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## A Portrayal of a Cross Section of India in Lavanya Sankaran's *The Red Carpet*

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### **Abstract:**

Lavanya Sankaran is a critically acclaimed Indian writer in English and her first book, *The Red Carpet* (2005) is a well-received short story collection containing eight short stories. These stories articulate the struggles between the old-fashioned and new cosmopolitan world of Bangalore. Ageless tradition and modern technology collide in this witty yet deeply compassionate collection set in contemporary India. The stories in *The Red Carpet* address contemporary issues humorously, such as the cultural tensions in India impacted by globalisation. The characters in the stories belong to different social backgrounds and upbringings, and how they react to the societal fluctuations from a traditional one to a reasonably modern one forms the crux of the stories. She has her finger on the economic pulse that motivates many of these striving young characters, all from the cosmopolitan city of Bangalore, to embrace modern technological changes at the peril of rupturing family and culture. Through a delicious potpourri of characters, all band in Bangalore (Bangaluru), India's main outsourcing and IT hub, Sankaran satirically reveals the wide chasm between the East and the West, the young and the old, the traditional and the modern, and the religious and the secular. More than the clash between tradition and modernity, Sankaran is fascinated by the nuances and contrasts, the different degrees of tension that keep the wires humming in a city like Bangalore. Wry humour and a delicious grasp of friction between generations in

Bangalore, India's own Silicon valley, are the hallmarks of Lavanya Sankaran's fresh and original talent.

**Keywords: conflict between tradition and modernity, societal fluctuations, contemporary issues, cultural tensions, globalization.**

The New generation Indian English Writers are being widely recognised both within and outside the nation. Lavanya Sankaran is one among them. She is a graduate of Bryn Mawr College and currently resides in Bangalore with her family. Her previous employments have included investment banking in New York and consulting in India. Her writing has been published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Sankaran's first book *The Red Carpet* (2005) is a well-received short story collection. It was at the top of Hachette's bestseller charts for over two years. Even before the book got published, the title story, *The Red Carpet*, was selected by the prestigious bookstore *Barnes and Nobles* as part of their "Discover Great Authors" programme for summer 2005.

The collection is marked by wisdom and wit, and contains eight short stories: "Bombay This", "Closed Curtains", "Two Four Six Eight", "The Red Carpet", "Alphabet Soup", "Mysore Coffee", "Birdie Num-Num", "Apple Pie, One by Two." The stories articulate the struggles between the old-fashioned and new cosmopolitan world of Bangalore (Bengaluru). Ageless tradition and modern technology collide in this witty yet deeply compassionate collection set in contemporary India. The stories poke and explore the aspirations of Indians educated abroad in the United States, England, Australia and elsewhere. They question what this cosmopolitan education offers younger generation and how such worldly lives affect the older generations.

"Bombay This," a fine opener, is about a software lad, Ramu, who is in his 30s. He is a member of the ruling class buttressing its traditional privileges with new technocratic trimmings. He dolefully observes that he has definitely reached an age and felt the matrimonial

instinct triggering in him for some time and finally asks his mother to start looking for brides. The only problem is that his modern thought does not match with his mother's. He thinks that "Ma appeared to be looking for a wife for herself" (7). When his mother suggests a Bombay-bred snob, Ashwini, as a suitable match for him, Ramu engages in an unenthusiastic appraisal of Ashwini whom he had met on different occasions. Soon Ramu's mother rejects the proposal when she comes to know that Ashwini donated a kidney to her cousin a few years back but Ramu sees it as a symbol of courage and plans to marry her. He draws an impressive checklist on why Aswini is a suitable partner. But Ashwini chooses Murthy, a friend of Ramu, as her companion. Ramu in his chauvinism constructs a stereotyped identity of Ashwini. This story is truly Ramu's, he holds the stage. Bangalore lingo and the identifiable predicament of Ramu makes this story delightful.

