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Monday, April 20th, 2009 AT 5:04 PM

Tags: fiction, Somerset Maugham, With The Tiger

Inez Baranay has recreated Somerset Maugham's The Razor's Edge in Australian and Indian setting as With The Tiger. She explains to Biswadip Mitra the changes she has introduced in it

The task of updating a novel, originally written by someone else, without losing the continuity, can be challenging. Australian writer Inez Baranay had long felt the need to take up the challenge to recreate Somerset Maugham's 1944 novel The Razor's Edge. So, in her recent work With the Tiger, Baranay brought back Larry Darrell, Elliott Templeton, Isabel, Gray and the rest of the Americans of Maugham's novel, changed them into Australians and let them drive the story in Australian and Indian settings of the 1980s.

In Maugham's work, Larry returns to his native place in Illinois in America, only to travel back to Europe and experience life there. In Baranay's work, it is India where Larry travels to. Referring to her choice of India as a replacement for Europe, the writer says, "After my previous novel Neem Dreams, that was set in India, I could not leave India behind. I had many reasons to keep returning here, in reality and in imagination."

I ask her to define the character of Larry. For Baranay, Larry is a young man "who is not satisfied to accept the privileges and opportunities of a safe comfortable life in Australia but wants to keep inquiring into the meaning of chance and death."

Maugham's novel dwells on Indian spirituality and possibly played a major role in beginning the



Inez Baranay

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Maugham's novel owes its Indian spirituality and possibly played a major role in beginning the spiritual craze for India among the Western readers. In *With the Tiger* too, Larry moves in search of spirituality and we find references of ashrams, Sri Aurobindo, Mother and the text of Patanjali. Why is this clichéd 'spiritual' image of India in the writings by non-Indians, I wonder. "Many non-Indian writers also write biographies, histories, travel books and so on," Baranay says in defence, admitting, however, that there "does exist a cliché of spiritual India", perhaps in commercial and common writings. "I have always been sceptical about 'spiritual India'. In my experience, the claim for India's spiritual richness has been mostly made by Indians themselves," the writer says.

And because of this scepticism, Baranay avoided the spirituality angle in *Neem Dreams*. "It was recognised for steering clear of this cliché," she adds. "In *With The Tiger*, politics, art, theatre, personal relationships and other secular matters also play their part in the Indian scenes," Baranay affirms.

Different and open

Why did she set the story in the 1980s, I ask. Baranay explains: "In Maugham's novel, many of the characters are affected by the stock market crash of 1929. In *With The Tiger*, it is the financial and the political scandals of the late 1980s." Though the impact of the events is similar in both the works, there are differences. "In Maugham's novel, Larry's journey ends with India, but in mine, it begins there too," Baranay informs.

Moreover, in Baranay's novel, the narrating character is an openly gay playwright and other characters are gay too, unlike in Maugham's work. "This reflects contemporary realities" that stand in contrast to "the closeted nature of Maugham's homosexual world," she says.

That brings us to the domain of feminism in literature. I ask her whether creativity remains credible if defined by any 'ism'. "Well, feminism in literature would depend on the context. I suppose it would be literature informed by respect for women's autonomy," Baranay replies. "Any artist's creativity will be informed by their values, whether they can be labelled with an 'ism' or not. And readers and critics will judge works as they see fit, whether or not they employ any 'ism' to do so."

Art of expression

For Baranay, it depends on what she is writing when making a choice between plain narrative and artful language. "Certainly language is an art form and I love to see it employed with wit and originality. There is also art in plain language which is precise and evocative at once," she says. "Sometimes you want to be swept excitedly forward in a narrative without delay. Sometimes you want to saunter and look around you, like a stroll in the garden, pausing to admire an effect."

Baranay, who is of Hungarian origin, was born in Italy and later their family migrated to Australia. When probed about her views on 'multiculturalism' and the need for 'integration', considering her background, she says, 'multiculturalism' is simply a fact; "society is made up of many cultures, whether they are defined by national and ethnic origins, religious, historical and cultural affiliations, or a wide variety of identities and interests".

"The issue of 'integration' is raised when there is a perception that some group's separate identity and/or practices pose a threat to the whole."

But, won't 'homogeneity' adversely affect creative varieties? "I don't think 'homogeneity' is even an option, more so with the increased movements around the world, in the physical space or cyberspace or altered inner space of an individual," she says. "The only issue of 'multiculturalism' is the 'will' for the varied human kinds to live together," she explains.

Baranay is at ease with screenplays, novels as well as non-fictions. "I enjoy working in various genres," she says, though she finds the long fiction as "the most exacting and demanding form".

Adding to Baranay's enjoyment is her ongoing endeavour to write a memoir of European cities, each linked with a particular friendship. "A memoir of my times in India will probably be the next. I'm also working on screenplay and prose fiction ideas," she informs.

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