

## URBAN CONTRASTS: CLASS, MODERNITY, AND HUMAN CONNECTION IN LAVANYA SANKARAN'S *THE RED CARPET*

**Mr. E. Senthilkumar**

Ph.D., Research Scholar (Part-Time)  
Department of English, E.R.K Arts and Science College  
Erumiyampatti, Dharmapuri

**Dr. B. Visalakshi**

Research Supervisor & Assistant Professor  
Department of English, E.R.K Arts and Science College  
Erumiyampatti, Dharmapuri  
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### Abstract

*The study explores the intricate themes of class, technology, and interpersonal relationships in Lavanya Sankaran's short story collection The Red Carpet, which was set in post-liberalization Bangalore — India's tech-driven urban frontier. Sankaran's narratives explore the tension between India's economic liberalization and its enduring socio-cultural structures by having a close textual readings and relevant secondary sources, this study highlights it portrays the class stratification through subtle domestic interactions and persistent social boundaries. Further, the insights from Satish Deshpande and Leela Fernandes underscore on how the economic reform in India reconfigures — but does not eliminate — caste and class hierarchies prevailing the society for a long time. The paper also examines on the evolving familial and romantic relationships in light of cultural transitions, with scholars like Meenakshi Mukherjee emphasizing the negotiation between autonomy and tradition, especially for women. In this interdisciplinary approach applied to the paper, places Sankaran's literary work within larger socio-political discourses which reflects the anxieties, aspirations, and contradictions of contemporary Indian urban life in emotional context.*  
**keywords:** Post-liberalization, class-stratification, globalization, socio-cultural structures

### Introduction

Lavanya Sankaran's *The Red Carpet* (2005) is a collection of eight stories set in Bangalore city which emblematic of India's rapid economic and technological transformation. These stories reflect the intersection of tradition and modernity through the lives of its characters from domestic servants and auto drivers to tech-savvy executives and NRI returnees. This paper explores how Sankaran employs the themes of class division, technological influence, and evolving relationships to reveal the complexities of contemporary Indian society. Her stories portray how technology acts as both a bridge and a barrier between social classes and generations, and how relationships are renegotiated in the light of changing socio-economic contexts.

### Class Stratification And Social Hierarchies

Terry Eagleton highlights the role of literature in society and how it helps to portray the realities prevailing in the society on the whole. "Literature is not ideology-free but reflects material conditions and class relations." Eagleton (145). The same is being highlighted in Sankaran's portrayal of class is marked by both subtle resistance and resignation. In "*Bombay This*," the driver Raju experiences social segregation despite proximity to affluence:

"The family drank their tea from porcelain cups with thin gold bands. Raju drank his tea in the kitchen from a steel tumbler" (Sankaran 27).

This image underscores the enduring caste-class boundaries in Indian society. Sociologist Satish Deshpande explains this in *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*, stating:

“Economic liberalization did not erase caste or class; it merely reconfigured their visibility and function in public life” (Deshpande 124).

Likewise, in “The Red Carpet,” the elitist tone Mrs. Choudhury adopts towards her maid Mala, despite her cosmopolitan lifestyle, reveals an embedded class consciousness:

“She spoke to Mala as she might speak to a child... ‘My son is coming. From America’ (Sankaran, 144).

A renowned literary critic Chelva Kanaganayakam in his work highlights its value where literature uses the culture and identity as:

“The Indian English short story often uses domestic settings to explore power structures, particularly the nexus between class and linguistic superiority” (*Indian English Literature Since Independence*, 2014, p. 67).

### **Technology as a Catalyst of Change**

The rise of technology in post-liberalization India has transformed in both economy and deeply reshaped the personal identities, communication, employment and social structures. In Indian English literature has actively engaged with these changes, portraying technology as a tool of empowerment and an origin of alienation. Technology is both empowering and alienating in Sankaran's stories. In “Apple Pie, One by Two,” Arthi feels inadequate around digital tools:

“Arthi had never touched a computer before. She stared at the screen in awe, afraid to press a button” (Sankaran 109).

