother-in-law. Finally she died of grief like Mirza and the child that the narrator had fathered also died a few days after her death.

Maupassant here seems to put across the idea that men are interested only in liaisons while women get carried away by their love affairs. Women like the old actress in “Julie Romain” or Rose here live in a world of sweet illusions which reality seeks to destroy.

“Vaasanai” (“Disposition”) is about a couple who apparently seem to have different vaasanas. Lalitha is an ordinary woman with basic human urges, while her husband, Sambasivan, seeks to follow the path of false renunciation chosen by his paternal uncle and other ancestors. The writer here subtly brings out the animal instinct in Sambasivan which manifests itself in his reaction to the hurtful comments of the beggar and later in his coarse and callous copulation with Lalitha. The jealousy aroused in him by the sexual
overtures of the beggar to his wife “liberates the beast” in him, to quote the words of Bradley used in the sketch of the jealously violent Othello (144).

The phallic violence of Sambasivan on Lalitha is endured with resignation and no sign of outward resistance while the same kind of callousness in the French story, “Useless Beauty” displayed by the authoritative and despotic character is recognized with silent resentment but she finally makes up her mind not to be “the victim of the hateful penalty of maternity” which her husband has inflicted on her for “eleven years” (110). The brutal man in him surfaces when the amorous man is repelled by his wife whom he has so long taken for granted. The Countess Gabrielle realizes in her distress that she has been “the victim of” her husband’s “terrible selfishness” and insensitivity (109). She wreaks vengeance on the man for what she in the French feminist fashion calls his “abominable male tyrannies” (112). Her husband, Count de Mascaret, is “a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a big red beard, a handsome man”, with a macho image, who to the outside world passes “as a perfect husband and an excellent father” (109). The Countess, Gabrielle, is “a tall lady” who even after the delivery of seven children, continues to be “still very young and whose striking beauty” seems “to appeal to men’s eyes” (114).

In her feminine phase of wifehood she endures the psychological pangs and the physical pains that she is subjected to but in her feminist phase she
sees through his jealously sinister intention to render her exceptional beauty “Useless” to her admirers. The feminist tone in the story is loudly audible when the Countess affirms, “I wish to live like a woman of the world, as I have the right to do, as all women have the right to do” (110). She decides once for all not to let him spoil her youthful figure through one more pregnancy. It is only three months since she delivered her seventh child in the Count’s country mansion “among fields and meadows” where she would be “condemned … to the existence of a brood mare” (111). She recalls to her “stupefied and agitated” man, “Then as soon as I was pregnant you grew disgusted with me, and I saw nothing of you for months” (109 and 111). She goes on to speak out, “I have always felt an antipathy for you and I have always let you see it.” She accuses him of taking advantage of her parents’ “embarrassed circumstances” and buying her to be his puppet (110). She thinks that he considers their children to be no more than victories over what she calls her “youth”, “beauty”, “charms” and the “compliments” paid by her admirers. One could see how patently the French writer portrays the patriarch of his times through the Count who tells his woman, “I am master – your master. I can exact from you what I like and when I like – and I have the law on my side” (111).

The story in the first section centers on the Countess’s accusations and the Count’s brutal gestures during their ride in a carriage. When his tyranny
becomes unbearable, she wants to be taken to church for a significant confession. There before the altar, she declares to him after her prayer, "One of your children is not yours, and one only;..." (112). She adds that she will never reveal the name of either her lover or the child who is the result of her betrayal. This section ends with her triumphant but terrified return home without her man.

The second section presents the emotionally estranged couple in their dining room with their children and the home tutor and the governess. All of a sudden, the man asks her to swear on the children that what she said in church is true. She "with the same firmness" says, "On the heads of my children, I swear that I have told you the truth" (113). The Count disappears from the scene and a letter is sent the next morning to tell her of his "longish journey" and of his arrangement to pay the money "for her expenses" (114).

The third section takes place during an opera when two admiring philosophers talk about the Countess. Roger could not believe that she is just thirty-six. They discuss the kind of life led by the Count and the lady. They pity the fact that she was turned "into a mere machine for maternity" (115). They blame God for creating humans with the bestial attitude. They express their wonder at the Count's alienation from the beautiful Countess and his craze for "bad women" (118).
The fourth section opens with the description of the Count and the Countess returning home after the opera. Six years have elapsed since the crucial confession. The Count admits that the punishment given by the woman is "intolerable." The tension is relaxed by the revelation of the Countess that she only lied to him in order to avoid lying with him, for she says, "but I could no longer endure that life of continual pregnancy, and I had only one means of driving you from my bed" (119). However, back in their drawing room, they make it up and agree to be "friends" again when the beast in him is vanquished (120).

