

REFLECTIONS ON
JAYAKANTHAN'S NOVELLA
ROCKING CHAIRS

Can one conclude the characters in the novella - disguised as a play - seem far-fetched?

Given the complexity of human nature and the fact that normal human appetites serve as the real key to happy, meaningful lives, I firmly believe *Rocking Chairs* is a credible story.

A few days ago I was reading Ann Taylor's novel *The Homesick Restaurant*. It is about a dysfunctional family - like the ones in *Rocking Chairs*- with too many rules and too little love. In an interview Ann Taylor said: "Normally, you would expect people to become homesick when they are denied the warmth of a close, well knit family. But when things go wrong, they could actually become sick because of their own family. That's what happens in my story."

Rocking Chairs is written like a play - albeit in a Tennessee Williams mode. The narration is in the present tense and occasionally one feels the author is hovering over the reader giving stage directions.

The story can be critiqued in several levels.

The principal characters show no maturity. The matriarch Alankaravalli - strong-willed and manipulative - demands our empathy as a character who continues to treat her offspring as children - that's how they are referred to in the story - and they do behave like children only. They seem blocked when it comes to dealing with their normal, sexual impulses, clearly and honestly.

Alankaravalli treats sex as a taboo and successfully beats her children into considering sex as a sin, and she attaches this stigma to herself and to others as well. While considering anything that resembles a man-

woman relationship is not a subject to be directly confronted with or discussed openly, the mother continues to demonstrate a perverse and unhealthy habit of eave-dropping into others' private matters. So does Adalarasan; he too displays a puerile frame of mind in these matters and shares his mother's outlook; with his lewd behavior he even violates the privacy of his sister, Janaki.

The ubiquitous rocking chair serves as a metaphor for this family - a family that indicates only a semblance of motion, but no actual movement. The Alankaravalli family seems poised for a change, but it is forever stuck in a limbo. Any meaningful shift in the family could come only from an outside source; that force appears in the form of Sundaram who is co-opted by Janaki, the insider. But he too fails in the end to bring about any change.

One can find a few similarities between *Rocking Chairs* and Tennessee Williams' *the Glass Menagerie*.

Both deal with families that more or less remain stagnant as the events move from one end to the other; they are run, managed and manipulated by domineering women.

Alankaravalli's situation is no less pathetic than Amanda's. She carries the burden of a typical Indian woman - never forgetting for a moment that she once belonged to an elitist group. Just as the ubiquitous presence of the photo of Amanda's husband - the traveling salesman - in their family living room haunts the family's past in *Menagerie*, so do the memories of the scandal involving Alankaravalli's husband's suicide in a remote hotel as well as the faded glory of her late father, the scholarly Rao Bahadur Makizamaran Pillai. Alankaravalli struggles hard to bring up her children - but a false sense of snobbery colors her every act and gesture. She is mentally stuck in the past, fiercely clings to status quo and dreads any change would only harm her and, therefore, her

children. She grows very protective of her brood; her insecurity also breeds the insecurities in her children. There is something sinister in the way the mother manipulates them - even as she knows they are growing with no self respect or pride. No child in the family is encouraged to feel about his or her uniqueness. We notice Alankaravalli does give an impression - when Janaki is around - that she trusts her; she keeps repeating this until Janaki expresses a desire to marry Sundaram and then demands that Sundaram must move into their household after marriage. This seems a sinister plot on her part to insist something that her instinct might have told her that Sundaram would definitely refuse.

One of Alankaravalli's constant refrains is that a child born in her womb would do nothing wrong; there are two ways of looking at this. It could mean she has a high regard for her children - tracing back to her own ancestors, the family tradition and values; the other side is she is putting guilt in Janaki's mind when the daughter feels like cutting loose from the family's stranglehold and start a new life with an outsider. Here again Alankaravalli plays a vicious role in handling her daughter's wish. There are signs that Alankaravalli has special love for Janaki - the youngest of her children - but the mother is wary of her because Janaki tries to do things never even dreamt by her other children. Aadalarsan is phony and self-righteous always deferring to his mother's opinion and judgment; Chellam is a timid person who doesn't even know that she leads a limited, sheltered life.

If we construct a table with these contrasting characters, it may look like this:

Table with Contrasting Characters

<u>Alankaravalli</u>	<u>Sundaram</u>
Has many hang ups	Shows moderation
Domineering	Extroverted
Manipulative	Sensitive to others

Religious, insecure
Scared of change
Elitist, Lives in the past

Tendency to appease
Welcomes change

Janaki

Hates family stranglehold,
Wants change
Open, honest
Grows with story

Aadalarasan

Passive, seeks no
change
Blocked, phony
doesn't grow,
Desires no change

Muthumanikkam and Janaki can be grouped as one pair, and this would serve as a foil to Aadalarasan/Chellam.

Muthumanikkam is introduced only in the last scene and, in certain ways; he is closer to Janaki than to other siblings. Like Janaki, he too questions the basic assumptions of Alankaravalli but is not strong enough to stand up to her. The irony is that Muthumanikkam is seen on his return from the hospital to be shaping up like a normal, healthy individual; he exhibits sanity as well as compassion for his sister's desire for a more congenial atmosphere to fulfill her goals and he eagerly welcomes Sundaram as a positive influence in their family. But he is still a victim to his mother's manipulation and retreats into his shell.