"Closed Curtains" is the most riveting story in the collection that sensitively traces the isolation and loneliness of old people in a city that has moved on. It takes place at a locality just off Ulsoor Road where the neighbourhood is fighting against encroaching modernization. Mr. D'Costa is the unofficial news-monger of this neighbourhood. His business is to know the day-to-day activities of his neighbours and being update with all the gossip. The city has become an absorbing spectacle for the D'Costa who cannot reach out to the new crop of people who have moved into his neighbourhood and share his city. He lives with his neurotic cartoon-addicted wife in an old house, and his only son has married a non-Indian and settled with his family in Australia. D'Costa constructs meaning to his life by identifying himself with the highs and lows of the young couple, the Kapurs, who have moved across the road. The frame of the window through which he gazes at the happenings in the new family fills up the vacuum of his life. Mr. D'Costa finds himself intensely curious about the lives of these "puppies" and what goes on behind their closed curtains. Mrs. Kapur who gets estranged from her husband, overwhelmed by the imbalance and the mess that her life has gotten into, indifferently casts D'Costa off, thus excluding him and drawing herself behind a closed curtain. The tale reaches

the level of bathos when D'Costa immediately identifies another neighbour to draw into his empty world.

The story "Two Four Six Eight," is a flashback into the life of a ten-year-old girl, who is studying at a convent school in Bangalore. Her life comprises of school and reading St. Enid with Malory Towers and St. Clare's being her gospel. The flashback is into a time when her school life is threatened and events are brought to a head by the actions of her maid, Mary and her school teacher, Mrs. Rafter. Mary insidiously subverts the hegemony of her mistress. Mary leaves a scar on the tender consciousness of her young ward. Yet the narrator has moved on and the enchanting world outside her home draws her away from the lonely and embittered woman. Mary is caught up in her small world where she fawns over and flatters her mistress – the only type of existence that is possible for her. This story details beautifully the hateful relationship she shares between Mary and Rafter and the way both of them were connected.

In "The Red Carpet" Sankaran explores the subtle ways in which the notion of difference wedges between master/mistress and the servant/driver/ayah. In this story, power manifests in multifarious ways. Poor, uneducated Rangappa @ Raju has to support his family on a pittance of a salary as a driver, while his glamorous employer lives in idle richness. He is well-paid and his "May-dum" (madam) is extremely well-spoken, not raising her voice at him even when he causes a dent in the brand-new car. She is very helpful towards her maids. Raju's only problem is with his "May-dum's" morality – wearing short skirts, drinking, smoking, going to "hell-houses" (pubs) and swearing. Generally, he ignores all these attributes of her as she has always been kind to him. She has taken an interest in his daughter and she visits her school and pays the fees for the whole year. She, too, visits his house and meets his family. The story effectively portrays how the "May-dum" wields a control over her staff. She wins the loyalty of her servants. She obtains her power through different ways. She obliterates the individual identity of her servants by calling all her drivers by a common name, Raju. By calling the new driver Rangappa as Raju, she deprives him of subjectivity; he is frozen into a

constructed identity. Raju, like the other servants in the house, is co-opted in the agenda of the rich woman who derives her identity through this subtle expression of power.

“The Alphabet Soup” is a story of a young Indian woman, Priyamvada. The story would resonate with many who left India several decades ago and have raised their now-college aged children in America. Priyamvada, a second generation American of Indian origin, cannot accept the way her parents have assimilated in the U.S. She sets off on a journey to India, which is an ethnographic trail. She occupies a peculiar position, that is, she is an insider/outsider in India, she occupies the liminal space. She uses the rites, rituals and practices of Tamil Brahmins as a cultural text to understand and define her identity which she concedes is multiple due to her origin, beliefs, relationships and various social and cultural factors that shape her behaviour. In Bangalore, she finds that her young, unmarried cousin, despite being raised in very traditional Brahmin-caste home, casually broke even the strictest traditions. The story illustrates the way immigrant households absorb the customs of their adopted homeland, retain the traditions of their own culture and try to balance the world.