In the fourth section, the woman one sees is no longer rebellious because she has gained "self-awareness" which, according to Showalter, is indicative of the "Female" phase (Morris, Literature ... 66). In spite of Maupassant's male-dominated milieu, he dared to portray female characters who have the boldness to detest and denounce dictatorial husbands in whom one sees the dehumanising effect of sexual jealousy. In Gabrielle, one could see the power of woman to rebel and resist man's basic instinct to see her as a mere object of sex and to sexualise everything about her. This story of feminist fury had been conceived and shaped by the French raconteur long before "the feminist" phase in the woman's liberation struggle was really ushered in (Showalter 13). The author here brings into focus with remarkable foresight the current feminist tone which, every women's libber has to admit,
finds an echo in the heart of every woman who yearns for emancipation and empowerment.

When one has finished reading Maupassant’s “Useless Beauty”, one instinctively says with Germaine Greer, “The first exercise of the free woman is to devise her own mode of revolt, a mode which will reflect her own independence and originality. The more clearly the forms of oppression emerge in her understanding, the more clearly she can see the shape of future action” (11).

One tends to ask what “mode of revolt” the sort of socially and sexually traumatized widow in a story like Ramaswamy’s “Pattuvaada” is to “devise” for being rescued from the savagery prevalent in a phallo-centred bureaucracy. Here Sundara Ramaswamy presents the suffocation that women experience in an environment where most of the officials too tend to exploit the weaker sex either financially or sexually. The officials in government offices function to serve the citizens of the country. But what happens in reality is the cruel exploitation of the weak and the poor. Even intermediaries tax them with the demand for money to get their grievances redressed.

The protagonist here is a woman who works as a help for a wealthy family. Her husband, a young politician, was shot dead. The widow gets some money from the government in the wake of her husband’s death which is soon squandered by her family. She gets small sums of money which a
widow is entitled to receive. But three-fourth of the money goes to the people who help her obtain it. She continues to sign blank papers for sanction of various benefits. There is talk of a German who donates one hundred thousand rupees to a woman with a serious attack of cancer in the uterus. Two more conditions have to be met for its sanction – the person’s mother tongue has to be Tamil and she has to be below 80 years of age. It is her dead husband’s friend who urges her to apply for it; but she flares up every time he refers to it.

The impoverished woman’s political contacts get weakened when she becomes a housemaid. One day she receives a letter asking her to collect rupees five hundred at the building numbered 119. This building is known to everybody in the city. Even the mistress of the house feels tempted to go and collect the money all by herself “without informing anyone.” The widow makes frequent inquiries to get to the place. It is a huge building “towering in the sky like a mountain” (600). She waits at the entrance for a long time. Tired of waiting, she gets back. She is clear and comfortable in mind when she enters Rajaveethi, but waiting at the crowded entrance tires her out. Three or four times she tries to get in. There is a vivid description of the cracked and dirty building where people rush in and out. One man forms a mental attachment to her and pursues her. On the way, he makes sexually suggestive comments to her. Unable to bear proximity to him, she thinks of getting down
to return home. She feels as if he reads her thoughts. She hears him say that another man will stick to her if he is cut off. There is here an unveiling of the thoughts passing through her mind. The man’s overtures remind her of the old humiliations she suffered.

The attitude of the men towards her is seen here when she stands on the steps holding on to the banisters. As they pass her, these men jab her in the back. There is one man who saves her from a fatal fall and keeps a firm grip on her left hand with his right hand. The woman seems to say that all men are alike. This is in fact her assessment of men. The man helping her climb up now literally carries her to the top floor. The woman is handed to his superior panderer. The lewd responses of the male staff here are strikingly described. Finally the woman is placed on the lunch table where she is gang-raped. The excitements of the men bring out their vulgarity at its worst. The sexual acts they perform on her demonstrate the degradation of the values cherished by humans down through the centuries.

The woman in the French story and the woman here are both victims of male lust – the former in marital captivity and the latter in official custody. The incongruity between the protracted agonies undergone by the women on the one side, and the momentary ecstasy experienced by their sexual exploiters on the other, is sardonically exposed throughout by Maupassant while it is
sarcastically laid bare by Ramaswamy with his characteristic ire at such inequities.

