

**FROM ANOTHER ROADSIDE ATTRACTION  
TO SKINNY LEGS AND ALL:  
AN EXPLORATION OF RELIGION IN THE  
WORKS OF TOM ROBBINS**

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*For Mummy and Daddy*



July 20, 2000

## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the Dissertation titled **“From Another Roadside Attraction to Skinny Legs and All: An Exploration of Religion in the works of Tom Robbins”** which is being submitted by **Archana B. Kamalanabhan** for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy is her original work, and it has not been submitted previously for the award of any degree of this or any other university.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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# CHAPTER - I

## Introduction

For a writer, who was shunned by academic critics in the initial part of his career, Tom Robbins has, of late, received enormous attention. Books, learned and popular articles, reviews, collections of interviews – all have subjected Tom Robbins to unprecedented scrutiny. In general, this outpouring of criticism and interpretation has been beneficial and illuminating, not only for the reader but for the writer as well. Yet, most of the critical works have been rather limited in the breadth of their reference and it is seldom that there has been any attempt to formulate the broad issues of his novels or to locate his novels in terms of such a formulation.

In my dissertation, I have tried to survey the very broad issues that form the bulwark of Robbins's novels, which have been spread well over three decades of his writing career. I recognize that such an attempt is in danger of oversimplification and superficiality. Although something may be lost in depth, a great deal can be gained by seeking the broad picture even though at times it may get blurred and I feel that

it is better than a narrow focus that reveals every detail, every pore and blemish in a single face.

Before I try to formulate the issues dealt in this dissertation, we could do with a little bit of biographical information, to locate the man himself in his times. Robbins's zealous care for privacy makes biographical information about him that much more difficult to obtain. Like Salinger – and the even more elusive Thomas Pynchon – the author lives in seclusion.

Thomas Eugene Robbins was born in Blowing Rock, North Carolina on 22 July, 1936. He was the oldest of four children, his father being a power company executive and his mother, a nurse. He seems to have acquired his literary skills from his mother who in her free time taught Sunday school and wrote children's stories in religious magazines. He was educated in rural Virginia schools, attended Washington and Lee University from 1950 to 1952, the Richmond Professional Institute (now the Virginia Commonwealth University) and finally, the University of Washington, which he left in 1960. However, he allows himself to be described only as a "student of art and religion" who "dropped out" to write fiction in a Washington State fishing village. After he left the university, he



had a brief stint as a copy editor for the Richmond Times – Dispatch and later went West to the Seattle Times, where he worked as a copy editor and art critic.

It was while he worked in Seattle that he became interested in writing novels. In an interview published by the Northwest Review, Michael Strelow quotes Tom Robbins:

Personally I ask four things of a novel; that it make me think, make me laugh, make me horny, and awaken my sense of wonder. If many months have passed in which I've not encountered such a book, I know it's time to write one. I take out a sheet of blank paper and simply commence.<sup>1</sup>

And so, in a career which has spanned over three decades, Robbins has now published seven novels—*Another Roadside Attraction* (1971), *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), *Skinny Legs and All* (1990), *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* (1994) and *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* (2000).

Robbins's first novel was a financial disaster largely because it was marketed as a hard-back-to an unresponsive market. But *Another Roadside Attraction* developed its audience slowly, when its real market turned out to be the younger reader who could afford the cheaper paperback or borrow a tattered copy from a friend. Robbins's successes in the paperback market have continued to be substantial and he has managed to attract such a large reading audience among late-

<sup>1</sup> Michael Strelow, "Dialogue with Tom Robbins. (Interview), *Northwest Review* 20 (1982): 98.

teen and college readers, that Mitchell S. Ross rightly dubs him the "Prince of the Paperback Literati."<sup>2</sup> Reviewers and critics point out that his success with the late-high school and early college year audience is due to the mixture of loosely structured narrative, zany characters and Rabelaisian style which are particularly appealing to them.

By the time Robbins's second novel appeared, he had secured a modest but growing audience, an agent and a new publisher and soon he became a best selling American novelist. Now, many consider him as one of the few writers who have managed to gain that elusive status of an avant-garde popular writer and critics mention him alongside Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Ken Kesey and Robert M. Pirsig.

Reviewers frequently describe Robbins as one of the foremost writers of the countercultural 'West Coast' or 'Californian' school along with Ken Kesey and Richard Brautigan.<sup>3</sup> Some even consider him as one of the key seven figures who were actually instrumental in creating the Sixties counterculture movement, that eventually changed the way America lived, ate and thought.<sup>4</sup> His novels which are

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<sup>2</sup> Mitchell S. Ross, "The Prince of the Paperback Literati," *New York Times Magazine* (February 12, 1978): 16.

<sup>3</sup> R.H. Miller, "Tom Robbins," *Dictionary of Literary Terms Yearbook 1980* (Michigan: Gale, 1981) : 301.

<sup>4</sup> Peter O. Whitmer, *Aquarius Revisited* (New York : Macmillan, 1987); 1.

reminiscent of the countercultural movement are playful stories full of metaphysical imagery and romantic tendencies – stories filled with sex, drugs, encounters with spirits and discussions between deities while on the surface, they appear a little more than “pop” stories aimed at a specific audience and catering to its interests.

The Sixties were the most colorful and controversial era when many cultural changes swept through America. In such a turbulent time American fiction was enlarging its theme and looking historically outward as a result of changes in perception of forces like government, society and such other external system. It was trying to re-appraise the forces set loose upon the world while simultaneously analyzing the individual's power to face them. The realm, therefore, which these novelists explored was somehow beyond human existence and the measure of reason: it was a history of distorting power plays, large conspiratorial structures and huge technological systems.<sup>5</sup>

Yet to dismiss Robbins as just another writer of the sixties nostalgia is to do a great injustice to both the author and his body of work. His novels emphasize the themes of

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (New York : OUP, 1983), 63.

personal freedom, the pursuit of higher states of being through Eastern mysticism and escape from the confining life of urban California to the openness of the pastoral Pacific Northwest and at the same time reveal his deep appreciation and understanding of American culture, including its literature and philosophy.

Having been a witness as well as part of the counterculture movement, Robbins incorporates into his writings all the values that the movement endorsed mainly the belief that outward violence could be countered by inward spirit. So, in all his novels, the reader is confronted by an ideal of non-conformity that dates back to that 'Summer of Love' when the young were freaky and the Establishment worried. This immense faith in the individual has, of late turned pessimistic as seen in the writings of his recent forbears who often write black comedy and present a bleak prognosis for the modern world and a bleaker entry of the system into the very heart of the self, rendering humanism impossible and life absurd. In such a scenario, Robbins's wildly playful novels establish him as a joyous writer who celebrates human spirit and upbeat values.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Marowski and Jean C. Stine, ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism* Volume 32, (Michigan : Gale, 1985) : 365.

In this dissertation, I have tried to formulate the principal issues that constitute Robbins's writing-conflict and transcendence – by taking up his three novels for study – *Another Roadside Attraction*, *Still Life with Woodpecker* and *Skinny Legs and All*. It is a chronological survey because I feel that written in three different decades, these three novels are representative of the various stages in Robbins's growth as a novelist and of the different phases in his dramatization of the individual's dilemmas in his/her confrontation with society. But the conflicts that an individual has with various systems have been dealt with many novelists before Robbins. In fact, Robbins is more like a writer of Western fiction that tries to discard assumptions of imposing self and the enclosing external system. But, Mark Siegel argues in his book on Tom Robbins that

By re-defining and re-organizing the confrontation of the individual and society... he has been able to go beyond the dead-end of the formula Western to suggest new resolutions to these conflicts that traditionally have been embodied in most Western fiction.<sup>7</sup>

On reading Robbins's novels, the reader realizes that he is more bitterly anti-Establishment than Salinger or even Kerouac.<sup>8</sup> FBI and CIA violence and treachery and the conspiratorial practices of the Roman Catholic church are his

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Siegel, *Tom Robbins*, (Boise: Boise State University Press, 1980), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Warren French, "Tom Robbins" *Contemporary Novelists* (Michigan : St. James Press, 1996) : 852.

most frequent targets and form, the Establishment side in its conflict between it and the individual.

The first chapter of this dissertation is an analysis of his first novel *Another Roadside Attraction* as metafiction, where the novelist uses the technique of the metanarrator to dramatize the conflict between the individual and the government. Capitalist and communist form of governments are both seen as keeping the dollar and not the individual as their primary concern. *ARA* also provides the conflict between history and reality and Robbins goes on to subvert the former through his metanarrator.

The second chapter studies the least praised novel of Robbins, *Still Life with Woodpecker* as a book in which the conflicts are hoped to be resolved by direct action, and is a step ahead of his first novel which is ambiguous in its ending. By adopting the fairy tale pattern, Robbins provides us a glimpse of his interest in Eastern mysticism. And for the first time, we get a hint of transcendence as a solution to conflicts in *Still Life with Woodpecker*.

All these culminate in his novel *Skinny Legs and All* which forms the subject of study in my third chapter. All the different forms of the oppressive Establishment are ridiculed

but Robbins reserves his most vitriolic indictment for organized religion. Poking fun at religion and man's mortality is a time-honored practice but very few can carry it off with the incisiveness of Robbins. Man's mortality is the theme of his novel *Jitterbug Perfume* and religion forms the major issue of both *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Skinny Legs and All*. In the latter, he explores religion by going back to documented history and by pointing to the presence of a pre-documented history, he subverts and debunks both history and religion in the process.

Finally a word on transcendence. Transcendence as a resolution of conflicting elements lends a positive touch in the process of finding solutions to the problems that plague the individual. All these three novels take the reader out on a spiritual journey that eventually leads to a transcendence of the different splits inside and outside the individual. Through his novels, Robbins reveals to us how it is possible and why it is beneficial to achieve transcendence between dichotomous entities that keep an individual in an existential isolation from his/her world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jerry H. Bryant, *The Open Decision* (New York : Free Press, 1970), 8.

What Tom Robbins regards as important to the human being grows out of the assumptions that were the result of the turbulent times he lived in. He recognizes the thirst in the individual for the absolute, and how he/she soon realizes that it is beyond one's grasp. And so in his novels, he tries to dramatize this conflict and concludes affirmatively that our highest satisfaction is achieved when one discovers that external oppressive agents impose the limits of our condition. The emphasis therefore is upon two things-first, a transcendence of these limits which comes as a result of a consciousness that the sense of the self with all its contradictions can achieve its most vivid state and second, a spontaneity in the individual which helps him fight the repressiveness of an industrialized, technological, middle class society. And all his novels are a discovery of the absolute worth of the individual even in situations where old values have been lost. This dissertation is part of my effort to understand the journey to make that discovery.