“Mysore Coffee” is the darkest story in the collection. It takes place on Wall Street. It describes how a professional business-woman working in investment banking in Bangalore interacts with her Indian and American co-workers, handles office politics and her own emotional baggage and career. The story lays bare the distressed psyche of Sita, an investment consultant, who fosters a dark desire to throw herself from the roof of a tall building from where her father jumped when she was a child. The incident makes Sita and her mother a pariah in the society. The mother and the daughter live in a cocoon – both have the ghosts of the past to handle. Her mother is placid by day, but is ripped apart by agony and anguish at night. The daughter browses the net for suicide hotline and constantly struggles to keep the equation of pain and pain-coping resources in the right proportion to keep away from the rooftop of Palace Tower that keeps beckoning her. Ramu, the suave man who contemplated marrying Ashwini in “Bombay This,” is a compulsive flirt in this story. He facetiously deals with Sita because

she is pitiable and will remain mute even when under her nose, he steals the project she had been exploring and working on. The suicide of a New Delhi socialite causes her to flirt with thoughts of the hows and whys of the suicide. It is a well written story of a woman juggling serious issues in her life.

“Birdie Num-Num” states that there is a genetic palimpsest that no one can escape. Tara is working on her Ph.D. program in the U.S and returns to India to write her thesis on Labour Policy. Her parents think that 27 is far too old for her to remain unmarried. So, they determined to finalise her marriage. She watches helplessly the predatory manner in which her parents stalk her and rid her of choices. Against some subtle psychological warfare carried out by her parents, Tara tries to introduce her world to her mother. She consents to have a party organised in her house. What the daughter does not understand, but something her mother always knew, is that there are cultural patterns deep down in her female psyche that she shared with the women of her family, that no amount of assimilation of foreign values could wipe out. The story is about a clash between the older and younger generation who wants to carry out changes in thoughts and actions.

“Apple Pie, One by Two” revisits the chummy software lads, who have attended the best Engineering schools in America and are eagerly sought after for jobs. Murthy and Swamy, two budding entrepreneurs have always shared their life experiences together. Since college, they used to share coffee, one by two and after onto graduate school in America and jobs in Silicon Valley they have always lived together sharing their experiences. They return to Bangalore after founding their own company, but with the dot-com bust they have to sell their company. Swamy starts making plans to return to America, but is shaken when Murthy announces that he is not going back. Murthy decides to stay back and tide over the recessions and setbacks in India, while Swamy does not want to feel washed away in a lost land and spend the rest of his life thinking ruefully of America as a faraway dream land or golden city that he allowed to slip away out of his hands. The story is a farewell to Swamy who is going back to

the U.S as it is a toast to his success. But the victor is truly the man who decides to stay in India. It is a very unique story about American educated, Indian born, high-tech startup founders. Many can relate the story to the ups and downs, the choices and dilemmas that many successful workers faced when India's Silicon Valley and outsourcing boom occurred.

In *The Red Carpet*, Lavanya Sankaran demonstrates considerable skill in constructing a collection that achieves both thematic coherence and narrative diversity. Rather than relying on heavy-handed linking devices, she employs Bangalore itself as the unifying consciousness—the city serves as India's Silicon Valley, positioned at the chaotic crossroads between past and present. This geographic anchoring transcends mere setting to become a character in its own right, one whose contradictions mirror those of its inhabitants.

Sankaran's approach to characterization merits particular attention. Where many short story collections suffer from what might be termed “authorial ventriloquism”—where ostensibly different characters become mere mouthpieces for a singular voice—Sankaran creates genuinely distinct personas across class lines. Her cast spans from software engineers to car drivers like Raju, from Non-Resident Indians like Priyamvada to traditional Tamil Brahmins, each rendered with authentic particularity rather than broad demographic strokes. The recurring characters serve not as lazy structural shortcuts but as subtle threads in what the author weaves into a complex social tapestry, suggesting the intimate interconnectedness of urban life.

The collection's central preoccupation with tradition versus modernity risks falling into the predictable territory of cultural cliché, yet Sankaran navigates this familiar terrain with nuanced sophistication. Rather than presenting a simple binary of “old versus young,” she explores the psychological and social complexities that emerge when American-trained professionals return to their old-fashioned families. This dynamic extends beyond mere generational conflict to encompass questions of authenticity, belonging, and the price of cosmopolitan mobility.

Lavanya Sankaran's treatment of economic stratification deserves critical examination. While the collection admirably encompasses "pampered American University students" alongside "traditional vegetarian Tamil Brahmins," Sankaran's own class position—as someone who has worked in investment banking in New York—demonstrably influences her portrayal of economic inequality. Her familiarity with Bangalore's "nouveau riche" occasionally reveals the limitations of cross-class representation, where her genuine empathy for affluent characters contrasts with a more superficial treatment of those from lower economic strata.