A careful reading of some of Maupassant’s stories leads one to the surprising revelation of the feminist angle adopted by this apparently patriarchal figure in France. In “Useless Beauty”, for instance, Maupassant makes the timid heroine emerge out of her “Feminine” phase and become a feminist and pass on into the female phase, while Ramaswamy, with less feminist sympathy, makes victimized women slip back into their helpless plight and accept their feminine lot in a male-ordained milieu (Showalter 13). There is no pattern of female assault here on men to parallel their verbal violence on men in the French fiction. Although, the vindictiveness and articulate female protest have not their parallels 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.

**Social Prescriptions and Individual Responses**

The modern notions of Maupassant and Ramaswamy are seen to disturb the composure of traditionalists who refuse to change with the times and give up old moral concepts or cultural prejudices. They force their readers to look at themselves critically from fresh and different points of view. What makes one love their stories is the way they bring in the dynamics of
personal and moral choices while focusing on human relationships. Although they are conscious of the bestiality in human nature, they want to preserve and extend the consciousness of basic human values which is the mark of civilized humanity and not to let the beast in humans be dominated by what Freud calls “Id” and do havoc as in the case of the French character, Monsieur Joseph Varambot, or the assailants of the headteacher, Thayamma, in the Tamil story. In the process of their pursuing material pleasures or preserving patriarchal moral conventions some of their male characters are seen to be getting dehumanized like the academician in “Fecundity” or the officials in “Pattuvaada”.

Michael G. Lerner says that when Maupassant submitted a poem to the Revue Moderne et Naturalistic, and it got published in 1879, he was charged with “an outrage against decency and public morality” (107). He goes on to say that the Revue was run to promote realist literature and to demolish conventional codes of morality which stood in the way. In his letter to Flaubert, Maupassant writes, “What is needed is your opinion of my poem Au Bord de l’ Eau from the literary and also the moral point of view (the morality of an artist is Beauty) and a show of your affection for me.” Maupassant like Flaubert, believes that “‘what is Beautiful is moral’ in Art” (Lerner 109). In the same way Ramaswamy’s stories like “Pillai” have provoked a wave of adverse criticism on account of departures from the conservative moral
viewpoint. An issue of the Tamil magazine Pudhiya Kaattru dated May 2005 has it that Sundara Ramaswamy has created a female Dalit character and derided her. Dalit writers, thinkers and a section of journalists have started protesting with the demand that he should tender an apology. They feel that Ramaswamy has striven here to confirm the false impression that Dalits are morally lax people who indulge in excessive sexuality (61). In an issue of the Tamil magazine Theeranadhi published on August 2002, Ramaswamy says, “The meaning of a text is the experience of the reader on the mental plane” (38-39). Like the French writer, Ramaswamy refuses to see the world through the obscured or distorting spectacles of creeds, customs and conventions. They both view human life and behaviour freshly with the eyes of common sense or rationality. Ramaswamy in a humorous vein makes Varathan in “Meikaathal” (“True Love”) comment on the “disapproving looks of those pure souls born to protect moral conduct.” He next asks, “But when one is old, what moral code will not one agree to follow!” (226). These writers do not accept any dogma or what one can term a “single truth” and wear moral blinkers. They question traditional moral codes to make the reader look for a higher moral truth but they do not say in so many words what this truth is.

In the story, “In the Moonlight” of Maupassant, one sees a dramatic shift in the clergyman’s conservative mindset where women and love are concerned. Here the protagonist is Abbe Marignan, “a tall, thin priest,
fanatical to a degree, but just and of an exalted soul.” His niece and his	housekeeper, Melanie, the sacristan’s wife, are minor characters introduced to
narrate the story of how the priest faces a situation which profoundly changes
his outlook on his divine Master’s plans, his view of women and his
perception of love. In the first of three sections one sees the delineation of the
Abbe’s character. The two facets of his character are focussed: the nature of
his religious belief and the man’s attitude towards women and love. He
considers himself to be a well merited “servant of God”. It is written “All his
beliefs were fixed, with never a waver. He thought that he understood God
thoroughly, that he penetrated His designs, His wishes, His intentions” (51).

