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THE DIALECTIC OF "MAYA" AND PRINCIPLES OF
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN INDIAN LITERATURE

daiś bhū pūrṇamādy mama māyā duratyāyā mām eva ye
prapadyante māyām etāh taranti te

-Bhagavad Gītā, 7.14

The argument of this paper may be briefly summarised as follows: first, a note on methodology which relies heavily on Marxist-Structuralist notions of the relationship between the "text" and the Real; second, an attempt at defining the "mediated Real" in Indian thought to which I give the title "meta-text I"; third, a look at the transformation of this "meta-text" (which I argue is a construct) into texts "proper" designated "text II" and "text III". At the receiving end of the sequence is the reader for whom all these ("meta-text I" and "texts II & III") are ways into the "absolute Real". The paper goes on to argue that because "meta-text I" becomes the "absolute pole of reference" and because as a construct (a "canonical text" in fact) it has already "interpreted" the Real, it is in Marxist terminology a "flawed microcosm" and should "behave" like any ordinary text. But the dominance of this "meta-text" in Indian thought and life has been such that it is the only image of the Real which the reader possesses. If this is so, then the relationship between literature and the historical matrix in Indian literature is between one text ("texts I & II") and another ("meta-text I") and both of these are heavily mediated. This paper proposes to explore tentatively the ramifications of this.³

The Methodology

I take as my heuristic model a reasonably straight-forward comment on the Marxist approach to the literary text. In a recent article Hayden White writes: "In Marxist criticism, the literary work is considered as a microcosm of the macrocosm, the flaw in question resulting from the form that the work of art is compelled to assume in a given system of commodity exchange".² Within such a theory, the historical matrix is further given a chrono-
logical character which has a dialectal relationship with the periods of social history (slave, feudal, capitalist). Furthermore, the forms of the works of literature and their latent content must be shown to be "products of the forms of consciousness possible within such a system". In other words, the ordering of reality which occurs in the literary work is directly related to the historical processes in terms of which the work has been written ("vulgar Marxists" would call it "homologous").

The literary work in fact structures the historical matrix so as to manifest through it the overall bent and tensions inherent within the system. Hence a basically diachronic event is given a synchronic presence in the literary work in such a manner that it becomes a kind of "living organism" (the phrase is Wolfgang Iser's) which is both linked with history on the one hand and with the reader on the other. The process itself, as Alastair Fowler remarks, breaks the "hermeneutic circle" which leads to the universalising through the literary artifact of the historical context so that it is available to the reader whose own historical period is different from the text's.

The text has a dialectal relationship with history. (The word dialectic is here used simply as "a contradiction determining continual interaction".) Quite clearly to see the text in terms of a convergence of structure and process (the construct and the historical reality) is to over-simplify the relationship. Yet, it seems to me to be a more effective description than the usual dichotomies of form and content which tend to assume different meanings in different contexts.

Meta-text I

The next step in the argument is to analyse how "reality" or the "historical process" is structured in Indian thought and what happens when the "flawed microcosm" (that is the text proper) must capture not the "macrocosm" but a structuring of the latter which is itself mediated and hence "flawed". I raise these issues within the concept of a "meta-text" and discuss them with reference to 

"maya", the Indian principle of illusion or the principium individuationis to use Schopenhauer's phrase borrowed by Nietzsche. In Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary, the word 
maya has a large entry and its meanings range from the Vedic "deception", "fraud" and "witchcraft" to the "source of the visible universe" of the Sāṃkhya and Vedānta systems of thought. I would like to restrict its usage in this paper to the definition given by the great monist thinker Śāṅkara (AD 788-820), the best-known exponent
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of advaita (non-dualism). 10 I am aware that some centuries later Rāmānuja (eleventh century) attempted a re-definition of the dialectic of māyā within a system of modified non-dualism (vītiṣītyādvaita) and after him Mādhva (1199-1276) took us into the heart of Indian pluralism with his claims of a completely dvaitic (dualistic) system. 11 Later still, others, and notably Nimbārka (twelfth century) and Vallalla (fifteenth century) attempted even more subtle re-definitions within their respective saṃpradāya (traditions). 12 However, it must be noted that the various commentators differ from each other not in any prima facie or "ontological" redefinition of māyā but disagree only on the issue of the relationship between this concept and Brahman.