## CHAPTER - II

### Another Roadside Attraction

When the West Coast Editor of Doubleday Luther Nichols asked Robbins what his new book was about, he replied that it was about “the discovery of the mummified body of Jesus Christ in the catacombs of Vatican, its subsequent theft and reappearance in America in a roadside zoo.”<sup>1</sup> Though this interview took place in 1967, Robbins actually began to write *Another Roadside Attraction* in 1968, and got it published in 1971. When it was first published *ARA* seemed destined to be a total financial failure. If it were not for the instant popularity Robbins’s later book *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) generated, *ARA* would easily have slipped into oblivion. But since 1976, *ARA* has sold well over 500,000 copies and has been one of his most read books.<sup>2</sup>

In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Robbins says that the idea for *Another Roadside Attraction* was with him since childhood. As he grew up, he realized that the whole concept of Western Civilization was predicated on the Divinity of Christ

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<sup>1</sup> Peter O. Whitmer, *Aquarius Revisited* (New York : Macmillan, 1987), 244.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Siegel, *Tom Robbins* (Boise: Boise State University Press, 1980), 9.

which who of paramount importance. All this, he says, led him to wonder.

“what would happen if we were to learn conclusively that Christ was not divine? What would this say about Western Civilization? Could we continue to lead moral and ethical lives, if Christ was proved to have died and stayed dead?”<sup>3</sup>

The Rolling Stone Magazine called *Another Roadside Attraction*, “the quintessential Sixties novel”<sup>4</sup> and there is very little doubt now that much of the cause for its popularity rests in the development of counterculture stereotypes brought in from the 1960s. *ARA* is essentially the story of two hippies who meet and fall in love with each other while working for the Indo-Tibetan Circus and Giant Panda Gypsy Blues Band. In the course of their tale, the reader is introduced to many counterculture individuals as well as the more ‘mainstream’ American individuals thus preparing the way for their conflict. Like in the spirit of the 1960s, the narrative intermixes sex, drugs and spiritual quests. And, the reader is introduced to Robbins’s questioning of authority in any form, a preoccupation which seems to recur in almost all of his novels and the reader also becomes aware of his encouragement of the use of naturally occurring substances like marijuana and

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<sup>3</sup> Larry McCaffery, and Sinda Gregory ed., *Alive and Writing : Interview with American Authors of 1980s* (Urbane: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 232.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Rogers, “Taking Tom Robbins Seriously,” *Rolling Stone* (November 17, 1977): 67.

psilocybin mushroom which the Establishment categorizes as hallucinatory and harmful narcotics.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter attempts to analyze the various conflicts between different dichotomous elements and the consequent transcendence that Robbins achieves in *Another Roadside Attraction*. It also analyzes how the use of metanarrator contributes to the achievement of transcendence in the novel. Dichotomy forms a major theme in *ARA* and Robbins skillfully introduces this concept right at the beginning of the novel.

The magician's underwear has just been found in a cardboard suitcase floating in a stagnant pond in the outskirts of Miami. However significant that discovery may be ... and there is the possibility that it could alter the destiny of each and everyone of us ... it is not the incident with which to begin this report.<sup>6</sup>

Straight away, Robbins prepares the way for juxtaposing two histories – one, of Amanda, a relatively insignificant individual in the scheme of things and another history that has been handed down by the previous generations. By his decision to ignore the latter and concentrate on the former, Robbins brings about a subversion of sorts, trivializing what has traditionally been considered important in comparison to Amanda's life story. By keeping Amanda as the central perspective, the narrator immediately establishes that two

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Robbins is an avid supporter of the LEMAR (Legalize Marijuana Movement).

<sup>6</sup> Tom Robbins, *Another Roadside Attraction* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 3.

stories will be running simultaneously and the integrity of the tale about the magician and his underwear will most probably be jeopardized by the narrator's own choice of the focus of the story, the girl Amanda. This focus is reinforced over the next few pages as the reader is provided with snippets of Amanda's past which demonstrate very broadly, the stages that she goes through in her development as a person till the time she meets her husband, a multi faceted drummer/magician/artist named John Paul Ziller.

It is in these pages, that Robbins establishes the characteristic features of 'meta-narrator'. *Another Roadside Attraction* is a self-reflexive novel and it puts to maximum use, the concept of the meta-narrator. M.H. Abrams defines a self-reflexive novel as one that "incorporates into narration reference to the process of composing the fictional story itself".<sup>7</sup> This becomes clear on page thirteen as the narrator intrudes upon the text with a biographical note. At this point, one would expect it to be about Amanda, but surprisingly it is about her husband. And the interference of this kind by the narrator is not the last. Throughout the narrative, the narrator not only intrudes with little notes, but also with his personal opinions and judgements. At this point, the reader still does not know

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<sup>7</sup> M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Bangalore: Prism, 1993), 168.

who the speaker is or why he is telling us the story in the first place. Nothing is clear other than the fact that the novel deals with a magician, his underwear and a girl called Amanda. These are blatant self-reflexive biographic sketches which continue throughout the first part and introduce the metafictional aspect of the novel. According to Patricia Waugh, metafiction is,

a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.<sup>8</sup>

The characters who will play important roles in both the stories are Plucky Purcell, Baby Thor, Ziller's baboon Mon Cul and of course Amanda and Ziller themselves. The elaborate names except Amanda are all suggestive of the platitudinous personality each one is and these characters represent a kind of comical response to the seemingly serious cosmic order. As each character is introduced with vivid descriptions, note that, in contrast, the narrator leaves himself out of any biographical sketches. Instead, the narrator chooses to remind the readers that he is not to be ignored, by establishing his presence through the tone and his choice of events he would narrate to

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<sup>8</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), 2.

the readers. For example, very early in the novel, there is a description when Amanda meets a Navajo man painting pictures in the sand. When she asks him about the function of the artist in the world, he says that it is to provide what life fails to<sup>9</sup>. This scene and many others that follow it establish the metaphysical dimension to the story. At this point, it must be mentioned that the characters themselves can be grouped into the 'metaphysical' and the 'realistic'. The metaphysical dimension to the story is almost exclusively developed in the characters of Amanda and Ziller. Amanda is completely an archetypal matriarchal figure and Ziller seems to be the one hanging in between, the 'threshold' character. The other two human characters, Plucky Purcell and the narrator serve to counteract not only the 'metaphysical' characters but also that dimension of the story. They represent what can be termed as the more 'realistic' point of view held by those in the empirical fields of science and business. Plucky is a renegade football and many critics identify the narrator as Robbins's alter ego. Again, there is a difference of degree between Plucky Purcell and the narrator. Plucky is the pessimistic of the two. Take for instance, his tirade against capitalism:

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<sup>9</sup> Robbins, *ARA*, 4.

'... the solutions to all issues are determined not by what will make the people most healthy and happy in their bodies and their minds but by economics'.<sup>10</sup>

Plucky perceives everything in life as being decided by the dollar. In other words, he finds that the earth moves because of the materialistic concerns of any authoritarian structure. Thus he is clearly an anti-metaphysical character. As already mentioned, the narrator too belongs to this category but he has a more positive vision and believes that inspite of all the decay in the system, it possesses the capacity to regenerate into something more meaningful. This and the fact that he represents the more analytical side to life become clear to the reader only in the latter part of the novel. But the narrator is very careful to remind the reader that his version of the story would be definitely biased by his point of view and his analysis would not be uninfluenced by his personal bias. Note when Amanda asks him if his 'record' would be of any use to historians, he says that

"If it's history, they want, they will have to accept it on my terms. I'm not without a sense of duty in this matter – but duty to whom is quite another business."<sup>11</sup>

This, once again, reminds the reader of the novelization that inevitably occurs to any history while at the same time it largely underscores the reality of a meta-narrator that is

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<sup>10</sup> Robbins, *ARA*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Robbins, *ARA*, 44.

guiding the story to its conclusion. Both these establish the metaphysical quality of the novel because fabrication of history and spuriousness of documentation are chief traits of metafictional prose.<sup>12</sup>

Part-II of the novel deals mainly with two stories: how Ziller and Amanda opened the funky roadside zoo called the Captain Kendrick Memorial Hot Dog Wildlife Preserve. This zoo is the brainchild of the Zillers and was an exotic menagerie of near extinct reptiles, its main attraction among many being the flea circus was the flea circus according to the signboard put up by the road. The zoo is the result of Amanda and Ziller's search for hidden meanings and deeper significance in whatever they saw which explains the strange assortment of animals present in the zoo. It is their way of parodying a zoo and thus defamiliarizing it.<sup>13</sup>

The second story deals with how Plucky came to steal the corpse of Jesus Christ from the underground bowels of Vatican, the centre of Roman Catholicism. The corpse itself and more importantly, its theft by Plucky are the focuses of the second story that explains why Ziller's underwear was found in a Miami pond in the first place.

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<sup>12</sup> John Kuehl, *Alternate Worlds* (New York : New York University Press, 1989), 82.

<sup>13</sup> Auberon Waugh, "Butterfly Nut." *The Spectator* (March 24, 1973): 366.



By now, the readers are made aware that Plucky has set out on a journey to discover Truth and through his letters we get to know that he has traveled to all parts of the world and finally got a job as security man in the Pope's office at Vatican. When an unexpected earthquake strikes that place, it opens up the darkest secrets that Christianity had buried in the deepest catacombs of Vatican. And of all the things Plucky is exposed to - the Holy Grail to the Pope's personal collection of pornography - Robbins makes him steal a mummified body, something which Plucky immediately realizes is that of Christ's. This is but the first blow in a continued and sustained attack that Robbins carries out against Christianity and every other organized religion that traffics in future rewards rather than in present realities."<sup>14</sup> Robbins views on religion tie him very strongly to many members of American literature and philosophy canon: William James, Walt Whitman, R.W Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne. All of them believed firmly that religion was like other oppressive systems which imposed limitations on the spirit of humanity, all along interested not in general welfare but in acquisition of power and authority. So we have Plucky speak of capitalism and communism in the same breath as Christianity thus reducing it to just another



<sup>14</sup> Robbins, ARA, 28.

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form of a power hungry system. But Robbins necessarily does not endorse the extreme views that Plucky holds about these institutions. Robbins's optimism makes his stand a moderate one and this becomes clear with the revelation of the character Marx Marvelous. So, despite a sustained attack on the validity of Christianity throughout the first half of the novel, it is not until Marx Marvelous tells his story that the reader begins to see the larger questions, the real issues that Robbins is posing through him. This happens only at the end of the second part and the readers come to know that it is indeed Marvelous who is the actual narrator of *Another Roadside Attraction*. As soon as this revelation is made, the narrator immediately explains that many of the events that he narrates have occurred even before he arrived at the zoo as a manager and that he has made use of letters, journals and considerable oral accounts to piece his story together.<sup>15</sup> So if a reader was wondering how the narrator could so clearly, write about, say perhaps, the inner working of Ziller's mind, his questions are put to rest. But more than anything else, this alludes to the influence of Henry James on Robbins. Take for instance what Joseph Beach said of Henry James in the introduction to *The American*.

He built his stories from a germinal "idea", or representative situations or character, involving something specially significant in

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<sup>15</sup> Robbins, *ARA*, 114.

human nature and then proceeding to evolve the whole complement of characters and action best suited to the embodiment of this idea.<sup>16</sup>

So it is with Marx Marvelous as the narrator of *Another Roadside Attraction*, that Robbins is able to introduce two, of the great mysteries of human life as his 'germinal' ideas simultaneously - human need for a Divine Presence and the act of falling in love. And these, in fact, are the larger questions, the real issues that Robbins tries to explore through the persona of Marx Marvelous.

