

Suppu (Aiyer's novel *Kamalampal Carittiram*) Malicious

Character In some ways, Suppu is the most complex character in this satirical novel about social problems in rural Tamil society at the turn of the twentieth century. On one level, she is despicable, a vicious gossip who turns husbands against wives and breaks up two marriages in the village. The author labels her the 'Commander-in-chief' of the Gossip Society. But he also says that 'she was not really a bad person. She had a generous nature and was kind, and compared to other village women, she listened to her mother-in-law. As least, she listened to her on Fridays [auspicious day] and on New Year's day.' Here, the author is playfully referring to the negative stereotype of the domineering mother-in-law and suggests that Suppu is at least a dutiful daughter-in-law, but only on certain days. She has a prodigious and dangerous memory, able to remember every detail of what happened on a particular day 15 years ago, and thus rake up old tensions and hostilities.

Activities As Commander-in-chief of the Gossip Society, Suppu presides over their weekly meetings. On other days, she operates like people in the 'Spanish Inquisition, striking up a seemingly innocent conversation and then hoarding any comments that might be likely to incriminate the person in the future.'

Illustrative moments

Malicious When Suppu sees two of Kamalampal's male relations in her house, she approaches and very skilfully hints that Kamalampal's sister-in-law has made insulting comments about her family. Without actually lying, Suppu is able to twist words in order to hurt other people. Her reason for sowing discord within Kamalampal's family is that Suppu feels rejected by that high-caste Brahmin family. Suppu feels that the too-good Kamalampal is a bit of a fraud and she intends to expose her baser nature.

Clever Suppu is also very clever and though she pretends to be illiterate is able to manipulate language to meet her own ends. When stirring up trouble, she takes care to use phrases that are appropriate to the person to whom she is attributing them. She thus mimics an untouchable, a merchant, a tribal person and a banker.

Discussion questions

The female gossip is a well-established stereotype in Western culture and literature. The appearance of Suppu, however, is probably the earliest example of this trope in an Indian novel.

Her speech presented the author with a problem that faces any writer who wishes to capture a spoken language. This problem is exacerbated in situations, such as late 19th century Tamil, where the gap between literary and spoken languages was large.