This technological gap becomes symbolic of a deeper socio-economic divide.

In *Technologies of Self: South Asian Fiction in the Digital Age*, Anjali Gera Roy argues:

“Access to technology in post-1991 India has created new epistemic classes, separating not just rural from urban but also poor urban from elite urban” (Roy 92).

Additionally, in “The Power of Prayer,” Sankaran shows how digital communication — emails, not calls — results in emotional distancing:

“Rajeev had not called in three weeks, but he had emailed to say he was busy with a product launch” (Sankaran 76).

This echoes Manuel Castells’ observation as follows

“In the informational age, connectivity increases but intimacy declines” (*The Rise of the Network Society*, 2000, p.368).

The Indian English literature presents technology as a complex, double-edged force: it promises liberation and mobility but often delivers alienation, exclusion, and anxiety. Lavanya Sankaran in her works depict the ordinary lives are caught in the flux between tradition and transformation.

### **Relationship Dynamics: Between Tradition and Modernity**

The study on relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, employers and workers, friends and lovers are constructed, negotiated and often fractured in the face of social change. The personal relationships in *The Red Carpet* reflects on the generational conflict and societal transition. In “Mysore Coffee,” Geeta’s mother disapproves of her independence:

“People will talk, Geeta. A girl drinking coffee alone in a restaurant? What will they think?” (Sankaran 57).

Such moments reveal the negotiation between traditional familial expectations and individual autonomy.

### **As Meenakshi Mukherjee states:**

“Modern Indian fiction explores how women must constantly negotiate between belonging and becoming” (*The Perishable Empire*, 2000, p. 93).

In “Two Four Six Eight,” class and childhood friendship intersect the views as “She was not like us. She did not speak like us. Her father worked in a factory” (Sankaran137).

The above passage highlights how early socialization instills notions of class purity, a point also raised by Leela Fernandes:

“Middle-class formation in India includes the internalization of spatial and moral boundaries that reinforce class distinctions” (*India’s New Middle Class*, 2006, p. 89).

Critics regard Sankaran as a writer who captures the nuanced textures of modern India without sentimentality. Rachel Donadio of *The New York Times* writes:

“Her clear-eyed stories blend irony and empathy to reflect the contradictions of an evolving nation.”

### **Scholar Susan Comfort emphasizes Sankaran's contribution to post-liberalization literature:**

“In representing cosmopolitan India, Sankaran’s narratives offer a bottom-up perspective, revealing how class anxiety and cultural displacement accompany economic reform” (*Postcolonial Fictions of Capital*, 2012, p. 148).

The relationships portrayed in the stories are no longer fixed within rigid traditions; instead, they are sites of **negotiation, resistance, and transformation**. The love, family, or friendship, modern Indian characters must constantly balance the pull of modern freedom with the weight of cultural memory.

### **Conclusion**

Lavanya Sankaran’s *The Red Carpet* offers a nuanced exploration of India’s socio-cultural landscape in the wake of global development changing the context in society. Through vivid and character-driven narratives set in Bangalore, the stories bring out the persistent tensions between inherited traditions and emergent avant-gardism. The themes such as class, technology, and relationships are treated in isolation and also intertwined to reveal on how the economic mobility does not necessarily lead to social equity but, and how the digital revolution leads to transformative and often exacerbates existing divides prevails in society. Sankaran’s portrayal of middle-class aspiration, domestic labor dynamics, generational conflict and technological alienation reflects the lived realities of urban India with authenticity and critical insight. The parallels drawn in the likes of scholars like Satish Deshpande, Anjali Gera Roy, and Meenakshi Mukherjee, this paper underscores how Sankaran's fiction functions as a reflective paradigm of post-liberalization society. *The Red Carpet* is both a portrait of a changing city and a literary map which shifts human values with a quiet but powerful commentary on identity, connection, and the costs of progress.

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