A lot of information about Marx Marvelous is revealed when Amanda conducts an interview with him for a position of the manager at the roadside zoo. During the course of this interview, the reader learns that Marvelous is actually a skeptical scientific dropout who was recently working as an intellectual with the East River Institute of Brain Power Unlimited that was a think tank located in New York. The fact that Marvelous is a scientist and the think tank is in New York makes it clear that these represent the analytic side of the novel. Note how the dichotomy is emphasized between this and the metaphysical by contrasting New York and Washington state, which is where the Zillers reside in complete harmony with nature, far away from the fast

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<sup>16</sup> Henry James, *The American* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1963), vi-vii.

paced life styles and big business networks of a city like New York. Also note how Robbins contrasts Amanda and Ziller with Marx Marvelous. Marvelous, being a man of science has the tendency to be empirical and is all the time trying to seek out the absolute truth, a trait which links him to Plucky Purcell. But unlike Plucky, Marvelous hopes that these absolute truths will take him on to the path of wisdom. Such metaphysical creatures as Amanda and Ziller who would believe that such an approach would be limiting in its scope would shun such a path. Because, when one accepts anything as being the absolute truth – for instance that two plus two is four or that the Bible is the truth it meant that one automatically cut oneself off from various other possibilities, one of them being that two and two might not always be equal to four. It is only when Marvelous loses his faith in the absolutes, while he is working with the East River Institute that he decides to go to the Zillers and it is from there that his journey towards self-awareness begins.<sup>17</sup>

Marvelous's last assignment at the Institute required him to conduct a prolonged study of the deterioration of 'traditional Christian values' in contemporary American society. This

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<sup>17</sup> Jean C. Stine and D.G. Marowski, ed., *Contemporary Literacy Criticism*, Vol. 32 (Michigan: Gale, 1985), 365.

project was financed by Christian leaders both in the church and government who were alarmed at the increasing rate of atheism and lack of values among the present generation which was seen as setting a bad trend of rebellion and non-conformism. As part of the assignment, Marvelous in order to gather first hand report decides to infiltrate into the large counterculture movement that seemed to hold sway over society in the latter years of the 1960s. Marvelous at this point admits that in the initial part of his assignment, he strongly believed that he would encounter a rebellious, self-destructive, nihilistic group of disillusioned anarchists. But his findings turned out to be totally different from his expectations and he was shocked to find that, in the free love and peace movement, there actually were young people who were living moral, holy lives but of a new order.

They practiced – not believed in, but practiced – a live-and-let-live philosophy of tolerance and tendency. They adhered to an almost severe code of ethics. Their protests ... were never mindless acts of rebellion ... the young radicals were not seeking personal power or economic gains, they were agitating for a more honest, healthy and democratic society.<sup>18</sup>

This system of values, Marvelous realizes, centered upon love for all people which was actually Christian. But one need only look at history to read about the Crusaders, the Salem Witch Trials, or more recently the killing of doctors by the Pro-

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<sup>18</sup> Robbins, *ARA*, 158.

Lifers, to see that the fundamental difference actually lies in the emphasis on the world 'practiced' in the passage. These findings lead Marx to believe that the radical revolution that was occurring in the realm of traditional Christian values was in fact, actually a return to the basic foundation on which these values were built. Despite the optimism that Marvelous records in his findings, the superiors at the Institute do not believe, like he does, that this change is actually beneficial. Instead, they decide that the symbol at the centre of Christianity, Jesus Christ, around whom the whole doctrine revolved, had been lost in the present day technological explosion and that it had led to the fractured psyche of the American society. In such a situation, they decided, that what the people of America needed was a new training that would enable the Americans to recognize the symbol of Jesus Christ again, in a new and improved way, one that took into account the 'space-age' mentality. All this only meant that old spirit was to be served in a new package. Marvelous disagrees with his superiors and instead feels that it is not the people but the religious institutions that require new training. Further he is convinced that the study he was involved in proved that this was already on the minds of the Christian leaders. In short, Marvelous thought that Christianity was merely undergoing a

revolution and this he believed was necessary for the continued existence of Christianity itself. On Good Friday, while he is alone in this study, Marvelous experiences an epiphany of staggering consequence when he realizes that he and his superiors were wrong to have presumed that the changes were actually occurring within the framework of the Christian study.

Christianity is dead! Dead. It is not being overhauled, it has been traded in. What is afoot is ... the development of an alternative mode, a superseding mode. We ... had thought in terms of revolution of faith ... There was no revolution. There was evolution – an infinitely more profound and permanent process. Spiritual evolution.<sup>19</sup>

This epiphany occurs to Marvelous, it's worth noting, on Good Friday, the day Jesus Christ was crucified, an indication that it was time to move on without having to cling on to dead symbols. Marvelous realizes that the whole of mankind was in a process of a spiritual evolution which was just another step in our combined and collective growth as a species. Such a process would necessitate replacing any outmoded system, be it the outdated Christian model of the universe, with something that is new and more significant to the present day and its immediate conditions and concerns. It is this idea of spiritual evolution, which is the central focus of the narrator over the entire body of Robbins's work. But for this spiritual evolution to occur, Robbins creates a confrontation between Marx's

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<sup>19</sup> Robbins, *ARA*, 160.

acquired new ideas on Christianity and the strict Christian upbringing in his formative years.

In his interview with Amanda for the post of manager at the roadside zoo, Marvelous describes his mother in a strange way and calls her "a ferocious one woman band for Baptist Fundamentalism."<sup>20</sup> At this point, it seems appropriate to mention that the character Marx Marvelous has some autobiographical overtones. Robbins's mother was a teacher at a Baptist School and his family was steeped in religion, one of his grandfathers being ordained as a Southern Baptist Minister.<sup>21</sup>

Having been raised in an atmosphere which nurtured him to believe in God and Jesus Christ, it is a small wonder then that Marvelous should react with such angst when he realizes that all he believed to be true and all that had shaped his belief system was not the Truth. There is a genuinely felt sense of crisis and alienation and it is the resulting angst that makes him to change his name to Marx Marvelous, symbolic of Communism and homosexuality, two things, which he assumes an average American male hates the most. This shows the defiant mood Marvelous is in and by placing

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<sup>20</sup> Robbins, *ARA*, 161.

<sup>21</sup> Whitmer, *Aquarius Revisited*, 238.



Marvelous in such a transitional stage, Robbins is able to use him to raise many questions, some of which he states during the course of the narrative. They are regarding the presence of an almighty power and his wondering if there is no God, should not he be there and how it is then that the world is able to move/turn. This indeed reflects the pioneer spirit that has always been present in America's history and has shaped it to a great extent. The major difference between Robbins's spirit and the one preceding his is this: the pioneers of America's past were exploring primarily a physical frontier and Robbins's territory of exploration is concerning spirituality.<sup>22</sup> It is his finding that the constructive process can only occur when the existing order is destroyed. It must be mentioned that the strident criticism of Roman Catholic Church should not be read as an ill-mannered attack on religion. It is only that the church is a convenient vehicle to show the uselessness of an old world order.<sup>23</sup> This emphasis on the idea of a new religion evolving from the ashes of the old, like a phoenix, becomes Robbins's central concern and this theme is central to all of his novels. Apart from this, all his novels are driven by a unified consciousness, and they demonstrate the movements of this

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<sup>22</sup> Siegel, *Tom Robbins*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Nadeau, *Readings from the New Book on Nature: Physics and Metaphysics in The Modern Novel* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 153.

single consciousness as the guiding force behind the novels. The beginnings of this narrator behind the narrator can be seen in the ambiguity with which Marvelous ends his tale.

The most important event in the end of *Another Roadside Attraction*, despite the deaths of Ziller, Mon Cul and Plucky, is the decision they all take, in spite of their initial differences, to not reveal the heist of any century—the mummified body of Jesus Christ—to the world, that he was never raised from the dead and therefore never ascended to heaven. In short, they decide to not play gods themselves and kill Christianity prematurely because it would result in a lot of chaos and confusion which according to them was unnecessary because the process of regeneration had already begun and society had in it, the right conditions to lead this process to its full and desired course. They also feel that by exposing to people what has guided their whole lives as false without a new one ready to take its place would be skipping a link in the evolutionary chain. By this decision, they let the reader and the narrator to provide a new narrative for themselves. As far as the narrator is concerned, his search begins with the search for love, the other great mystery that Robbins tries to explore in this novel. As for his love for Amanda, ambiguity is what Marvelous must fend with because at the end of the novel, he realizes two

things about her that she loves him, but at the same time is completely indifferent to whether she will ever see him again or not.<sup>24</sup>

*Another Roadside Attraction* is Robbins's first novel and we can already see the various issues that form a major part of his writing take shape in this novel. The novel displays typical characteristics of his fiction: outrageous plot, unusual characters and imaginative use of language. Robbins liberally mixes philosophy and social commentary and his main concerns are to advocate the joyous acceptance of the mystery of the universe and to portray the romance between Marx and the heroine along with Marx's journey towards self-awareness. Conflict between the metaphysical and the analytical forms the major theme in this novel. And in *ARA* Robbins also seems to be pre-occupied with historical reality and fiction. He is not the first to have taken up this issue. Contemporary American fiction in its attempt to escape subjection to pre-existent formulas and launch competitive alternatives has had the distinction of trying to strip various realms of discourse off privileges they have traditionally enjoyed over the years.<sup>25</sup> Anything that in anyway remotely implies reliable explicit

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<sup>24</sup> Robbins, *ARA*, 336.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur M. Saltzman, *Designs of Darkness in Contemporary American Fiction* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 30.

avenues for readers to travel on the path to ultimate resolution is reneged by contemporary literature because all systems of organizing and selecting evidence are considered outright falsifications, any stabilizing perspective, any representations of "life halted and poised for analysis"<sup>26</sup> are indicted for distortions.

One of such fields has been the traditional form of history and Robbins joins the contemporary writers in debunking it. His fiction ventures to re-introduce history by recognizing its availability to fictional devices. In other words, Robbins believes historical reality to be a human construct and a man made significance. But Robbins takes up the issue of history not to completely dismiss it as obsolete but to invoke it for the purpose of subversion.

It is through the character of Marx Marvelous that Robbins makes his stand about history. Marx Marvelous shows equal skepticism towards statements derived from both fictional and historical context. Fiction is confessed to be an artifice, but history is also exposed as relying on fictional methods and strategies. In other words, in *Another Roadside Attraction*, Robbins, reduces history to the level of fiction but at

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<sup>26</sup> Marianna Turgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981, 5.

the same time he establishes the novelist to be better than a historian because as E.L. Doctorow would put it the novelist confesses his fabrication to be just that, he does not succumb to his own deceptions.<sup>27</sup> These are some of the characteristic traits of metafictional prose and it is through his metanarrator Marvelous that Robbins uses metafiction hoping that it will serve for constructive social criticism.<sup>28</sup>

In such a situation the only certainty seems to be indeterminacy which is probably why there is ambiguity at the end of the novel, which unfolds merely to expose more folds. The transcendence which Robbins tries to bring about between two conflicting elements is not complete although he does make an attempt but seems not sure. He lets ambiguity to blossom beyond our capacities to stabilize, summarize or restore them to sense. It is still in an unsure stage in his first novel, which reveals a pervasive despair of trying to understand rational discourse and systems. But it is this same ambiguity, which turns celebratory once Robbins matures as a novelist in his later novels.

