The Quest for Truth: Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge* and Chandilyan’s *Kavarntha Kankal*

Dr. N. Mythili
Professor of English, Ambika College of Arts, Madurai.

**Abstract**

The American School of the studies of Comparative Literature has set up its programme based on the unquestionable definition of Professor Henry H.H. Remak, the founding father of this school, who remarks that comparative literature should not be regarded as a discipline on its own but rather as a connecting link between subjects or ‘subject areas.’ A comparison thus can be made between two or more different literatures and between literature and other fields of cognition. The American School promotes largely two theories, namely, ‘Parallelism’ and ‘Intertextuality’. The theory of ‘Parallelism’ is derived from the idea of similarities in humanity’s social and historical evolution, that is, harmony in the process of literary development. This present study on Maugham and Chandilyan is based on this premise.

W.S. Somerset Maugham (1874-1966) and Chandilyan (1910-1987), the British and Tamil novelists are separated by culture, creed and language. However, there are meeting points in their handling of religious and philosophical concepts. Their idea seems to be identical basically, in the circumstances that dictate the action of the characters and in their attempts to find the Truth, they differ. While Maugham, an agnostic, seems to test every other religious doctrine, before he decides in favour of the *advaita* philosophy of Hinduism, Chandilyan’s deep knowledge of the *vaishnavite* concept of utter surrender enables him to fashion his characters to illustrate the principle. Maugham has no hesitation in showing up the mere ritualistic nature of Christian dogmas by making Larry reject them, before he embarks on an adventure in finding the Truth in India. W.S. Maugham’s novel that deals with religion and philosophy at the most is *The Razor’s Edge* (1944). Similarly, Chandilyan’s *Kavarntha Kankal* (1961) takes up religion and philosophy as its background.

Maugham got inspiration for his novel from *Kathopanishad*, one of the eighteen important *Upanishads*, which form the core of *Vedanta* of Hindu philosophy. A verse in the *Kathopanishad* says, “The path that leads to salvation is like the sharp edge of a razor, difficult to cross and hard to tread. The realization of spirit is not a smooth development or uninterrupted advance. The progress to perfection is through pain and suffering”1. The *Upanishad* narrates the story of Nachiketas, who goes to Yama; the God of Death to know what exists beyond Death. Yama initiates Nachiketas into the secret of the mystical word, OM, meaning Brahman, the Ultimate Truth. In *The Razor’s Edge*, Maugham creates Larry Daniel, a young man, the metamorphosed Nachiketas, who sets out in search of Truth, due to the traumatic experience of the death of his friend in war.

*Corresponding author.
Email address: nicemyth@gmail.com

Chadilyan’s *Kavarntha Kankal* (Luring Eyes) deals with the conversion of a spiritually barren man—who loves his wife passionately—into a real devotee of Vishnu by the grace of Sri. Ramanuja, the great Vaishnava acharya and the propounder of Visishtadvaita. This novel displays a sensitive awareness of Hindu Spiritual thought in terms of bhakti. Chadilyan states that he has brought in some philosophic ideas into the novel to create awareness among the public of the greatness of *Sri Vaishnavite* tradition. “In *Sri Vaishnavite* Tradition, there is no distinction like the Brahmin, the Lower Caste or the Backward Person. There is but one community, and that is the *Sri Vaishhanavite* Community. This story is one of the incidents in the life of that unparalleled World-Teacher”².

Larry, an orphan was under the care of Dr. Nelson, an old friend of his father. Finding the boy quite reserved, he tries to bring him out of his reserved self, but feels quite frustrated as there is no response from the boy. Larry’s self imposed loneliness, however seems to mark an air of self confidence and a yearning for an adventure. He goes to the extent of telling a lie about his age to get into the Air-force. His co-pilot loses his life in an accident, and this encounter with death with all its hideous aspects marks the start of his spiritual journey. As a result, he undertakes a series of arduous tasks such as working as a miner, an itinerant farm-hand, a self-appointed redeemer of fallen women, until finally he decides to spend his life as a ship-man. He has nothing of his own except the clothes he wears. A short spell in a Catholic seminary is followed by his visit to India, where he comes face to face with the real meaning of Hinduism.

The title *Kavarntha Kankal* signifies how the bewitching eyes of the heroine Ponaatchi, become a source of enticement to Villidhasan, the wrestler. Intoxicated by the voluptuous beauty and indescribable charm of the lady, Villidhasan fails to remember that there is something in human life essentially undefeatable, something that cannot be destroyed. In the second half of the novel, the eyes that attract him are the beautiful eyes of God which communicate to him the message of self-realization through detachment. Ponaatchi urges him to take her to Srirangam to have a *darshan* of Lord Renganatha. This visit to Srirangam brings him into direct contact with Sri. Ramanuja. The emotional involvement with the saint makes him understand the sacredness of human body. The great inner change wrought by Sri Ramanuja leads him to see things with new eyes.

Both Maugham and Chadilyan deal with the three aspects of God—realization as expounded in Hindu philosophy—*karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga*—the path of work, the path of devotion and the path of knowledge. Chadilyan draws inspiration from Alwars especially Nammalvar, to expound the path of devotion, while Maugham utilizes his experience in India to elaborate the intricate nuances of the Hindu theory of salvation and to prepare for which one has to find a *Guru* initially. The meeting point between the Christian author and the *vaishnavite* writer is evident when both emphasize the need for proper guidance by a *Guru*. They proclaim that the path of salvation is like walking on a sword, the razor’s edge. One false step might be fatal, so, there arises the necessary direction from a *Guru*.