What Sāṅkara did in his commentary on the Vedānta was to structure the relationship between Brahman and the phenomenal world; in other words, he stratified and froze all history into a "metaphysical encounter". History as a day of Brahmā was perhaps in need of such organisation to make the relationship between man and it more meaningful. 13 As described by Sāṅkara, the "dialectic of māyā" took the following form. There is only one universal Being, Brahman or Paramātman, the Supreme Self. This Being does not have attributes, it cannot be predicated, it is thought itself. However, we do perceive ourselves and the world of phenomena because Brahman is associated with a certain power called māyā or avidyā (nescience) to which is attributed this world. This power, writes George Thibault, is in fact a "principle of illusion; the undefinable cause owing to which there seems to exist a material world comprehending distinct individual existences." 14 Within the various components of this material world there exists the essence of Brahman as jīva but the power of māyā is so strong that it is not possible to perceive its existence. The dialectic to which I have already alluded arises precisely because of the eternal recurrence of māyā - to transcend māyā a kind of absolute knowledge of the self is necessary and this absolute knowledge may be presented within some such statement as "atman-vidyā is Brahman-vidyā", self-knowledge is knowledge of Brahman. Only through a recognition of this, through tat tvam asī, does one achieve final release. Without this self-assurance, through, for instance, the Vedic paths of "Works", karmacānda and jñānakānda (action and knowledge) one simply arrives at an understanding of Iṣvā, the lowest Brahman and not the Highest Brahman. Only in the final moment of release does one withdraw from the influence of māyā and achieve total Oneness. In the words of Radhakrishnan:

Works are vain and bind us firmly to this unreal cosmic process (samsāra), the endless chain of cause
and effect. Only the wisdom that the universal reality and the individual self are identical can bring us redemption. When this wisdom arises, the ego is dissolved, the wandering ceases and we have perfect joy and blessedness.15

For the purposes of my argument, the significant thing is that Śankara's system is a construct, a structuring of reality or history in such a manner that only the dialectic remains meaningful, that is to say, that the constant, organic tension between the individual and maya is the important, if not the only, mode of "operation". To this end, knowledge of the self is important but that knowledge is not a fictional search for authentic values in a world of unauthentic values (after Goldmann) or a re-enactment of a unified sensibility (after T.S. Eliot, Leavis etc.). Hence our proposition: Indian literature cannot transform the Real, it cannot be a "flawed microcosm" because the macrocosm in terms of which literature works is itself a "flawed" typological re-statement of the Brahman-maya-Self impasse.16 This construct, which I have called the "meta-text", has been bequeathed upon Indian literature as a sort of hidden universal. In the rest of this paper, I will try to demonstrate how the "meta-text" gets transformed into principles of narrative structure in two Indian texts, one medieval, the other modern.

Text II

On the surface the transformation of the dialectic into narrative should be a reasonably straightforward matter. The Self (let us say the hero) is ensnared by maya, becomes totally immersed in sansara, discovers the futility of "works" but finally achieves moksha through an awareness of his own atman. The lines of the dialectic are clear-cut as neither end of the triangle is in an oppositional relationship to another. Between Śankara and Tulsidāsa (1532-1623) the author of our text proper ("text II"), Rāmacaritamanasa,17 a whole body of exegetical literature intervenes and the methods of achieving moksha undergo considerable modification. Two important ideas have a direct bearing on this text. The first is the growing significance of bhakti marga, the path of devotion, and the second is the concept of the aparāparāvaṃśam Brahma, the Lord who is also avatāra, that is capable of incarnating himself through time. The latter idea may sound very much like the historical Jesus - God "translates" Himself into time and in doing so affirms the reality of history.18 In Hinduism, however, such historical reincarnation never occurs, the
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avatāra of the sāṅgava Brahma as Rāma or Kṛṣṇa, for instance, always occur outside time. To return to the two points, the presence of bhakti and sāṅgava Brahma meant that there was a real triumph over mâyā possible through devotion to a god incarnate. So ideally, one should expect a slight change within the narrative transformation outlined above: the Self (let us say our hero again) through bhakti (devotion) overcomes mâyā and merges into Brahman. But there remains one major problem. Having frozen history, the construct (the "meta-text") does not lend itself to narrative transformation too readily; it has simply internalised all sense of progression. To give it a narrative "form" would mean reverting to a sense of history, affirming the dynamic and temporal nature of existence. It seems paradoxical that this is so but the most important bhakti texts clearly bear this out, a sort of literary helplessness in the face of this formidable system mediating between the Indian and the beyond. Hence whereas the Rāmacaritamānasā of Tulsidās (begun c. 1574 and commonly known as the Rāmāyana) does have a strong narrative thread which follows its Sanskrit prototype (the Vālmiki Rāmāyana 3rd century B.C.) quite closely, it nevertheless does not demonstrate how Rāma himself (the hero) transcends mâyā as a result of a process of self-awareness, the basic thrust of the genre. Obviously the matter is complicated by the fact that in Tulsidās’s version Rāma cannot be dissociated from a tradition which has already occulted him. As Viṣṇu incarnate, mâyā is no more than a principle which flows from him anyway.