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Paul Levine, "The Writer as Independent Witness" (interview), 69.

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*, 11.

## CHAPTER - III

### Still Life with Woodpecker

*Still Life with Woodpecker: A Sort of a Love Story* was published in 1980, nine years after Robbins's first novel *Another Roadside Attraction* was printed. In terms of style and self-awareness, there is a great leap shown in *Still Life*, and it allows for the greater maturation and ultimate transcendence that is seen in Robbins's fifth novel *Skinny Legs and All*.

Thus, *Still Life* is an important novel in the evolution of Tom Robbins as a novelist. In contrast to the complicated plots of his earlier novels, the story of *Still Life* is simple and according to some critics, slow moving and fable-like.<sup>1</sup> It is his shortest novel and is also the novel that has received the least amount of critical praise. In fact most critics are of the opinion that *Still Life* is a complete failure. But one cannot dispute the fact that this novel is important in Robbins's growth as a novelist. Thematically, it, probably, is a continuation of his earlier novels, but with reference to form and style, Robbins shows a clear departure from his preceding works. This

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<sup>1</sup> Stine, Jean C, and Daniel Marowski, ed., *Contemporary Literary Criticism* Vol. 32, (Michigan: Gale, 1985), 365.

chapter is a study of the novel as a continuation of the conflicts first explored in *ARA*, only this time, the conflict is incorporated into the form as well.

*Still Life with Woodpecker* is Robbins's most traditional novel. In his other two works that I have dealt with, there are essentially two stories that are narrated simultaneously. But in *Still Life*, there is primarily a single plot—the love affair between Leigh – Cheri and Bernard Mickey Wrangle – and the novel pursues the themes of his earlier works but this time it is through a parody of the oriental romance.<sup>2</sup> Their love story seems to pose the question of how to make love stay, a question that has plagued mankind for a long time. This question also serves as a device that reinforces the story's tendency to lean towards the traditional.

*Still Life with Woodpecker*, chronicles the love affair of Princess Leigh – Cheri Furstenburg – Barcelona and Bernard Mickey Wrangle, alias the Woodpecker. Princess Leigh – Cheri is the heiress of the Pacific island paradise of Mu and is the daughter of King Max and Queen Tilli, the ousted monarchs of Mu. She is a member of a displaced nobility that has now come to reside quietly, in much reduced circumstances, in an old

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<sup>2</sup> R.H. Miller, "Tom Robbins," *Dictionary of Literary Terms Yearbook-1980* (Michigan: Gale, 1981), 302.

old house on Puget Sound in Seattle, Washington, under the private aegis of the CIA. Bernard Wrangle on the other hand, is a friendly bomber who uses strong explosives as a tool to shake up society so as to keep things in perpetual motion. He is considered as an outlaw but he is much admired although he is fiercely wanted by the Establishment. The two meet and fall in love when they arrive in Hawaii for the Care Fest which is a gathering of environmentalists and leaders. Of course, both arrive at the Fest with different intentions. Leigh – Cheri has come with the purpose of participating in the seminar and Bernard has a plan to blow up the place.

Thematically, *Still Life with Woodpecker* seems to take off from where *Another Roadside Attraction* ends. The latter ends in a kind of ambiguity which seemed to harbour a possible hope for mankind's new salvation, on love. The theme, as already mentioned, therefore not only serves as a connection to *ARA* but also to the traditional fairy tale and the Western genre: a princess and an outlaw falling in love in the far west of Hawaii. More importantly the characters of Bernard and Leigh – Cheri serve as the next incarnation of Amanda and Marx Marvelous from *ARA* and their love affair continues the exploits and explorations which had begun in his first novel. But the nine year gap between these two sets of characters is evident.



example, Leigh – Cheri, as an extension of Amanda, is no longer the product of the peace and love movement of the 1960s. Rather she matures in the aftermath of the Manson murders, Disco and living through the Carter years. Donald R Hettinga thinks, she is a “nostalgic devotee of the Sixties, fanatically searching for a cause, while sporting her “no Nukes” T-shirt and nursing a crush on Ralph Nader”.<sup>3</sup> This means that despite her aristocratic roots and the cultural climate she grew up in, Leigh is living the typical life of the stereotypical American teen:

She had a room in the north end of the second floor (of her parents' home), a room with a full sized bed and a comfortable chair, a desk at which to do her schoolwork, and a dresser filled with cosmetics and underwear. There was a phonograph dedicated to the faithful reproduction of rock 'n' roll and a mirror dedicated to the flattering reproduction of her own image. There were curtains at the windows and heirloom carpets on the floor, while upon the wall posters of the Hawaiian Islands rubbed edges with photographs of Ralph Nader.<sup>4</sup>

The mention of “heirloom rugs” in the above passage reminds us of her blue blood but she seems more a typical American teenager than a princess although Leigh does not hesitate to use her influence as a princess to do good, especially in the field of environmentalism.

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<sup>3</sup> Donald R. Hettinga, “Tom Robbins’s *Still Life with Woodpecker*,” *Chicago Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Autumn 1980); 124.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Robbins, *Still Life with Woodpecker* (New York: Bantam, 1980), 10.

This interest in environment and preservation of the earth is a direct tie to the character of Amanda in *Another Roadside Attraction*. But, as said earlier, there are differences given the nine years that has passed between the two. While Amanda was trying to connect with the Earth, Leigh – Cheri is concerned with saving it. This represents the change that has occurred in human minds during the nine years that has elapsed between the two women—a change from the generically pro-active Sixties to the Quallude comforted late Seventies and the Cocaine charged early Eighties. Another way of seeing Leigh as the evolution of the character, Amanda, can be found in their differing attitudes towards sex. While Amanda was very liberated when it came to sex, she was also quite willing to shoulder the responsibility that automatically came with such a kind of freedom, for example, pregnancy or possibility of an eventual emotional attachment. But, the experiences of Leigh – Cheri have forced her to arrive at a different set of conclusions. For instance, when she gets pregnant with the child of the quarterback of her college football team, note the way she reacts to it. While he refuses to take responsibility for it, she is pondering about her future action. And she ends up with a miscarriage while she is cheering for the team from the sidelines. All this results in a great deal of embarrassment on

her part and ridicule from her peers which force her to take two steps – first, she quits college and second, she decides to take up celibacy. These reveal her unwillingness to take responsibility for her actions especially when they get intertwined with the actions of others, hence her decision both to leave college and take up celibacy. But, of course, predictably, her resolution meets its greatest temptation in the form of Bernard Mickey Wrangle or the Woodpecker.

Bernard is a very curious character. The outlaw hero is developed from the real life character who in the Sixties blew up a chemistry building at the University of Wisconsin to protest against the Vietnam War.<sup>5</sup> In the novel, he lives the life of an outlaw and goes to the extreme of wearing all black, all the time. Yet, there is so much more to his extremist belief in outlawism than just his choice of attire. Bernard's insistence on the outlaw as the only true productive member of society is a natural growth of the character of Marx Marvelous. While Marvelous was captured in the question of what to do once he realized that what he had so long believed to be the truth was not the truth, Wrangle has decided on a course of direct action based on what he believes society essentially needs: mainly to be shaken up. Bernard describes his beliefs thus:

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<sup>5</sup> Hettinga, *Chicago Review*, 124.

All people who live subject to other peoples' laws are victims. People who break laws out of greed, frustration or vengeance are victims. People who overturn laws in order to replace them with their own laws are victims. (I am speaking here of revolutionaries.) We, outlaws, however live beyond the law. We do not merely live beyond the letter of the law – many businessmen, most politicians, and all cops do that – we live beyond the spirit of the law. In a sense, then, we live beyond society. Have we a common goal, that goal is to turn the tables on the nature of society. When we succeed, we raise the exhilaration content of the universe. We even raise it a little bit when we fail.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that if Bernard was to find a place in *Another Roadside Attraction*, he would have surely chosen to expose the corpse of Jesus Christ to the general public, to commit the ultimate in shaking things up, so to speak. Bernard considers his necessary function as a witness of American society to change the very nature of that society, and forget what the consequences would be. This in itself shows a remarkable shift in the consciousness of ARA. Gone is the muddled and the confused frame of mind brought about by the ideological confrontations experienced by Marvelous, and is replaced instead by an anarchist desire to do something and to do it immediately. Yet, we cannot dismiss Bernard as an irresponsible outlaw. When he unwittingly kills a graduate student working on a male contraceptive pill, in one of his bombings, he takes up the study himself, as a part of his self-inflicted punishment for killing an innocent bystander when he blew up what he believed was an empty building on a

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<sup>6</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, 63.

University Campus. In fact, it is this concern on his part that attracts Leigh – Cheri to Bernard and leads her to sleep with him, inspite of her resolution of celibacy. After he has given her a natural Chinese contraceptive called She – link, Bernard adds “Later I’ll teach you lunaception : how to observe the way your hormonal cycle coordinates with light. You can learn to synchronize your body with moon phasing and be knock-up proof and in harmony with the universe at the same time. A whale of a bargain.”<sup>7</sup> Leigh – Cheri had never come across this concern for her womb in any other man she had known and this acts as a final catapult that propels Leigh into Bernard’s bed. Yet once their love is consummated, they find themselves back at square one. Sex does not necessarily make their love eternal and so the question arises as to how to make love last forever. This question allows Robbins to introduce a concept that not only gives a partial answer as to how to make love stay but also provides a key to understanding his vision.

The question itself is put to an interesting test in the relationship between Bernard and Leigh. Soon after both of them return to Seattle, the FBI captures Bernard and he is placed under arrest for all the bombings that he masterminded in the past as well as for his innumerable escapes from justice.

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<sup>7</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, 102.

His lawyer, however, manages to get him a parole but to be eligible for it Bernard will have to spend twenty months in jail. As a result, Bernard is placed under ultra solitary confinement in a cell that was considered so impregnable that even Houdini had no chance of escaping from it. Meanwhile, Leigh who is desperately in love with Bernard, converts the attic of her parents' home into an almost exact reproduction of the conditions in Bernard's cell, in an effort to remain with him atleast in spirit.

Earlier in the story, Bernard has stated that even though he does not smoke, he always keeps a pack of Camel cigarettes with him, in case he is arrested: "In jail, a cigarette can be a friend. Otherwise my Camels are just a front. It's an excuse for carrying matches."<sup>8</sup> While his jailers refuse him access to matches, convinced that, that would keep him from igniting a bomb and escaping, they do allow him a pack of Camels. When Leigh first decides to symbolically imprison herself along with Bernard, the first thing she does is to purchase a pack of Camels.

After several days of confinement in the attic, Leigh begins to focus in on the cigarette pack for lack of anything else to do.

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<sup>8</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, 72.