The priest’s presumption that he could place himself in his Master’s
place and know the logic of all that He does is related in the next three
paragraphs. Sometimes, as he walks up and down in his garden, he would ask
himself, “Why did God make that?” He usually would satisfy himself with
the answer to every such question. He is not the kind of man who would
humble himself before God and say, “O Lord, thy ways are past finding out!”
What he really feels is, “I am the servant of God; I ought to know the reason
of what he does or to divine it if I do not.” He knows, for instance, that the
dawns are “made to rejoice you on waking, the days to ripen the harvests, the
rains to water them, the evenings to prepare for sleeping and the nights dark
for sleep” (51). The priest, here, is seen to represent the tyranny of the spirit over the flesh.

The priest’s attitude towards women and love is detailed next. He unconsciously hates woman and instinctively despises her as “the temptress who had ensnared the first man and who still continued her damnable works; …” He hates “her poisonous beauty” but he absolutely detests “her loving soul.” He is almost certain that God is “ill pleased with that particular work of his hands.” He has felt woman’s tenderness attacking him but he knows “himself to be unassailable.” He is often exasperated by women’s “need of loving which quivers continually in their hearts” (51). Abbe Marignan tolerates only the presence of nuns “rendered harmless by their vow” but he treats them harshly because in them too he finds “the eternal tenderness” which even in its enchained state goes out even to this “servant of God” (51-52).

The priest has a niece living with her mother in a nearby house. He has been trying to make her “a sister of charity.” This pretty young woman would only laugh away the serious sermons of her uncle. When he feels annoyed at her playful indifference, she would kiss him “vehemently, pressing him to her heart while he would seek involuntarily to free himself from her embrace.” In the midst of his annoyance he would experience “a certain sweet joy, awakening deep within him that sensation of fatherhood which slumbers in every man.”
One sees here the contrast between the puritanical priest’s rejection of life’s pleasures and the youthful woman’s passionate pursuit of the “joy of living which could be seen in her eyes.” What the priest sees in his niece too is “the ineradicable tenderness which ever springs in the hearts of women” (52).

The author from this point onwards proceeds to portray the ground which prepares the priest for the process of change which occurs overnight in him. The theme of the story is the transformation taking place in him. His religious belief is the force with which the author effects the change. The sin that the priest commits from a religious point of view is his attempts to penetrate into divine mysteries. The priest’s presumption prepares the reader for his psychological punishment.

When the priest learns from his housekeeper that his niece is in love with a man who meets her beside the river as soon as her mother goes to bed, he is so upset that he does not believe it to be true. One reads how all that day he remains silent and sullen. “the mighty power of love” only makes him experience “the moral indignation of a father, of a teacher, of a keeper of souls, who has been deceived, robbed, played with by a child” (52). The priest is not able to read after dinner. When it strikes ten he goes out carrying his usual cane after giving expression to his fury with it on the back of a chair.

The splendour of the moonlight assuages his anger. He walks through his garden enjoying the lovely sights and “drinking the air as drunkards drink
their wine.” He forgets the mission of his nocturnal walk in the midst of nature’s beauties. His courage begins to fail and he has the urge “to sit down, to pause right there and praise God in all His works.” The priest pauses again “penetrated to the depths of his soul by a strong and growing emotion.” He asks himself why God has made the night “more charming than the day, sweeter than dawns and sunsets?” The Abbe’s next question is “Why did not the sweetest of all songsters go to rest like the others?” He does not know who “this sublime spectacle” is intended for, “this flood of poetry poured from heaven to earth?” (53).

Under the arched roof of the trees down there along the edge of the pasture he sees the lovers. The lover of his niece is a tall man walking with his arm around his beloved’s neck and kissing her on the forehead from time to time. They seem to animate the lifeless landscape around them. The whole landscape, the calm and silent night with all its loveliness seem to be made for these two beings. They, in fact, approach “the priest like a living answer, the answer vouchsafed by his Master to his question.” He stands there motionless and still “overwhelmed and with a beating heart.” Memories of amorous scenes in the Bible flash through his mind and he concludes, “God perhaps has made such nights as this to clothe with his ideals the loves of men.” He realises that God does “indeed permit love, since He surrounds it visibly with splendor such as this?” The priest hurries back to his parsonage feeling
ashamed of trying to intrude "into a temple where he had no right to enter" (54).