To get out of this difficulty Tulsidās, I believe, constantly frames the tale of Rāma. The frames are then re-cast within existing ones and one gets a kind of Chinese box effect with the important exception that the story itself does not change, it simply gets more and more abstract. Each repetition, naturally, involves the teller of the tale who finds liberation as a result of telling the story and the reader for whom reading is a devotional process which destroys "avidyā which is the root of re-birth". The main narrator of the tale of Rāma is Śiva (who frames the narrative of the others) whose technique is based on the principle of sevaka sevya bhāva (the devotion of the servant for the master). Śiva narrates the story to his consort Umā (Pārvati) and within this he re-tells the tale as told to Garud (the eagle) by Kāka Bhusūndī (the crow) who in turn received it from Lomas Rishi. In each case the tale acts as a meditative exercise, the participation in which is essential for moksha. The reader who, finally, makes such articulation possible, participates in its attainment. So what we get here is a picture of the "meta-text" at work again—

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- without getting itself transformed in any significant way.

Towards the end of the seventh and final book of the epic, the *Uttara Kânda*, Tulsidasâ does attempt to fill the dialectic of *mâyâ* out though, admittedly, that "filling out" is no more than an *mâyâ* out though, that "filling out" is no more than an *mâyâ* out though, that "filling out" is no more than an imposition of a set of poetic conventions onto the construct. In a symbolic sort of a fashion, the crow Bhuśundi in his version of the tale personalises *mâyâ* as a female *bâkta* which binds, among others, the *triśis*, dvas and even Śiva. Yet this *bâkta* is the Lord's *sevika*, his servant. Already the paradox is being worked out within an established pattern of sexual roles; the abstractions are being given "live" significance. In the central *aupâśi* ("verse") where this is raised we read that the other paths to *moksha* (*jnâna*, *vairagya*, *yoga* and *vîjñâna*) are all *puruṣa* that is masculine and being physically strong cannot triumph over women's strength which is, of course, *mâyâ*, the Lord's *sevika*. The relevant passage reads:

\[
jâna birâga joga bigînâna, ye sâba puruṣa sunehu Harijâna
\]

\[
\text{puruṣa pratâpa prabala saba bhâtî, ablâ abai sahaj jañ jati}\]

If masculine strength (the unenlightened soul) cannot triumph over *mâyâ* (which is feminine), how else does one explain the problem? Tulsidasâ claims that it is only through *bhakti* (devotion) that one can get out of *aupâśa*. And his logic goes something like this. *Mâyâ* is feminine and is full of guile like a temple dancer, the *nartakî*. But *bhakti* is also feminine (this is a case of gender classification) and it is identified with Śîta, Râma's wife (by an obvious synecdochic process). Hence Tulsidasâ writes:

\[
mâyâ bhagati sunehu tumha doau, nâri barga jâna sabâ koau
\]

\[
puni Râghubbirahi bhagiti piyâri, mâyâ khalu nartikî bicâri\]