According to Frank McConnell, the princess who is now isolated from her lover tries to reinvent her love and incidentally reinvents the history of civilization by contemplating that most banal artifact of advertising technology, a Camel pack.<sup>9</sup> Leigh, meanwhile begins to ponder the deeper significance of the pack and its subtle nuances. Delving deeper into the pack's design, she delves deeper into her own sub-conscious mind, eventually entering the pack itself and beginning her search for Bernard as well as the answer to the question of how to make love last forever. Her logic for all this is that if she can enter the magical world of the pack, then even Bernard can. This not only emphasizes the metaphysical dimension of Robbins's work begun in *ARA* but also connects with the hope of love as a solution for humanity's problems that was emphasized at the end of his first novel. Leigh's own world within the Camel pack grows to the extent that it even has its own distinctive characteristics. She describes sitting next to an oasis questioning any "traders, raiders, belly dancers, ali babas and caravan executives" that happen her way if they have seen Bernard. They in turn ask for a cigarette to which she replies:

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<sup>9</sup> Frank McConnell, "Should We Trust a Cuddly Novelist?" *Commonweal* Vol. CVIII, No. 5 (March 13, 1981); 154.

“But I cannot open the pack ... if I did all this would collapse. A successful external reality depends upon an internal vision that is left intact”. They glared at her the way intelligent persons ought to glare when what they need is a smoke, a bite, a cup of coffee, a piece of ass, or a good fast paced story, and all they are getting is philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

This passage establishes Leigh’s essentially metaphysical perception of the universe while it also underscores the presence of a narrator. Leigh is, after all, claiming that we create our own conceptions of the universe and that this conception is the only real one; on the other hand, the narrator is acknowledging the fact that he realizes the reader may have wanted simply a story, not a philosophical discourse on where love comes from or where it goes when it leaves. Soon, however, Leigh finds that Bernard won’t be found in her world, within the Camel pack.

Leigh, as a princess, is subject to America’s craving for a junk – food diet of media sensationalism, a problem she shares with British monarchy and O.J. Simpson. As a result, it is not long before the press picks up on her self-inflicted imprisonment and gleefully spreads the news prompting other estranged lovers to copy her actions and in turn imprison themselves also. When Bernard gets to know about this in the jail, he sends a letter to Leigh by the underground mail system, condemning her activities. In his letter, Bernard states that

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<sup>10</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, 167.



“their personal relationship has become soap opera, a low budget interview with Barbara Streisand and a sport on the order of flagpole sitting and phone-booth stuffing.”<sup>11</sup> He ends his letter with the conclusion that all that their relationship truly was, was “some barking at the moon.” In short, Bernard is asserting that once their love had gone public, it had lost its essence. Bernard here is making an observation of staggering proportion : it is not the relationship that is important but rather the love itself. The relationship is embodied in the chemistry between two people who share it, but love is the actual emotion that is a product of this chemistry, the essence that transcends even the people involved. In other words, Bernard seems to say that it is not the other person who is important, but it is the love that these two people share between them. The concept of love in Robbins’s work is dealt with in detail in the conclusion part of this dissertation. This concept of love can be applied to an individual’s relationship with the Divine also. It is not the actual interaction between a person and his/her god that is of important. Instead, it is the belief in the existence of such a being. The actual mechanisms of the rituals are not important, it is the essence behind them. In light of this, it can be said that the secret to making love

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<sup>11</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, 201.

stay has nothing at all to do with making a relationship last, but rather staying in love with whomever or whatever. This is what Bernard alludes to when he writes to Leigh “you and I are no longer sucking the same orange.”<sup>12</sup>

Leigh has essentially put her longing for the Divine and her need for love in the same basket, that is Bernard. In doing so, she has lost the distinction between the self and the other that is necessary for survival as well as further evolution. The reader by now realizes that Leigh’s character serves to introduce Robbins’s concern with transcendence and in her predicament, one sees the same danger that Marx faced at the end of *ARA* a danger that was not delved into by Robbins and was ultimately avoided due to the ambiguity in Amanda’s feelings towards Marx. As all that had once propped up and guided his life was abruptly pulled from underneath Marx’s feet, he desperately tries to cling on to anything that he perceives as being able to fill the void. In the case of *Marvelous*, it turns out to be Amanda, who serves as both the object of his love as well as his link with the Divine. Of course, it is clear by now to the reader that in *Still Life with Woodpecker*, the problem of maintaining one’s identity and subjectivity in the face of such an intense emotion as love is transferred from

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<sup>12</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, 201.

male to the female but one is quick to realize that this does not, in any way, place hindrance to the understanding of the fact that this struggle is a natural extension of the explorations that had actually begun in *ARA* and Leigh and Bernard are indeed the new incarnations of Amanda and Marx in Robbins's first novel.

The story of *Still Life with Woodpecker* is framed by an author's monologue having to do with his efforts to type out his narrative on a Remington SL – 3 typewriter. So *Still Life* is not just an extension of the theme first introduced in *ARA*, it also introduces the reader to Robbins's continued self-reflexive style and the meta-narrator. But just like his characters, even Robbins's narrator shows his maturation, probably because of the time that has passed between them as well as the demands made by the structure of the novel. *Still Life* begins with Prologue in which, like in Robbins's first novel, the narrator does not reveal his identity, but there are enough clues provided which lead the reader to speculate that he could be the same meta-narrator who told us the story of *ARA*. The most concrete material is the typewriter used by the meta-narrator, which is, as already mentioned, a Remington SL – 3. In fact, it is the same model of the typewriter that was used in the creation of *ARA*:

This is the all new Remington SL - 3, the machine that answers the question, "Which is harder, trying to read Brothers Karamazov while listening to Stevie Wonder records or hunting for Easter eggs on a typewriter keyboard?" This is the cherry on top of the cowgirl. The burger served by the genius waitress. The empress card. I sense that the novel of my dreams is in the Remington SL - 3 - although it writes much faster than I can spell. And no matter that my typing finger was pinched by a giant land crab. This baby speaks electric Shakespeare at the slightest provocation and will rap out a page and half if you just look at it hard.<sup>13</sup>

In a typically brilliant beginning to his story, Robbins presents first the tool of the meta-narrator, a tool that takes on greater importance as the story continues. In the same prologue, Robbins also introduces the fact that the meta narrator is telling us the story.

I have in my cupboard, under lock and key, the last bottle of Anais Nin (Green Label) to be smuggled out of the Punta del Visionario before the revolution. Tonight, I will pull the cork. I will inject ten cc into a ripe lime the way the natives do. I will suck. And begin... If this typewriter cannot do it, I will swear it cannot be done.<sup>14</sup>

Note how this introduction is different from what is seen in *ARA*. There is no reference to the importance, historically or otherwise, of the story to the reader. This becomes interesting when one considers the fact with the prologue, the meta narrator tells us he is convinced that it is the typewriter that can tell the story, with him serving merely as a driver. In essence, this places the narration of the story in the position of primary importance rather than the story itself, mirroring the

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<sup>13</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, ix.

<sup>14</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, x.

ideas contained in the novel, for example, Bernard's and Leigh's story demonstrating that it is not the relationship that is important but rather the love that it represents. Whereas in *ARA* telling the story was important to the meaning as a whole, in *Still Life with Woodpecker*, the meta-narrator is coming to grips with the typewriter and the story itself, and more importantly his own self consciousness as the author.

When the first part of the novel ends, the meta-narrator begins to have doubts concerning the ability of his typewriter to tell his story. Despite its evident technological advantages, matte blue paint job and dingy bells, it seems to him that the machine threatens to chase away the writer's muse. He begins to desire a more natural typewriter:

A carved typewriter hewn from a single block of sacred cypress; decorated with mineral pigments, berry juice, and mud; its keys living mushrooms its ribbon the long iridescent tongue of a lizard. An animal typewriter, silent until touched, then filling the page with growls and squeals and squawks, yowls and bleats and snorts, brayings and chatterings and dry rattlings from the underbrush; a typewriter that could type real kisses, ooze semen and sweat.<sup>15</sup>

With this description, Robbins is also acknowledging his own place in the post modern world and most importantly his desire to transcend that world.

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<sup>15</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, 35.

Thus, *Still Life with Woodpecker* carries forward the conflicts that were explored in *ARA* but then, as already mentioned in the first chapter, there were no tangible solutions given for these conflicts. And *Still Life* serves as a novel where not only these conflicts are resolved but also where Robbins's and thus by consequence, his meta-narrator's attempt at transcendence gets complete. While, at one level, we have the meta narrator trying to transcend the tool of the writer, Robbins as an author tries to transcend the classification as a "post-modern" writer and the placement in the post-modern genre in general.<sup>16</sup> This can be seen in Robbins's choice of subject matter which concerns itself with metaphysical questions that are universal, questions such as how to make love stay or about of the evolution of spirituality. As this is the case, it can be said that Robbins in making a serious and conscious attempt to create what would rightfully be termed as literature, although many critics like Donald R Hettinga feel otherwise.<sup>17</sup>

But the transcendence that Robbins and the meta narrator achieve does not itself get complete without having resolved the conflicts of Bernard and Leigh. So, Robbins does

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<sup>16</sup> McConnell, *Commonweal*, 154.

<sup>17</sup> Stine, *CLC*, 365.

not leave their relationship hanging after Bernard's angry letter to Leigh. He uses the traditional form of a fairy tale to narrate the rest of the story.

Meanwhile, Leigh who remained faithful to Bernard, misinterprets his letter as a rejection of her love. On the rebound, she separates from Bernard and gives her love and her troth to a billionaire Arab sportsman called A'ben Fazel. She even gets engaged to him. Fazel promises to build her a marvelous pyramid reminiscent of the one on a pack of Camel cigarettes, since to Leigh - Cheri pyramids symbolize the inherent cosmic power of red headed people (most notably, Bernard), and the pyramid on the pack of camels represents the immutability of all pyramids. Through the power of pyramids she hopes to be reunited with Bernard, and ironically she is.

After emerging from prison, Bernard makes his way to Egypt where Leigh is all set to marry the Arab prince. Truly and madly in love with Leigh, Bernard infiltrates the pyramid which is her wedding present. Finally Bernard shows up and both are reunited after Leigh discovers him on the night before her wedding. They fall into a passionate embrace only to be discovered by the irate prince who locks the two lovers in the

inner chamber of the pyramid, reminiscent of Aida and Antigone. For some days the two survive on wedding cake and champagne, but when these get over, there is no other way out but to blow up the place to escape live burial. Leigh stealthily plants some of the Woodpecker's dynamites against the tomb's door. Of course, this endeavor is fraught with danger due to their proximity to the door. But Leigh and Bernard survive the blast with only small cuts but have suffered such tremendous loss of their hearing that both of them are now nearly stone-deaf and live more or less happily ever after. But at this point, Robbins turns the traditional fairy tale to an interesting angle.

Writing notes back and forth, however, Leigh and Bernard discover that they both had the 'dream' that they entered a pack of Camels at the moment of the blast, and that their recollections are exactly the same. Robbins ends their love story with their mutual resolution of their conflicts. In essence, they transcend the boundary between the 'self' and the 'other', allowing them to operate subjectively and objectively together and to transcend their relationship and truly fall in love. Thus all the loose ends are neatly tied and the transcendence is complete in every sense of the word.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jerry H. Bryant, *The Open Decision* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 103.