Abbe Marignan enters the world of lovers in which he is as much an alien as the devil in paradise, although the priest's intention is not to tempt but to prevent a fall. The man of purity feels prompted to run back fearing that his presence will pollute this scene of sanctity. In Elements of Literature, Robert Scholes comments, "And the Abbe's story, if we consider its beginning and end, is a story of education, of a change in attitude. The change involves a dramatic shift in the priest's view of women and love" (181). Here one sees how the need for a liberal view of life is underscored. What the writer tries to get across is the fact that one hardly can afford to be dogmatic where one's religious or moral creeds are concerned. The rigidity and fixity of the priest's beliefs paves the way for his transformative experience.

Ramaswamy's story "Chenkamalamum Oru Soppum" ("Chenkamalam and a Cake of Soap") could be called the analogue of Maupassant's story in terms of its theme. Both the stories seek to bring out the tendency of some people to be obsessed with the idea of their being flawless or holier than others. The Tamil story is spiced with wit and humour as the process of Chenkamalam's presumption is presented and the way for her comeuppance is prepared.
Chenkamalam is a researcher who is obsessed with the need to eradicate microbes permeating the world and its occupants. Gowrikutty, her housemaid, outwits her in the end. The mistress and her maid almost become companions in the course of time. Chenkamalam is a bacteriologist who has done research on the terrible harm done by microbes. Her studies of germs have left her obsessed with the need to use disinfectants in all areas of activity to kill or keep away harmful organisms. She would never tire of telling Gowrikutty the need for doing away with microbes, for “Her work is examining bacteria through a microscope and taking count of them.” She would ask Gowrikutty everyday, “Did you wash the mop today with lotion?” Next she would ask “Did you have a bath this morning?” She would add “Did you use the medicated soap?” (111). The maid would reply in the positive to all her questions. Chenkamalam has long begun to doubt whether Gowrikutty daily uses this soap for her bath or whether she makes a pretence of it.

One night Chenkamalam sits up late into the night, steals into her maid’s room and takes away her maid’s medicated soap without her knowledge and keeps it in her cupboard in order to find out if she really uses the soap for her bath. In a fit of anger Chenkamalam asks the maid the following morning, “Gowrikutty, have you had a bath today? … Did you use the soap?” (114). She would repeat this question for two more days and then
she asks her to produce the soap. When Gowrikutty fetches the soap Chenkamalam turns pale in the face.

What the maid does is really to pay her back in her own coin by taking out of Chenkamalam’s cupboard her pleasant-smelling soap and using it in place of her own soap. Chenkamalam, when cornered, realises her own fault and frailty and admits, “I forgot to take bath while testing if you would bath.” What the maid tells her mistress-turned companion at the end is significant, “Madam, what is this? Let’s not make an issue out of it. Have we no freedom to stay away from our bath for a couple of days? We have so many maladies which are beyond the reach of microbes” (116).

The author tries to get across the point that we are all imperfect beings and that we tend to be more liable to lapses when we claim to be cleaner than others and keep trying to find fault with our fellow beings. The humane approach of Maupassant and the humorous attitude of Ramaswamy here towards their characters and their view of rules and regulations oblige one to recall Christ’s eternally relevant observation that “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Individual responses to societal prescriptions or prejudices in the sphere of conjugality find points of convergence in some of the stories of Maupassant and Ramaswamy like “The Log” and “Thayakkam” (“Reluctance”). The accidental drop of a log out of a grate in the present brings back into the
narrator's mind memories of a similar accident which rescued him from betrayal of his friend. The log holds so much significance as to be chosen for the title here. It is Velu's reluctance at the end of the story to marry Swarnam, a woman in the neighbourhood, which makes up the title of the Tamil story. Both the male protagonists in these stories respond negatively to the institution of matrimony as they consider a woman's affection to be "jealous", "suspicious, uneasy and carnal", to quote the words of the French character, Paul (622). The Tamil character here is said to experience suffocation with bitter recollections clouding his mind and finding no outlet:

For one or one-and-a-half hours Velu lay prone. He felt as if the chimney of his mind got blocked. His thoughts, in the smoky darkness, finding it difficult to identify and link to one another, struggled hard without any outlet. They moved about spiralling. His mind fumed without break. (287)

Paul feels that a woman's love for her man "will not tolerate ... the mutual confidence which exists between two men" who are friends attached to each other like him and Julien (622). So both the men here prefer the ancient philosopher's way of observing celibacy and seeking consolation through friendships or fraternal ties.