Sankaran's deployment of "native lingo and cultural soup" raises important questions about linguistic authenticity in contemporary Indian English literature. Her facility with local idiom and cultural reference points establishes credibility. Yet, one must consider whether this linguistic code-switching serves genuine narrative purposes or merely provides exotic flavor for readers unfamiliar with South Indian urban culture. The challenge for any writer navigating multiple cultural registers is to avoid both sanitized universalism and performative localism. The collection's exploration of neocolonial dynamics—particularly the relationship between American corporate culture and Indian social structures—demands more rigorous critical scrutiny. While Sankaran effectively captures the surface tensions between Western professional values and traditional family expectations, the deeper structural critiques of economic dependency and cultural hegemony remain somewhat underdeveloped. The stories excel at depicting individual psychological conflicts but occasionally fall short of interrogating the systemic forces that create these dilemmas.

*The Red Carpet* succeeds most fully as a work of social observation, offering readers a window into the lived experience of India's emerging professional class during a period of rapid economic transformation. Sankaran's prose demonstrates considerable technical proficiency, and her ability to inhabit multiple perspectives across gender, class, and generational lines speaks to genuine imaginative range. However, the collection's focus on

middle and upper-middle class concerns, while skillfully executed, ultimately limits its scope. The “beggars” mentioned alongside “billionaires” remain largely peripheral figures, raising questions about whose stories deserve full narrative attention. This selective focus reflects not artistic failure but rather the inherent constraints of writing from within particular social positions.

Lavanya Sankaran deftly captures a city at a pivotal juncture, stringing together the lives of individuals caught at the crossroads of tradition and transformation, as the genteel “Pensioners' Paradise” of old Bangalore morphs into a sprawling global metropolis. The vestiges of the old city seamlessly merge, in Lavanya’s stories, with the hip-hop culture of the new city that boasts of pubs, shopping malls and neon-lit MG Road. She interestingly weaves together the various stories in *The Red Carpet* – the changing soul-scape of the city becomes the binding space where various characters play out their parts. Some characters appear in more than one story and reveal various shades of their personality in different contexts and in their relationships with different people. The glimpses of these characters over many stories build like layers to reveal the kaleidoscope of human nature. With wry humour and a sharp sense of the tension between generations, she portrays the cultural and emotional shifts happening in Bangalore, often called India’s Silicon Valley.

*The Red Carpet* is an extraordinary, enjoyable, witty and humane collection of stories as rich and absorbing as any novel. Sankaran’s appreciation of brevity is most evident in her endings. She patiently explores the textures of differences in each encounter and then suddenly ties up – or occasionally disentangles – the encounter. Each time, the city proves itself to be capacious enough to embrace the new while comforting the old. The stories in this collection address the contemporary issues humorously such as the cultural tensions in India impacted by globalisation. Sankaran demonstrates a keen sensitivity to the economic forces that propel Bangalore’s ambitious youth toward technological modernity, even as this pursuit threatens to unravel deep-rooted familial and cultural bonds. Set in India’s bustling IT and outsourcing

capital, Bangalore (Bengaluru), her narrative unfolds through a diverse cast of characters whose lives converge in a city caught between competing worlds. With satirical precision and humanizing nuance, she exposes the widening gulf between East and West, youth and age, tradition and modernity, faith and secularism. However, rather than portraying these tensions as binary clashes, Sankaran is more attuned to their intricate entanglements—the subtle gradations and everyday frictions that sustain the city's restless energy. Her interest lies not in resolution, but in the dissonance itself: the buzzing wires of a metropolis where inherited pasts and imagined futures intersect in unpredictable, often poignant ways. The collection's greatest strength lies in its refusal to offer easy resolutions to the cultural tensions it explores. Sankaran resists the temptation to provide neat reconciliations between tradition and modernity, instead allowing her characters to inhabit the uncomfortable spaces between competing value systems. This mature restraint elevates the work above simple cultural documentation toward genuine literary achievement.

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