In the last two pages of the novel. Robbins states his theme most effectively : “When the mystery of the connection (between lovers) goes, love goes”. Leigh – Cheri and the Woodpecker embody a truth as old as romance itself, that the “connection” allows to weave a fabric of their own and create their own world. This theme counterpoints such trendy topics of the early 1980s as deposed royalty, red-headed bombers, and pyramid power to ask plaintive question “who knows how to make love stay?”<sup>19</sup> Robbins clearly despairs of an answer, especially during an era of distrust between the sexes, but an almost Aida – like ending hints at a way out of the dilemma. And keeping in mind the fairy tale structure of the novel, it also forms the moral of the story.

In the epilogue, Robbins makes the statement that despite the Remington’s ability to pull through the experience of writing a novel, it will be the last one that he would write on an electric typewriter. Robbins then slips into a pseudo – academic style trying to sum up the theme of the novel and its importance to the world and states that

This is the very kind of analytical, after-the-fact goose gunk the Remington SL – 3 cut its teeth on. No wonder it is yammering

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<sup>19</sup> Miller, *DLTY*, 303.

away, despite a lack of fuel, despite the red enamel house paint that's run down into its guts. Enough, already, I am going to pull its pluggggg...<sup>20</sup>

So, the typewriter fails him and the narrator says that he has to complete the novel in longhand. This is clearly intended to symbolize the transcendence achieved and is the final device in Robbin's movement away from the use of standard forms, tools and narrative structure. Rather, by pulling the plug on the Remington, Robbins is actually acknowledging his own evolution as a writer and the equally important development of his own consciousness as a person who happens to be a writer.<sup>21</sup>

Pulling the plug on an external tool also serves to indicate an end in the dependence on external reality and demonstrates the next stage in the continuing spiritual journey that Robbins is guiding us on. This places the narrator in a position to look inward for help in the next state of the journey. This mirrors Bernard and Leigh transcending the 'self' and the 'other' together in that they escape into the Camel pack at the climax of the story. Just as Robbins has the novel and its characters turning inward, the reader is also placed in this position in an effort to come to grips with the world around us. Contrast this position at the end of *ARA* where we find ourselves in the

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<sup>20</sup> Robbins, *Still Life*, 272.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Siegel, *Tom Robbins* (Boise: Boise State University Press, 1980), 39.

position of looking outside of ourselves for an answer to the perplexities of life. Of course, *Still Life with Woodpecker* is not the end of the journey, Robbins takes it up again in his novel *Skinny Legs and All* which forms the subject of this dissertation's third chapter.

As already mentioned, *Still Life with Woodpecker* is a novel that has received the least critical praise. One of its fiercest critics has been Donald R. Hettinga who feels that the novel is just a "clever package of worlds" and its philosophy "hedonistic" which is "valid only in the world of the novel."<sup>22</sup> He also criticizes Robbins as ending up with flat characters in his attempts at social commentary.

Hettinga seems to have considered *Still Life* in isolation and seems to miss out the fact that Robbin's "attempts at social commentary" are largely a smokescreen for the essential function of this novel, which is the use and continued development of the meta-narrator in guiding his readers on their spiritual journey spread over many novels.

But inspite of such criticism, many critics however appreciate Robbins's creative use of language, as well as his celebration of the human spirit and his perpetuation of upbeat

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<sup>22</sup> Hettinga, *Chicago Review*, 125.

values. Sue M. Halpern says that *Still Life with Woodpecker* is a "formula novel which relies heavily on the elements used by classical fabulists."<sup>23</sup> Such a novel would demand certain things. Being a fable, a happy ending is imperative but before that, the truth must be revealed. And even before there can be truth, there must be mystery and confusion. So in like most fables, the story of *Still Life* is told in service to his moral, which explains why the plot is not as strong as that of the earlier two novels but it is definitely more intricately interlaced and has the complexity and exoticism of grand opera. As for the moral, it seems to be about "CHOICE"<sup>24</sup> to refuse to passively accept what we have been handed by nature or society but to choose for ourselves and in the process create our own world yet another case for the power an individual has to make or break his/her world.

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<sup>23</sup> Sue M. Halpern, "A Pox on Dullness," *The Nation* Vol. 231, No. 13 (October 25, 1980); 415.

<sup>24</sup> R.V. Cassill, "Whimsy with Moral," *The New York Times Book Review* (September 28, 1980); 15.

## CHAPTER – IV

### **Skinny Legs and All**

*Skinny Legs and All* is a novel that has served with *Another Roadside Attraction* as the most pivotal in Robbins's body of work, illustrating the major stages in Robbins's growth as a first class writer of contemporary American literature. Although *Another Roadside Attraction* introduced him as a writer with great imagination and playfulness, it is with *Skinny Legs and All* that he established himself as a writer whose stories revealed his profound understanding of American culture, its literature and philosophy.

First published in the year 1990, *Skinny Legs and All* is, once again, a story filled with sex, drugs, encounter with spirits and pagan gods. But the story, more than anything else, seems to be about conflicts- between an ideal non-conformity [represented in part by Ellen Cherry] and a very worried Establishment [partly represented by the character Buddy Winkler], between past and present, between the animate and the inanimate and between the two genders. In this chapter, I would attempt to analyze these dichotomous sets and how Robbins achieves transcendence between these elements in

*Skinny Legs and All*. Dichotomy and conflict are not new concerns in the vast area of western fiction. In fact we see them embodied in the fiction of John Steinbeck, Saul Bellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James for example. Robbins's novels deal with western 'frontier' spirit but the newness is in the quirky, original and hopeful solutions that he seems to spin out of these 'postmodern' conflicts

Dichotomy forms a major theme in the novel and it is established from the very beginning of the novel. Consider the opening sentence of the book:

This is the room of the wolfmother wallpaper.<sup>1</sup>

Straight away, the word 'wolfmother' conjures up contrasting images of a wolf, which is a stereotype for fierceness, and of a mother who stands for care and warmth. And by yoking these two images, Robbins not only makes the reader aware of the conflict between the two figures but also prepares the stage for the next important theme, that of transcendence of the splits that society seems to have woven into its structure. As the novel progresses, the yoking continues:

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 1.

This is the room where your music was invented. Notice the cracked drumhead spiked to... the wolfmother wallpaper above the corner sink where the wayward wife washed her silk underpants inspecting in the blue seepage from the No Vacancy neon that flickered suspiciously out in the thin lizard dawn.<sup>2</sup>

With this image of the room, the reader becomes aware of Robbins's attempt to intermingle the past and present together. The room is where the music originated, an event which clearly occurred in the distant past. Yet outside the room there is neon light, which is a symbol of the immensely bureaucratic capitalist machine that the society of America has become in recent times. By thus establishing the interconnectedness of life, the reader is prepared to be taken out on a spiritual journey into the heart of contemporary society through the world of Ellen Cherry Charles and Boomer Petway, two artist-protagonists who are very different from each other. Ellen's main interest is painting and she is an artist who has pre-conceived notions about art. She stands for everything that defines art in the classical sense of the term. On the other hand, Boomer is a rowdy redneck welder who cares very little for anything other than hedonistic pleasure. His life revolves around sex, beer and fun and he strongly believes that the greatest good lies in something that gives the greatest pleasure. In short, these two characters stand for art and popular culture and form a part of the age-old internal

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<sup>2</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 1.

conflict found on the distinction between high or classical and low or vernacular arts.<sup>3</sup> And the union of Ellen and Boomer is Robbins's attempt to erase the gap between popular culture and high culture. This union causes a great amount of tension, but is so potent that it accounts for his most common and most distinctive trick—the animation of five inanimate objects to gain mobility<sup>4</sup> a conch shell, a red stick, Boomer's dirty sock, Ellen's silver spoon and a can of beans. Technically, it's the sock, spoon and the can that attain mobility since the shell and the stick had always possessed this ability and somehow they had gone into a long stupor and had now woken up from it. It is interesting how Robbins categorizes even inanimate objects as representations of the past and the present. The conch shell and the painted stick belong to a time when paganism was the only religion man knew and therefore they represent the past. In comparison, the spoon and the sock are relatively new because they are the products or necessities of the modern Western Civilization. It is only the can of beans, which does not seem to fit into any category. The can encapsulates timelessness; here past and present meet in a highly metaphorical manner because the can tries to preserve

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<sup>3</sup> Madelyn Jablon, *Black Metafiction*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 57.

<sup>4</sup> Frank McConnell, "Should We Trust a Cuddly Novelist," *Commonweal* (March 13, 1981): 155.



'past' food for future use. Even the male-female bifurcation doesn't apply to the can of beans. It is to be noted here that the shell and spoon are given feminine attributes whereas the stick and the sock are masculine symbols. But the can of beans is a hermaphrodite and is referred to as he/she in the novel. Thus the can of beans is where the contrasts meet and therefore it may be considered as the ultimate symbol of transcendence. It can also be likened to the deity Pales, who plays a crucial part later on in the novel. The destination of the objects is Jerusalem and though they have a lot of questions they simply decide to get on with their pilgrimage. Their tale is simultaneously narrated as Boomer and Ellen's story is, and the latter serves to inadvertently place these objects within close proximity to one another and also functions as the more conventional tale around which the supernatural story of the objects and their pilgrimage can evolve. So, on one hand when we have people transcending the world of objects, on the other, we have objects transcending the world of people.

Another important character in the novel who is representative of the Foundation is Ellen's uncle, Buddy Winkler. He is a fundamentalist preacher who has a great influence over the masses, who with his messages of guilt and fear is able to turn his listeners into slaves who are unable to

think for themselves. As his popularity grows, so does his ambition when he suddenly wants to force evolution and intervene in on the natural chain of events. For this, he plans to explode the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which he believes would initiate the third World War and result in an early Judgment Day and the Second Coming of Jesus. Buddy thinks that he can alter destiny with the power that has been invested in him and is almost successful in his endeavor. It is only when the Vice President realizes that there is no political gain in the whole thing that he intervenes and prevents Buddy from realizing his grand plan. It is through the character of Buddy Winkler that Robbins makes his most scathing indictment of Christianity. Christianity and other organized religions of the world are shown as more interested in power and control than the salvation of people's souls and betterment of their lives on earth. In fact, it is a 'do-what-I-preach-and-not-what-I-do' policy that the religions seem to follow. Thus, by exposing the hypocrisy prevalent in them and the decadence prevalent in them Robbins slowly but surely destroys the validity of organized religion.

Having thus criticized religion, Robbins finds himself in a vacuum-like situation at the crossroads. He, therefore, must not only find out what constitutes the truth but also the way to

get there. It is the same predicament Marx Marvelous faces in *ARA*. It is clear to him by now that there is no single way and that he has to adopt two paths in his search for Truth-the supernatural and the analytic-which culminate in the ancient ritual of the Dance of the Seven Veils. But for the culmination to take place, Robbins has had to reinforce the dichotomy between the supernatural elements of life [Divine, desire for love] and the analytic [desire for security, order and reason] by the simultaneous narration of the two tales already mentioned. This emphasis on the contrasting elements heightens the opposing features of these elements and makes transcendence seem impossible to be achieved. And Robbins feels that it is the seemingness that comes in the way of union between conflicting sets and once that is realized transcendence could be arrived at.