Both the stories unfold through the recollections of the protagonists. Paul, in the French story, a bachelor, "a constant friend, a companion in the
journey of life” narrates his “rather sad and unpleasant story” to an old woman (621-22). Julien was his friend, to whom he was attached by “the mind” and “the heart.” When Julien announced that he was going to get married, the narrator felt as if “he had robbed” him “or betrayed” him. Paul thinks that “a man and a woman are always strangers in mind and intellect; they remain belligerents; they belong to different races.” After Julien’s marriage, Paul tended to move away from the couple. But their frequent invitations to dine with them made him like the couple and find his “empty house very dull” (622).

One evening Julien asked Paul to give company to his wife, Bertha, in his absence. Paul tried to speak something to fill up “an embarrassing silence” (623). Suddenly she leaned over his shoulder and kissed him. Paul was not ready to deceive Julien and he hated to be “the lover of this little, silly, wrongheaded, cunning woman, who was no doubt terribly sensual and for whom her husband was already not sufficient!” A log which fell out of the grate startled them. While Paul was replacing the log, Julien came. But for that fallen log, they could “have been caught in the very act” and this might have broken their friendship and brought about the kind of disastrous consequences which one witnesses in “Mother and Son” (624). Paul here could be seen to prefer singleness precisely because of the pliability of woman that he has witnessed. He is negative in his response to the societal
prescription that every man has to choose a woman for companionship through the institution of marriage. He is the kind of guy who would denounce woman as Hamlet does when he denigrates her thus, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (Ham.1.2.146).

Velu's reluctance to marry Swarnam makes up the main strand in the Tamil story. His is a large joint family consisting of his parents, brothers, sisters and their spouses and children. Velu, being the youngest of the male member, has painfully witnessed in the family developments which have left its members divided and unhappy. The sensitive mind of Velu with its painful and perplexing thoughts perturbing it is picturesquely portrayed at the close of the story. One of his brothers, Subbiah, gets transferred and his wife goes away with him not caring to stay back and look after her bedridden mother-in-law. His own elder sister, Kosalai, persuades her husband to seek a transfer and leaves the house with him. The wife of another brother, Ponnaiah, moves house as the children born to her do not stay alive. Velu's younger sister, Papu, dies soon after giving birth to a child. His elder brother, Umai Thanu, separates from his wife who moves out deserting her two children and finally dies. Velu's younger sister's husband gets ready to remarry within a few months of her death. Their child brought to the house by Velu and tenderly cared for dies on the night of its father's bride-seeing ceremony.
It is obvious that Velu has lost his trust in the institution of marriage. He has been very fond of his folks. His reluctance to be married might stem from his fear that the woman he marries also could turn out to be one facilitating the disintegration of his family. He is one who is firm in the values he cherishes. The author here evidently analyses the very institution of marriage and seeks to know which of the marriages here has brought happiness and harmony for the people in the story. The conclusion he arrives at through Velu might be that marriage has only helped to divide the members of his family and bring some of them misery and leave some others selfish.

Paul is much dejected and depressed by the frailty and infidelity of women. Velu, unlike his French counterpart, does neither suspect the women nor fear to be cuckolded, but the death of his near ones on one side and indifferent or selfish attitude of some women of his household on the other make him reluctant to conform to the custom of conjugality.

Maupassant in “Boitelle” and Ramaswamy in “Leelai” (“Caprice”) portray communal prejudices which leave little room for personal predilections to prevail. What unites the two stories is the theme of rejection of the brides on the basis of their dark complexion. Both the women are, to use the words of Maupassant, “as good as the best girls in the country” because they exhibit “a regard for economy, industry, religion and good conduct” (897). Boitelle’s mother saw that she had wonderful skill in cookery
and would follow her "to the dairy, to the stable, to the hen house" and took
"the hardest part of the work" (900). Alemelu is complimented on her
culinary skill even by Raja when he drinks the coffee made by her. His father
says, "the coffee tastes like nectar" (297).

When questioned whether his children are well married, Boitelle says
that he "crossed them in nothing" and feels that "We shouldn't go against
people's likings - it turns out badly." He says that his parents "went against"
his "likings" and his lot in life turned out to be bad, although he married and
raised fourteen children (895). Ever since he had parted from his sweetheart,
he has "had no heart for anything" and became a night cartman doing "dirty
jobs" (901 and 895). Whenever he looks back he regrets the loss of his Negro
love who had the power to enrapture him. He says, "she had only to give me
one glance and I felt as if I were in heaven!" (901). Even when Boitelle's
mother saw that the Negro bride was "strong, thrifty, clean, well conducted
and sensible" and that "All these were better than money would be in the
hands of a bad housewife", her cultural prejudice made her feel that the
woman was too black and so she had to be rejected as unacceptable (897).