This "allegorisation of *mâyâ*, for lack of a better phrase, is central to Indian literature, especially post-pûrânic (hence vernacular) literatures of India. What happens in the seventh book of the *Râmâccârtamânasa* is that the *construct* is given a "literary" dimension, though as yet a purely narrative thread has not been superimposed - the *nartakî* as a character in fiction does not participate in the life of the hero. This tradition is, of course, not new. In Kâbir, over a century before, *mâyâ* had been referred to as *kanak kâmpî* the seductress who ensnares and then repulses the *kâmpî*, the male. But limited as this change was, the conventions which arose became important to the other Indian writers. The recognition of this change is, I believe, central to Indian literary criticism and theory. For while the "dancer" in Indian
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fiction may be no more than just that (one remembers W.B. Yeats) and as such indistinguishable from the dance, it is nevertheless a device which directly recalls the nartaki-Māyā dichotomy I have outlined. Moreover, as Tulsiśā's version was related to bhakti, in itself a Southern Dravidian concept, it acquired very quickly the significance of a universal image which could be utilised by all Indian writers.

Tulsiśā's bhakti-dancer/nartaki/Māyā-Brahman framework is an important step towards the "moving outwards" of this dialectic but the final transformation of this dialectic, in so far as it pertains to this paper, had to wait until an alien form had made its way into Indian consciousness. This brought with it tensions of its own for because the construct was so strong and all pervasive, this form, the novel, itself a product of a western economic stage of development, counteracting and paralleling that economic system, reflecting and modifying the dominant ideology of the ruling classes and getting progressively more and more reified as a consequence of the growing disjuncture between the individual and the economic system (the conflict essentially between "use value" and "work value"), this form had to transform a "false" ideology which was not the ideology of the ruling classes but rather of the ruling intellectuals, the Brahmans who like Šankara (and indeed the "writers" of the Vedānta) had already structured reality. The novel could not overlook this because it reflected Indian ways of thinking generally and whenever it tried to reconcile itself to what lay beyond Māyā, the economic "base" of Marx, it found itself lumbered and bogged down with this construct. This I believe is the major problem confronting the theorist of the Indian novel and one which needs closer analysis.

Text III

The basic plot of R.K. Narayan's The Guide is very straightforward. A shopkeeper's son, Raju, becomes a tourist guide, gets involved with Rosie, the wife of "Marco" an archaeologist, encourages her to take up her "family" career as a dancer, is convicted of forgery, leaves prison just "to go somewhere" and in spite of himself emerges a māmū who fasts for rain in a drought-stricken village. On the level of the paradigm sketched (the "meta-text") the following possibility emerges: Rosie as the nartaki is Māyā which ensnares Raju, the jīva in search of ātman-vidyā. To discover self-knowledge (at this stage a concept which lacks any religious dimension) he pursues the path of karma in a Protestant sort of a fashion but gets even more entangled within the web of Māyā, the dancer. Finally, he embraces bhakti (one is speaking of
narrative ordering and not intention here), devotion to the Lord and itself a feminine principle, which enables him to move away from Raju the guide and fraudulent pundit to Raju the suāmī suff generis who, if the construct is correct, finally escapes sambhara and finds release. Where Tulsidāsa (working within established Indian forms) had simply conventionalised the construct by simply hinting at a narrative possibility, and had written what Charlotte Vaudeville has called a bhakti raṃā (a treatise) and not a purāṇa (narrative) or a tantra (a yogic exercise) per se, R.K. Narayan is much more aware of the narrative possibilities implied in the tension between the nartakī, the self and bhakts. Instead of framing his narrative (frames are still used in The Guide) so that it is Velan who finds ultimate release because he has heard the tale of Raju (as Umā, Garud and the reader find in the Rāmacaritamānasa), the dialectic is given the overall pattern of the "classical" novel in which the hero finds a realistic basis for his own existence. Part of the problem with the novel is that it still seems to be hankering after integrated civilizations. In India the bourgeois ethic has not completely fractured that inner harmony about which Georg Lukács has written. Against this background, the convergence of the novel form - exploratory, social, dialectically related to history and so forth - and the construct which always falsifies the Real creates not only problems of interpretation but questions the overall status of the novel as a genre in India.