But this union would entail a lot of undesirable consequences because it would mean an alteration of the existing pattern, which has grown much too comfortable. It starts when Spike Cohen, a Jew and Abu Hadee, an Arab open a restaurant together across the street of the United Nations. This is an obvious ironic attack on the UNO and its failure to achieve what it set out to, especially in its attempt to resolve the Arab-Jew conflict in all these years. This is yet another

pointer to the fact that the problems that plague humanity are outside the purview of politics and politics can never hope to solve them. The restaurant makes a mockery of the institution that is the UNO, because the restaurant has been able to successfully establish peace between Jews and Arabs, albeit on a personal level and in its own little way serves as a symbol of optimism for peace in the strife ridden region of the middle east by asserting the power of the individual's will over the institution.

When the restaurant opens, it generates a lot of criticism and dissent mainly from the fundamentalist groups that try and keep the customers away from the place with constant threats of explosion with bombs. Spike and Abu try every trick in the book to lure the customers back to the restaurant but it is only when they hire a belly dancer called Salome that the fortunes change in their favor. Salome is an instant hit and she manages to even bring in new customers while keeping back the regulars. No one knows anything about her and this only increases the aura of mystery that surrounds her. It takes one of the restaurant's regulars, a curious detective named Shaftoe to glean some information about Salome-that she is a registered student of the university and more importantly, that she is the only one who can dance the ultimate belly dance, the

Dance of the Seven Veils. Soon Abu and Spike are flooded with requests from customers asking Salome to enthrall them with the Dance. But she turns them down, thus increasing the mystery surrounding her and the Dance itself. Abu tries to shed some light on the subject by referring to the historian Josephus who recorded that it was a dance that King Herod asked his stepdaughter to perform during his birthday celebrations. But he clarifies that:

The dance itself predates Herod and that particular Salome, his stepdaughter. In fact, it is very ancient and thoroughly pagan. It is connected to the myth of the cyclic death of the sun god. His moon goddess travels to the underworld to rescue him, but to get him back, she has to drop one of her seven articles of clothing at each of the seven gates.<sup>5</sup>

Abu speculates that each of the veils represent layers of illusion and as each veil is peeled away, an illusion gets destroyed until at the center, some great mystery of life is revealed. All this is historical information and it does not reveal clearly anything about the dance, per se. Once again, Robbins is pulling together a dichotomy, this time between historical fact and relevant information useful for living. He, by referring to the dance as pagan shows the existence of a history that predates Christianity and undermines the religion's authority. And all of a sudden, the framework with which one measured time is broken down and Christianity is shown to be situated

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<sup>5</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 402.

somewhere on a continuum scale that had been existing even before the birth of Christ. Christianity is, therefore portrayed as a religion, which imposed limits on time and defines only time which moves towards eternity only along one direction.

Moving on with the narrative, something transpires in the novel that causes Salome to relent and dance the Dance of the Seven Veils. Boomer has established himself as a promising artist among the ranks of New York art critics with his creation of the giant metallic turkey. This makes Ellen Cherry completely disillusioned, and her own struggling condition as an artist in comparison with her husband's overnight and strictly unintentional success as an artist sours her relationship with Boomer. She, meanwhile, gives up painting and takes to waiting tables at Ishmael and Isaac restaurant out of despair that her artistic ability was never acknowledged according to standard definitions.<sup>6</sup>

Strangely enough, it is because of Boomer that Ellen decides to return to the world of art that she had left before. Boomer has long been working on a highly guarded project in Jerusalem financed by Spike and Abu and soon, the readers come to know that he is working on a huge statue of a pagan

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<sup>6</sup> Jablon, *Black Metafiction*, 57.

deity called Pales, represented as a donkey with both male and female genitalia

Pales was a deity. The ass-god. Or the ass-goddess. Usually he was male but sometimes she was female, and sometime its gender was a tad ambivalent... The ass was a savior who provided milk, meat, shoe leather, and transportation [what the Bible calls the "golden calf" was actually the golden ass, since there were never many cows in the Levant]. The ass was also obstinate, silly, and sexually crude. Embodying all of those characteristics, Pales was a trickster, fertility spirit and sacred clown, presiding over human kind's unruly passions, giving mortals what they needed, but not before having some fun with them.<sup>7</sup>

With his choice of deities, Robbins is doing two things. First he is once again pulling together the assumed separateness of man and woman, showing them as both important in the development of Pales in particular and paganism in general and contrasts it to what Christianity does with Adam and Eve and the concept of the First Sin. Secondly taking the deity. Pales as representative of paganism, Robbins portrays Christianity as a religion that indulged in bastardization and absorption of the pagan rituals and that preached control and restraint. The whole philosophy of Christianity is based on abstinence and all bodily pleasures are taboo, the First Sin according to it being the union of Adam and Eve. On the contrary, paganism is far more exciting; suggesting spirituality could be attained by celebrating life, by seeking bodily pleasures.

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<sup>7</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 413.

When Ellen Cherry actually sees the prototype of Pales's statue, she leaves the restaurant to an art store and gets some paints and brushes. She returns to the restaurant where she transforms a wall into a giant mural, a nighttime landscape, a lot like the room of the wolfmother wallpaper where the music was created:

Though the painting was heavy and dense... nothing stood still in it.... All spun like the stars: onward, outward, inward, backward, sideways, upside down, and forever.... The golden cradle that was balanced in the crotch of the tree rocked so hard that the sky rocked with it, a zodiac transformed into a music hall.<sup>8</sup>

So Boomer's statue acts as a catalyst in Ellen Cherry's transcendence of her preconceived notions of art she started out with and she is now able to connect with art in a new way and find a balance between personal expression and the external need. Art suddenly becomes a new sort of religion, providing her everything that life doesn't. Proof of the power of Ellen's mural and the transcendence it represents is seen when Salome has one long look at it and finally agrees to perform the Dance of the Seven Veils. The mural also becomes the background to the stage on which the Dance is to be performed. Just when everyone is gearing up to watch the Dance, Salome disappoints all by choosing an odd day for the performance. She wants to dance on the same day as the

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<sup>8</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 424.



Super Bowl game is to be played. In essence, Robbins makes the clientele of the restaurant to choose between "religion" and their corresponding rituals, between football and the ultimate dance of cognition.

When it comes to choosing between these two, one would expect almost everyone to choose to watch the dance that could change his/her life. But like it happens in real life, many of them opt for football and the restaurant has to place its famous huge television screen in the courtyard to avoid any further squabbles. It is a real pity that when one has to choose between artificial religion [football] and the real thing, they choose football and it is seen as a sign of the failure of the existing religions to liberate people.

The Dance itself lives up to its reputation, even from the moment the first veil is dropped. Everyone present at that time expects the veil covering Salome's face to be dropped first. But to everyone's surprise and shock, it is the one that covers Salome's loins that is shed first. Soon the Dance stirs activity in Ellen's mind and she begins to get new 'ideas' and she starts to believe that the earth is a sexual planet,

...a biospherical epic in which the players were either Seed Packages or Egg Cartons [a few versatile actors such as the amoebae could perform both roles, but it was a dying art]....<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 456.

This earth was run by sex and ironically, it was always the women who ran things, who directed the sexual drama largely. Aware of their inferior sexual role, some few insecure men went to ridiculous and often violent lengths to compensate for it. One of these ways was the establishment of the patriarchal religion and the remolding of the Father Figure as the producer of the show [the plethora of phallic symbols such as the Cross and the Sword of God seems to suggest so]. Thus women had been historically programmed to believe that it was the men who were in charge of things. The men not only sounded the death knell to Great Goddess, they also spent a lot of time and money trying to conceal her existence. Further whenever there were signs of rediscovering the Goddess or the more feminine value systems in the society, fear of sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis and AIDS was made to permeate through society. All this is seen to be generated by the patriarchal system that is deadly afraid of sex and sexual license. Ellen arrives at an understanding that despite the heavy odds stacked against her, the Great Goddess and her sexuality would soon overcome the diseases and regain her rightful place of importance in the world.

The second veil to be pulled loose is the one covering Salome's navel. As this falls to the floor, Ellen realizes that

human beings, after all, have no dominion over the plant and animal kingdom. Robbins feels that in the continued evolution of our species we have always considered ourselves as the senior partners and that they depend on us, so much so that we began to interfere in their lives. All the deforestation and extinction activities are seen as "arrogant, profane and ultimately a boomerang honed for suicide."<sup>10</sup> He feels that they have a lot to teach humanity and we have a lot to learn from them, as a result of their experience and perfection. Finally he feels that for any civilization to have a legitimate chance for survival, it has to redefine its relation to nature. Humanity was a function of nature. It could not therefore live separately from nature except in a self-deceiving masquerade. It could not live in opposition to nature except in a schizophrenic crime. And it could not blind itself to the wonders of nature without mutating into something too monstrous to love.

The third veil to fall is the one covering Salome's shoulders. Ellen now realizes that politics is dirty and it would forever fail to solve the problems of humanity, since our problems are definitely not political but philosophical. But this does not mean there are no political problems. In fact there are, but they are secondary to the philosophical problems and

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<sup>10</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 458.

unless the latter were solved, there would be no permanent solutions to the former and this is the real necessity in the present day context.

Robbins feels that the crimes of politics like the Holocaust could have been averted if only Hitler's followers were aware that it was control not liberation that he wanted and showed him disrespect and laughter. And a permanent solution could be arrived at only when humanity tries to reach

...that philosophical plateau where it recognized that its great mission in life had nothing to do with any struggle between classes, races, nations, or ideologies, but was rather a personal quest to enlarge the soul, liberate the spirit and light up the brain.<sup>11</sup>

and on that quest, the politicians were simply an obstacle of stentorian monkeys. So our problems aren't actually fully external but internal and subjective. And it is when we accept that the internal and subjective have a real and deep impact on the external world, that a meaningful solution to the problems plaguing humanity can be arrived at.

The fourth veil which intertwines both of Salome's arms is the next to fall. It represents religion and the shedding of this veil symbolizes humanity's release from it. Robbins feels that the concept of the Divine was never clearly understood by

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<sup>11</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 460.

religion, it was an entity which was in flux, and absolutely transcendent. Religion was an attempt to pin down the Divine. By giving petty human attributes, it tries to pigeonhole him to a knowable quantity, so that mortal can efficiently deal with it. Thus religion was reductive where as the Divine was ever expansive and in no way, could the former explain the latter. And if this was not bad enough entered into an unholy nexus with politics to become "the most dangerous and repressive force that the world has ever known."<sup>12</sup>

The next Veil to fall was the one shielding Salome's thin and skinny legs and the veil stands for the endless quest of humanity for material gain, something that only serves to impede the movement of its owner in the long run. The sixth veil to be shed covered Salome's breasts and suddenly all the revelations made till now start to overlap, and the notions about history, time and the afterlife begin to attain new meanings in a larger framework:

She saw that past was a recent invention, that people sacrificed the present for a future that never really came...;saw that time was a meadow not a highway; and the psyche was an all-night restaurant, not a museum or a church....<sup>13</sup>

As the final veil falls, the one covering Salome's face, we understand that it stands for the illusion that one cannot get

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<sup>12</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 463.