The Ramaswamian protagonist, unlike her French counterpart, gives
expression to her righteous indignation when her refinement is ignored and
she is judged on the basis of her exterior. When they get back, she tells her
father crying, "Throw your good conduct and musical skill into the dustbin"
and attributes her misery to the work of God, "This is not the treachery committed by humans; it is the deception done by God" (304-05).

In the French story, the protagonist goes with her lover gaudily dressed "in variegated costume" in order to impress his parents and win their consent to their marriage, "She had put on, for this journey to the house of her lover's parents, her most beautiful and most gaudy clothes, in which yellow, red and blue were the prevailing colors, so that she had the appearance of one adorned for a national fete" (898). In the Tamil story the protagonist realizes after her rejection by Raja that she needs to spruce herself up in order to brighten her marital prospects and goes to see Chinna Alamelu's uncle on the pretext of visiting her. It is written:

Alamelu put on the only nylon saree she had. For the first time she took out the bodice which she had hidden away without anyone's knowledge. That was a specially stitched one. When she wore it and looked at herself in the mirror, she felt ill at ease, but she murmured, 'looks quite nice'. She lightly applied lipstick. She put on her face more powder than usual. Her neck and hand ached before she finished doing her hair. When she finished it and looked at herself in the mirror stroking her nape, she felt that she had the resemblance of a serpentine beauty in some movie. (306-07)
In the Tamil story, there is no parental objection probably because the groom, Raja, is overage, but there is obviously male prejudice against plain brides. In the French story what the author brings into focus is not only the rejection of the bride for her lack of beauty from the blonde's angle but also the prejudice and antipathy that white parents have towards black girls. When Boitelle asks his mother for her opinion of his black sweetheart, she says, "My poor lad, she is really too black. If she were only a little less black I would not go against you, but this is too much. One would think it was Satan!" (900).

The pride and prejudice of the French parents demolish their son's gumption which results in his self-denigration as a doer of "dirty jobs" (895). In the Tamil story, the rejected bride demeans herself by setting out as a coquette to conquer Chinna Alamelu's uncle with her made-up sex appeal. Both the authors seek to bring out the fact that there is human degradation and frustration when there is rejection of basic human values in a material and consumerist culture.

The scrutiny of the stories here serves to bring into focus the divergent perceptions of the Western and the Eastern attitudes towards desires of the flesh. Here one sees that Maupassant's heroes and heroines quite often reject what one would call "chapel morality" as they feel that surrender to the senses alone could lead to the fulfilment of their basic urges (Delavancy 47). The French personalities portrayed by Maupassant reveal to one a conception of
life completely different from the Tamil or Indian way of life with its fear of Mrs. Grundy. The French tolerance of deviant sexuality would be quite a revelation to the orthodox Hindu here. Although the French writer is conscious of the bestiality in human nature, he is seen to underscore the need to preserve and extend the consciousness of basic human values which distinguish humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. He is out here to show one what havoc can be done when the beast in a man is let loose as in the case of the hero in “Fecundity”. There is here in stories like “Mother and Son” an attempt to rediscover the hidden sources of human carnality which Freud terms “id” and which the Hindus have called Kama. This impulse in humans, when not restrained and offset by “ego” and “super ego” from the Freudian viewpoint, or by dharma from the Hindu angle, impels them to harm themselves and others (Freud 362). Total suppression of this “pleasure principle”, on the other hand, could land a man in a situation of misplaced love of spirituality, as in the case of Abbe Marignan, or false spirituality which the nuns in “Ball-of-Fat” or the hero in the Tamil story “Vaasanai” pretend to profess. Maupassant is brutally frank in his treatment of human emotional or instinctual urges. He is sometimes seen to be coarse to the point of apparent vulgarity. His plots are not designed for moralizing or emphasizing a particular ethical code in a conventional sense. His stories, though they abound in scenes of explicit sex, generally leave the reader with
the impression of their relevance or reality to life. Although he never moralizes in the conventional way, some of his powerfully drawn scenes suggest a deeper moral lesson, as in "A Dead Woman's Secret" or "Useless Beauty". He never judges even the worst of profligates without remembering his own frailty. He gives the reader the realistic portraits of the men and women of his own age without hiding what orthodox moralists call their vices and virtues. His fiction like the Shawian play The Devil's Disciple brings out the anomaly that generous impulses frequently are found in those whom society condemns like the harlot heroine of "Ball-of-Fat". He regards with indifference the temptations of the senses, but he has no pity for actions or situations which arise from selfish motives, intolerance or injustice as in "Rosalie Prudent". His protagonists generally have very passionate dispositions which lead them into liaisons.