Let us now follow what R.K. Narayan does with the dialectic more closely. "My problems would not have started...but for Rosie", Raju tells Velan and adds "She looked just the orthodox dancer". Early on in the narrative Rosie's identification with the nartakī-māyā 'principle' is carefully stressed. When she reaches Malgudi her one desire is to see a cobra: "Can you show me a cobra - a king cobra it must be, which can dance to the music of a flute?" (p.47). And as the cobra danced, Raju watched Rosie:

She watched it swaying with the raptest attention. She stretched out her arm slightly and swayed it in imitation of the movement; she swayed her whole body to the rhythm - for just a second, but that was sufficient to tell me what she was, the greatest dancer of the century. (pp.60-61)

Later the lines of the identification between Rosie and the nartakī become more clear-cut. She tells Raju:
"I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers; my mother, grandmother, and, before her, her mother. Even as a young girl, I danced in our village temple. You know how our caste is viewed?" "It's the noblest caste on earth", I said. "We are viewed as public women", she said plainly, and I was thrilled to hear the word. "We are not considered respectable; we are not considered civilized". (p.92)

The temple-dancer is, of course, essential to the temple. But she is not a mere dātā of the Lord; she exists as the weaver of the unreal world; the veil past which it is the function of devotees to perceive. Her presence indeed makes that perception so much more difficult. In Narayan the initial construct is being given a felt recreation within a narrative but the narrative itself cannot acquire an independent status outside the construct because it tends to organise the Indian's attitudes towards the world.

But first the total absorption into sāsvāda must take place. Raju is completely enamoured of Rosie. "All my mental powers were now turned to keep her within my reach, and keep her smiling all the time", (p.104) he explains. By the time she emerges as the only true reality, he has disowned friends, mother, relatives, all. And as she acquires more and more the status of the "snake", the "she-devil", the "demon" and so forth, the further removed she becomes and begins to create a world of her own.32

The central episode of the novel (Raju's arrest at the hands of his friend, the District Superintendent of Police) occurs when Nalini, for that is what Rosie is now called, dances the rare snake dance for which a special "mood was needed". (p.189) The snake-dance in this episode is further connected with Śiva, the Natrāja, the Lord of the dance who is part of the creative force behind the world of illusion. Perhaps too self-consciously, Narayan inserts Raju's mother's warning, "A serpent girl; Be careful", and undercuts the reader's own awareness of the analogy. After the arrest for forgery, the rest is straightforward: gaol, release, escape to the temple, sacrifice of the self (a consequence of a deception which misfires)33 and moksha. The latter remains contentious to the end - Raju seems to feel the rains coming down on the hills but Narayan does not convert this into any kind of an affirmation of release or Oneness of some sort. A life which ironically had become "valuable to the country" (p.219) and to the American television company simply enters sunya: the immense void.
Though I have used throughout this paper the dialectic of maya simply as a model in terms of which we may gain access to certain Indian texts (the model, of course, as Iser wrote, cannot be equated with the literary text itself), I nevertheless believe, at this stage of my explorations, that the issue of the transformation of the construct into narrative principles in Indian literature - central as the ideology which infuses it is to Indian thought generally - takes us to the heart of three important and related problems. The first concerns the problem of a literary theory for Indian literature, a problem magnified by the very obviously religious nature of the creative act implied in the poetic śāstra. I have attempted to explore a few limited lines of growth by subjecting the literature to what I have called, perhaps erroneously, the dialectic of maya. I have found that within Indian texts ("text II") - texts which belong essentially to Indian generic forms - the narrative transformation is only an "allegorical" one: to re-constitute maya into a sequence charged with temporal significations would, I have argued, lead to a reversal of the initial "freezing" which had occurred. The next problem is the relationship between the world of literature and the original macrocosm which it attempts to capture. However, if the original is itself flawed and as maya-self-Brahman a "fictional" construct, then the relationship of the literary work to it is at best mediated by (through) this principle of illusion or at worst becomes a reflection of a flawed reality which has no historical basis. The final problem arises with the introduction of an alien form which, we are told, is the ideal form which captures the dialectical tensions within the historical matrix. The novel in India is precisely that form but the argument of this paper is that because the weight of the construct, the "meta-text", is so over-riding (men's beliefs are in fact structured and conditioned by it), the Indian novel, here The Guide, cannot break past the false macrocosm and confront the historical processes themselves. Saturated as the macrocosm itself is with what Terry Eagleton calls "certain ideological modes of perception, certain codified ways of interpreting reality", the combination and transmutation of forms become doubly difficult for Indian writers.

