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USA TODAY

May 7, 2002, Tuesday, FINAL EDITION

Vivid '**Video**' images capture Indian life

BYLINE: Whitney Matheson

SECTION: LIFE; Pg. 4D

LENGTH: 460 words

Video: Stories

By **Meera Nair**

Pantheon, 191 pp., \$ 21.95

Author **Meera Nair** visits a number of universal themes in her first story collection: the strains of marriage, the pain of abuse, the confusion and excitement of adolescence.

But the unique gifts within **Nair's Video** are its vivid portraits of Indian life. **Nair**, an American writer who was raised in India, infuses each tale with incisive details about Indian culture, from the magical to the mundane.

In the first story, also titled "**Video**," a husband becomes transfixed by a Western pornographic film, a sight that deeply alters his 15-year marriage. His wife, stunned by her husband's discoveries, abruptly stops speaking to him and secludes herself in the family's outhouse.

While the characters in **Video** range greatly in age, gender and occupation, most of them, in some way, are confronted with Western culture's influence on Indian traditions.

"The Curry Leaf Tree" examines America through the eyes of Dilip Alva, a proud Indian man living with his new wife in the USA. She adapts quickly to her new environment, replacing her saris with jeans and ordering turkey sandwiches at Subway.

Dilip, however, feels the "sense of the familiar falling away." Isolating him even further is his most distinguishable trait, "a most sensitive nose," which Dilip discovers is both a blessing and a curse.

Nair also incorporates humor and fantasy into one of **Video's** highlights: "A Warm Welcome to the President, *Insh'Allah!*" As an Indian village prepares for the arrival of President Clinton, excitement flows through each resident -- at the last minute, the townspeople are even inspired to build a bathroom, exclusively for the world leader.

Nair's poetic prose conveys the mood of the village:

"We lined up to watch in wonder as the crowds jostled along the road, and sneezed as the red dust rose in their wake. . . . It was a mela, a carnival, and we were making more money than we had in the harvest season."

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On the opposite end of the spectrum, a few *Video* tales are heartbreaking: In "Summer," a girl is molested while rehearsing for a play. In "Sixteen Days in December," a female journalist must face the death of her influential father. In "My Grandfather Dreams of Fences," a 15-year-old boy watches helplessly as laborers take advantage of his aging grandfather's land.

A gifted writer with a flair for storytelling, **Nair** creates passionate, distinctive characters, establishing herself as a writer to watch. From "The Sculptor of Sands," a timeless fable, to the more modern "Curry Leaf Tree," her work pulsates with captivating, varied subject matter that all types of readers can appreciate.

LOAD-DATE: May 07, 2002

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, B/W, Joe Tabaca; PHOTO, B/W; **Nair:** The Indian-born author writes of the influence of the West on Indian ways.

TYPE: BOOKS

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