At Sri Ganesh Ashram Larry understands that the *Guru* is not to be thought of as an ordinary man. *Guru* is father, mother and *Brahman*. The *Guru* explains that there is in reality but one *Guru*, the supreme *Guru*, the *Brahman*, the center and source of all power of the Universe. He who knows *Brahman* is all, that the supreme soul (*Paramatma*) and the individual soul (*jivatma*) are one, and freed from all attachment, he becomes the *Jivan muktha* or liberated while yet living. Larry receives a total understanding that the *Guru* is the most authoritative guide in a person’s spiritual ascent.

Maugham stresses the *vedantic* concept of the soul where soul is compared to a charioteer while the body to that of a chariot: “Know the self or atman as the lord who sits in the chariot called the body, *buddhi* or intelligence is the charioteer”¹. Larry realizes that once the soul is set towards divinity, the body is detached gradually to do whatever *karma* it is forced to. It experiences neither pain nor pleasure, neither praise nor abuse since it is detached. Larry realizes: “Self-realization is reached not through wholesale rejection or self-conscious renunciation of the world, but through assimilation of good, eschewing of virtuous, purgation of vices—so naturally”⁴. This cosmic theory fully influences Larry during his main but short stay in Ganesha Ashram and by watching the dedicated lives of people at Varanasi near the Ganges.

On the other hand, the lessons for the spiritual seeker that Chadilyan underline are part of *vaishnavite* Tradition—dedication to God, renunciation of all bonds with this world, devotion to the *Guru*, dedication to the devotees of God. The core of *vaishnavism* is to do ‘*saranagathi*’ or absolute surrender to the Lord and by doing so a person gets his salvation. The *Guru* in Indian thought is the one who enlightens, expels the darkness of ignorance in a person. It is Sri Ramanuja, who removes the scale of ignorance from Villi’s eyes in the temple. Villi’s monumental *guru-bhakti* is an example to others. From the grossest of dedications, Villi proceeds to the most ideal of dedications. From the absorption of the body, he proceeds to the beauty of grace. In the feet of his *Guru* he sees God, and in the devotees of
God, he finds god, too.

Larry’s quest makes him doubt about man’s existence and belief in God - “I want to make up my mind, whether God is or God is not. I want to find out, why evil exists, I want to know whether I have an immortal soul or whether when I die, and it is the end". He is determined to alleviate his doubts without making a mental surrender, which he does after facing shocking experiences. As Larry moves from place to place learning new things about the mystery of existence he spends six months at Banaras. Here, he is much impressed by the common people’s uninhibited faith which is not based on learning or conducting mere rituals; it is a matter of the heart. He realizes that Hinduism is a simple, straightforward method, an assimilation of several faiths, not institutional but a way of life itself.

Unlike Larry, Villidhasan, has no such doubts, He is lured by the powerful whirlpool eye of Kaveri, the river, first, and then by the magnetic eyes of his wife, and, lastly by the divine eyes of the deity. It is a sort of evolution from aesthetic through physical to spiritual charms. Like Larry, Villidhasan does not go from one place to another in search of Truth. In fact, he does not seem to have such an agenda at all. He enjoys life as a doting husband and this superlative love or ‘prema’ is the catch-point to Sri Ramanuja, who by a simple initiation converts him to be a supreme devotee. Larry learns wisdom through a strenuous way, whereas Villi’s wisdom dawns out of unquestioning love.

Both the novels illustrate self-consciousness as well as weakness of the characters and both deal with young men’s personal crisis set against a larger background. In both these novels there is an acute inner conflict of self, which finally triumphs after undergoing various stages of temptations, It is more or less a battlefield where the warrior faces obstacles, but wins his battle in the end through his perseverance and self-control.

There are three types of conflict that each individual faces in life—conflict between himself and the society he lives in, conflict between himself and with his blood-relationship and conflict within his inner and outer selves. The third one is symbolic of every spiritual questor. He is subjected to various temptations and he has to pass through many ordeals. Finally, through the grace of Lord that comes in the form of a Guru, the seeker is able to visualize the mystery of the Divine, being illumined from within. This is the conquest of the self, for which self-control is the vital element.

W.S.Maugham’s The Razor’s Edge, a document of self-knowledge, shows how the protagonist is influenced by the Eastern Hindu Concept of mysticism. Chandilyan’s Kavarntha Kankal is also a record of self-knowledge and portrays through the life of a simple man that the realization of self is through renunciation, that is, renunciation of selfish motives, passion and deliberately freeing from eternal bondage. This has been an ideal of the Hindu Way of Life. Both the novelists convey a message at the end of the novels - We have two selves: from the one comes the voice of duty proclaiming that our salvation comes in meeting bravely every circumstance of life, and from the other comes the insinuating voice of passion and egoism. By our deeds we are saved or lost, by our deeds we create an inferno or a paradise.

References

5. The Orient in Somerset Maugham’s Fiction,p.199. (Author unknown)