Naturally, a much more thorough investigation is necessary before one can properly speak about narrative structure, constructs, the relevance of Marxist theories to Indian literature and so forth. But if I am right (or at least partially right) in contending that the construct as outlined in the "meta-text" is the dominant background against which Indian literature must be measured, then it is reasonable to assume that Indian literary texts carry within themselves theories about Indian literature.
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Ultimately, an awareness of this may be the only way out of an immense paradox.

Notes

1. "This creative power (māyā) of Mine, consisting of divine elements, is hard to transcend. Only those who put their trust in Me alone go beyond it".
3. See diagram at the end of the paper.
13. *Bhagavad Gītā*, 8.17:
   saha-yauga-parantam ahar yad brAhmAno viduḥ,
   nātirīk yuga-shāsavatīṇāṁ te hri-ratrā-vidyā jānāti.
   "A day of Brahmā lasts a thousand ages, a night equally long. Only by knowing this can man know day and night".

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"ages" = 4,320,000 years.)
See Raja Rao, op.cit., p.85: "That is why Indians wrote no history..."

14. The Vedanta Sūtras of Rādārāyaṇa with the Commentary by Saṅka-


indeed suggests that this is precisely the problem with the
Marxist vision. In the relevant passages of his introduction
(notably pp.8-9 & 22) he seems to be identifying the Marxist
Real in fact with this dialectic of māyā (the "meta-text"): "Matter or material Nature is dynamic (as in Marx) and in-
cludes everything that is subject to change...". Naturally,
this means that the absolute Real or truth remains elusive
even to the Marxist who in fact operates, like the Indian,
within mediated systems. Zaehner sees the mystical experi-
ence (especially in his Hindu and Muslim Mysticism (London:
Athlone, 1960) and Concordant Discord (Oxford: Clarendon,
1970) as the only way out of the dilemma. According to him,
the Real is not the absolute consciousness of Marx ("Con-
sciousness does not determine life; life determines con-
sciousness", wrote Marx in The German Ideology) but the know-
ledge of Brahman.

17. Tulsidāsa, Rāmacaritamānasā, ed. S.N. Caube (Kāśī, 1948). All
references are made to this edition.

18. John Lukacs, Historical Consciousness of the Remembered Past

19. F.R. Alrichin, "The Reconciliation of Jñāna and Bhakti in
Rāmacaritamānasā", Religious Studies, Vol. XII, No. 1 (March,
1976), pp. 81-91.

20. A complete breakdown of temporal and spatial categories
occurs in Kāka Bhusupdi's narrative because he "participates"
in the perennial birth of Rāma.

21. The process is basically allegorical. However, I prefer the
word symbolic because allegory as a form is a Christian mode
of operation in literature, grounded as it is within a spec-
ific ethical and moral system.

"Listen Garuḍ, knowledge, asceticism, work and science
are all masculine and being masculine their strength
is of a different kind (and therefore they cannot over-
power) women who are in fact weak (and fragile)
".

23. Vijay Mishra, "Rāmacaritamānasā: the Re-writing of a Sanskrit
Epic", Indian Literature, Vol. XXI, No. 3 (May-June, 1978),
pp.121-137.
24. Rāma-caritamānasa, VII, 116, caupā. "Māyā and bhakti are feminine, this is known to all. But bhakti is Rāma’s beloved and māyā is a helpless temple dancer." The notion of Rāma’s beloved coalesces bhakti and Sītā into one category. This conjunction brings together within one paradox both bhakti and māyā.


28. Even in Tulsīdāsa, a case for a total narrative transformation of the dialectic can be made if one looks at the sub-heroes of the epic, especially Bharat, Bālī and Bhibhiṣāna.


30. As an over-riding principle, the transformation of a dialectic into narrative is central to the novel form and hence is not peculiar to R.K. Narayan.


32. Rosie’s outbursts, her almost irrational love for her husband could be placed within the Indian convention of striya caritra, roles which a woman is expected to play.

33. The intrusion of the imbecile to upset the "idyllic" state of affairs is a dramatic set-piece common to all literatures.


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