<sup>13</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 465.

somebody else to do one's things. Ellen perceives that the only way for a completely liberated existence is that all must figure out for themselves what constitutes the truth. Even though humans have a lot of things in common, every individual must establish his/her own special relationship with reality, the universe and the Divine. But this was not an easy task.

In fact it was different for everybody as it was the same, so everybody had to take control of their own life, define their own death, and construct their own salvation. And when you finished, you didn't call the Messiah. He'd call you.<sup>14</sup>

This is probably why Robbins chooses to reveal these illusions through Ellen Cherry's eyes. It does not necessarily mean that the others present in the restaurant feel the same enlightenment even though once in a while we have someone exclaiming "That's it" or "How true". So it is upto the individual to learn what he/she wants to, in his/her quest to establish a meaningful relationship with the external world.

As the illusions that obscure humanity's view of the true universe fall away, Ellen becomes an 'enlightened' person with a wider and a truer perspective on life. Once she figures out the interplay of dichotomy and transcendence, the way is all uphill for Ellen. The external world hasn't changed, it is only the relationship with it which Ellen has redefined, that puts

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<sup>14</sup> Robbins, *SLA*, 465.

her on a new high. Ellen is now able to transcend the dichotomy of the objective and the subjective, thus integrating the self and the other. Both counter point and improvisation are central to Ellen's development. The former helps her appreciate the beauty of each individual and community while the latter gives her the confidence to act according to her feelings. Thus the two come together to transcend the reality that we have been programmed to see. Her new art does not signify withdrawal from the world, it becomes a means of confrontation and immersion.<sup>15</sup> This is Robbins's greatest transcendence, because he is able to heal the dichotomy between the notion of the self and the other as distinct entities that exist separately in the universe. The two now become one and it is now that Ellen is able to re-unite with Boomer and live with him again, only this time their relationship has become more meaningful and profound. In the meantime, the five objects have themselves been through a great deal of complications but they manage to reach Jerusalem finally and find themselves satisfied in their present states. So transcendence attains new definitions. It is more an awareness of the paradoxes, an awareness which does not dissolve them

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<sup>15</sup> Jablon, *Black Metafiction*, 63.

but receives them as contrasts within the unity of the organism.<sup>16</sup>

*Skinny Legs and All* is a patchwork novel in which most of today's very sensitive issues like race, politics, marriage, art, religion, money and lust have been woven together in a brilliant pattern and it serves as a showcase of Robbins's audacious views and opinions on contemporary society. But mainly it is a novel representative of the counterculture spirit which celebrates the power of the individual over everything else and rejects everything that the Establishment has handed down to us as being the truth, be it history of the past or the past itself.

The past has been an obsession with the postmodern writers and history, which is the record of the known past, attains new dimensions in their hands. The philosophical foundation in Robbins's work is that the past, even if it is in any version, will always remain an active and transforming force in the present. Umberto Eco, in his essay *Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable* is of the opinion that there is the awareness among the postmodern writers that the past "cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jerry Bryant, *The Open Decision*, 283.

<sup>17</sup> Paula Geyh, Fred G.L., Levy Andrew, *Post Modern American Fiction – A Norton Anthology* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 622.



This and the awareness that there can never be a complete breakaway from the past drives the writer to make a journey into the past, only this time there is no innocence involved anymore but just a kind of irony which is the writer's way of acceding the challenge of the past, of what has already been said and acknowledging the fact that the past cannot in any way be eliminated. Robbins sets out on an ironic revisitiation of the past where he is convinced that he'll find the roots of power struggle, and conspiratorial structures. The findings are predictably horrifying and one could say that Robbins is especially unforgiving when it comes to religion and politics. The resulting images are quite disconcerting and history itself that has been our link to the past is established as a manipulated record of manipulations in patterns, processes and systems of power.

Under such findings, one would expect Robbins to negate the past or history completely. But being the optimist that he claims to be, he does an ironic rethinking of the past at the end of which there is a collapse of the distinctions that separate the past and the present, thus creating a seamless mosaic of experiences with no particular chronological sequence. So in a way, Robbins is dehistoricizing the past. His method is clear. He starts out by questioning any belief system that claims

universality or transcendence. Then there is a critique or disputation over the foundation the particular institution has constructed its authority.

As the work moves between past and present, fact and fiction, low and high culture with tremendous intensity, it tells us as much about the legacy of the past as much about the past itself. By presenting the conch shell and the painted stick [clearly symbols from the past] and making them speak, Robbins creates a startling alternative to the recorded history and raises issues over its authenticity. This strategy of revisiting the past is something more metaphorical, because as Sherman Alexie puts it "Each time a story is told, something changes. And everytime a story is retold, something changes again "

## **CHAPTER – V**

### **Conclusion**

Post-structuralist theories emphasize formal innovation as a result of which a disproportionate amount of attention goes into the analysis of diegetic techniques, often at the expense of disregarding or overlooking other indices. I feel that theorists these days often treat thematic concerns superficially, as if they were self-evident and needed no explanation. In this investigation, I have tried to analyze the thematic concerns in the novels of Tom Robbins and show that most of these are formulated in the science, social science and the philosophy of his time. Since, an exploration of all the themes is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I have tried to show that Robbins frames his action in terms of conflicts between the individual and social institutions. A lot has been written about this in the pervious chapters. I would like to add here that Robbins's view is formulated on the basis of some metaphysical assumptions- that reality lies in the individual, that the individual is subjective and ambiguous at the same time. These assumptions reflect the main preoccupations of the age-men, bereft of their old explanation are filled with despair over the loss of old values and find themselves adrift; condemned to freedom, find themselves, ironically, terrified to

chose; deprived of total explanation continue their frustrated search for the absolute; limited in their strength are vulnerable to the social apparatus and isolated in their own skins look for love and community.

The individual in Tom Robbins novels is portrayed as being constantly endangered by suffocating social institutions, but who finally avoids being stifled by the apparatus, escapes bad faith, transcends chance and death and learns to affirm the human condition through the very characters that define the human being— independence, commitment, love, the willingness to risk oneself. The novels that have been discussed in this work do not express a uniform attitude toward these concerns but seem to be unanimous on the resolution of the conflict between the individual and the social apparatus. They all stress on a consciousness to be free of any tradition or prejudice which claims the final truth and binds itself to predetermined possibilities to transcend the demands of a single society. The other possible solution to the tension between the individual and his society would be to surrender wholly to the apparatus but that would mean to destroy the presence of life itself and is therefore completely shunned by Robbins.

Many critics are of the opinion that the individual, especially in Robbins's first novel *Another Roadside Attraction*, is inadequately

constructed and sometimes he/she even borders on being a caricature. In his first novel, Robbins is more a "chronicler of the experience of transience"<sup>1</sup> than a portrayer of convincing characters because his focus seems to be more on the milieu than the individual and the former is eternally transient and never permanent. Therefore it is the rush of events and not Robbins's lack of skill which distorts the individual in *Another Roadside Attraction*.

Another important feature of the writings of Tom Robbins is the wealth of philosophical interest he brings to them. He feels that "excessive rationalization of western culture has alienated man from his roots in nature"<sup>2</sup>. Ditto for organized religion, which has become more a tool of logic and control than of spirit Robbins tries to re-invent reality and re-vitalize life which has been dulled beyond appreciation by logic and authority for which he increasingly turns toward Eastern philosophies. But he does not advocate blind adherence. While in *Another Roadside Attraction* he supports devotion to Eastern philosophies, he warns against it in his other novel *Even Cowgirls get the Blues*. This may seem paradoxical, but these two different stands are actually related. They both stem from Robbins's notion that any truly fulfilling way of life must evolve from the individual's recognition of his unique relationship to the world.

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<sup>1</sup> William Cloonan, "Tom Robbins's Culture: The Brain Takes its Lumps." *New Boston Review* 3 (December 1977): 6.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, *The Practice of Fiction in America: Writers from Hawthorne to the Present* (Ames : Iowa State University Press, 1980), 124.

So even if Americans can learn a lot about liberation from Oriental philosophies, they must nevertheless find a way of liberation that is natural to them in their own world.

But so much is the influence of oriental philosophies that Robbins's novels suggest several Zen lessons: that objectivity is impossible, that we are all connected to all events and that self-conscious perspective is the key to improving the depth of our perceptions. Far from eschewing the personal, egocentric narrator for a sham objectivity, Robbins insists on the subjectivity of every narrator, since every narrator takes part in the history he is recreating. For example, in *Another Roadside Attraction*, the narrator declaims at great length about the impunity of history and in fact insists on telling his historically important tale as a fragment in the life of Amanda, not because she is central to history, but because he is in love with her.

While Robbins clearly believes in the value of individualism and diversity, he also seems to recognize the need for some kind of social structure, even if it may be radically different from anything we have now. It is through this vision that his characters work out the conflicts between their love of free, primitive pantheistic life styles and the complex restrictions of a sophisticated, bureaucratic society. The resolution of these conflicts is derived from the concept

that the individual himself/herself is composed of contradictory elements and satisfaction depends upon their fusion which depends on one's ability to transcend them. It is only when the psychological conflicts are resolved that external conflicts fade away. All this makes Robbins a writer of the Western genre but it is the unusual style in which he has tried to rework many conflicts familiar to the genre that sets him apart from other Western writers.

And what sets him apart from his contemporary novelists such as Pynchon and Heller is his vision. The latter are writers of 'black comedy' which tends to emphasize rather than alleviate the reader's horror at the things they describe. But Robbins's vision is not 'black', he is not concerned so much with making us re-experience, the terrible condition of humanity and man's ultimate inability to do much about it. Rather he is concerned with what one can do to make things better and believes that social changes must be fought for and hopes that success will be possible. The ending of *Another Roadside Attraction* might indicate limited optimism but the narrator says that your reading this manuscript is a sign of hope and possibility which attains fulfillment in his fifth novel *Skinny Legs and All* and so the limited optimism is only a transitional step towards fulfillment.

Finally, Robbins's basic themes dealt in this work might be summarized in this way: Our current society is doing very little in fulfilling many of our emotional and psychological needs. Part of this problem arises from the fact that our culture and social institutions were developed to meet needs occasioned by conditions that have changed radically over the last many years. Christianity has added to our problems by inducing man to cut himself off from nature and making our existence subservient to rules and institutions. Now that our social structures are no longer responsive to our environment, these have to be changed.

In short we must break out of our old patterns and learn from experience what we really want. We must find new paths for ourselves by defying the over rigid traditional society. Most of all, we must remember that attaining fulfillment is the work of life that is continuous and always. And therefore, Robbins celebrates the intrinsic value-even worth of the human being. This is not a trivial thing to do.



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