There is in most of Ramaswamy's protagonists repression of Kama although there is in them the urge for the kind of surrender seen in the French characters. Id almost corresponds to what Hindu scriptures term kama. Artha and kama are among the four goals of human life as mentioned earlier. They indicate human tendency to acquire wealth and to satisfy desire. Dharma is the third goal indicating sacred duty which paves the way for liberation or Moksha. Dharma roughly corresponds to what Freud terms "super ego". Its rebukes considerably constrict the leeway of one in a traditional social system
which the Tamil story illustrates. The woman in “Akam” is deeply conscious of how extramarital sex subjects one to the punishments like the illness of her daughter. It is seen to bring about the destruction of the family through death. This bears out the Tamil longing to conform to moral norms where sex inside or outside marriage does not affect the health or happiness of children. Materiality which is devoid of dharma seems to be repudiated here. What Ramaswamy highlights in this story is the trauma that the daughter here suffers when her mother has a lover. But what the French writer seeks to show in a similar situation is the basic need of the lonely mother longing for male companionship although it has disastrous consequences. The French author seems to sympathize with the mother while the Tamil writer’s sympathies go rather to the traumatized daughter. The Tamil writer could be termed a psychoanalytically-oriented realist in that he considers literature to be as exact a reproduction as could be achieved of humans. His fiction depicts humans striving to rise above the level of animality. They see or are made to see the need for the maintenance of order in society and sanity of human behaviour. When one compares the French and Tamil stories here one sees that Maupassant’s concept of morality is rather aesthetic whereas Ramaswamy’s thinking on it borders on the humanistic.

The moral sensitivity and intelligence of the narrator in their stories reflect those of the authors. Interpretive writers like Maupassant or
Ramaswamy, being thoughtful observers of life, are likely to question conventional beliefs and challenge them. Their ideas about life, society or morality are not simply taken over ready-made from what they were taught from the sacred books of their ancestors; but they are rather the formulations of sensitive and independent observers who have collated all that they have read and been taught by experience. The conscious mind is created by social mores, education, environment, family pressures and conventions. These writers force their readers to look at themselves critically from fresh and different angles. According to Maupassant, a modern fiction aims not at "telling a story or entertaining us or touching our hearts but at forcing us to think and understand the deeper, hidden meaning of events" ("Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) — in full Henry-René-Albert-Guy de Maupassant," Kirjasto). Ramaswamy feels, "They alone know the form of the short story who subject old conventions and traditions to fresh scrutiny and questions and reveal the fact that life today does not accept what were once considered to be and accepted dogmatically as better" (Ivai ... 95). Neither writer expects to be adorned with a moral halo of the conventional sort. Stanley Jackson says of Maupassant, "Like Turgenev, he despised anything that weakened the strength and beauty of language, and both men believed that a writer should serve his own vision of the truth, not a system or school of thought" (157). Rajamarthandam writes of Ramaswamy thus, "His short stories are artistic
revelations of the quest for the meaning of life with largeness of vision marked by a lack of trust and an attitude of doubtfulness towards any system or belief however excellent or established they are” (6).

Maupassant does not believe like Zola that humans are animals devoid of self and independent will. “However, his stories like those of Ramaswamy fulfil the Naturalist demand that works of art should be human documents but their psychological probing of their protagonists’ motives and their vision of the prismatic nature of truth separate them from the Naturalist school. There is precise documentation of the milieu. Both the writers realised that humans are not creatures of God but only earthly creatures slightly above the animal level. The greatness of these two writers lies in that they transcend the limits of naturalism, modernism or any other critical theory and present a pleasantly persuasive picture of the human predicament in a realistic fashion. The French and the Tamil writers have in mind the concept of literature shaped by scientific observation and rational conclusions.