

The Elements of Indianness in Kamala Markandaya's Novel *Nectar In A Seive*

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Abstract

This paper presents the elements of Indianness in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar In A Seive*. Kamala Markandaya clearly disapproves of superstitious practices of the rural people. On the failure of rain, Rukmani threw herself on the earth, prayed, offered a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to the goddess, but no rains came. The living conditions of the rural people are almost primitive. Nathan's house is a small thatched mud hut near a paddy field held in the vicinity of a couple of similar huts. A Garland of mango leaves has been hung across its doorway to herald happiness and good fortune, The hut has rooms, one of which is a kind of storehouse for grain where as the other is for virtually everything else. For lighting, the village has wick lamps a wick or oil filled coconut shells used as lamps. The village transport is a bullock-cart, moving in the midst of sight and sound from nature, which makes the journey enjoyable to both animals and passengers.

KEYWORDS: Indianness, superstitious, rural, nature

In the one hundred and fifty or so years of its existence Indo-English literature has proved its strength and maturity sufficiently to be taken seriously worldwide. It is no longer considered an oddity in the west, though up until the late seventies, one did detect a vaguely patronizing air about the western critical response to the Indian writer in English. All that changed in the eighties, thanks to the excellent new crop of writers who made their appearance and have contributed to Indian literature in English since then.

There has always been, on the whole, a far more judicious, if less hysterically enthusiastic, response to it in India. However, most critics tend to continue applying western standards of criticism when judging Indo-English passage of time, a greater and more voluminous literary output, and a growing reading public, criteria of particular relevance to Indo-English literature will emerge no scholar western or Indian, appears so far to have attempted to lay down such criteria for judging Indo-English literature. It is perhaps important to first isolate the typical Indian elements in such writings before formulating a set of relevant critical standpoints.

This is especially so because Indo-English literature, as its very name implies is a product of two cultures – the Indian and the English. It is part of English literature in that it uses the English language as its medium of expression, yet it is isolated from English literature being written by English authors who are Indians and whose native language is usually not English. Yet they use English with ease and facility having been generally educated in English by Europeans in European missionary or convent schools. One such writer NayantraSagal acknowledges this fact. She writes “I am Indian – by blood, nationality, upbringing and conviction – and western by virtue of my English Medium education”.

The western or English influence on Indo-English writing, especially the novel, is obvious. Apart from the fact that the novels in English have their limitation in English style and idiom is one indicator of strong western influence. But what are the elements that enable Indo-English fiction to stand out as a distinctive Literary genre is the question that needs to be answered if one is to get closer to the issue of ‘Indianness’.

RajiNarasimbandefines Indiannessas “little more than the creative bending of Indian concepts and the English language; a cross–breed, in other words”

SrinivasaIyengar in his authoritative work Indian writing also attempts to define Indianness in Indo-English literature;-

“What makesIndo-English literature an Indian literature is the quality, in the choice of subject, in the texture of thought and play of sentiment in the organization of the creative use of language. It is hardly worth pointing out that Indianness is not means to be “a substitute for discipline” or a celebrate lowering of standards.

This research paper brings into focus the elements of Indiannessin Kamala Markandaya’s “Nectar in a Seive”.

The primary factor that contributes to Indianness in theme is the fact that the experience portrayed by the author is peculiar to India alone i.e., that it is a product of these specific geographical region or location in which the novel is set,this experience would be inherently different somewhere else than in the specific setting of the novel of this genre.

A second criterion for Indianness in theme relates to the experience described. A typical Indian theme is one with which a majority of Indians would or could empathize and identity with – being common place within the Indian context.

Elements of Indianness in themes include:

- i) Protest, Reform and Proletarian progressivism.
- ii) India’s modern destiny.
- iii) Social change and cultural transformation.
- iv) Regional communal Identities

iv) The East – West encounter

vi) Questioning affirmation and tradition

‘Nectar in a Sieve’ deals with social change and the peripheral and dynamic effects of progress on the village.

Especially “Nectar in a Sieve” depicts four themes which portray Indianness

- I) East – west encounter
- II) The impact of social change.
- III) Poverty in India
- IV) Tradition vs Modernity

Much Indo-English literary scholarship has focused on an analysis of the characters portrayed in it. This has produced interesting data on the degree of idealism in character-creation and portrayal. It becomes evident that by and large characters in Indo-English fiction are true to life. As early as 1972, Kai Nicholson undertook a study of the Indo-English Novel. What has emerged very clearly from these studies is that ‘type’ figures dominate Indian literature in English. Individuals are less commonly present. Based on the research done to date on the subject, the following ‘types’ predominate.

1. The exploited Indian laborer
2. The sati savithri or long-suffering wife / sacrificial mother figure.
3. The Memsahib
4. The sahib
5. The Anglicized Indian or the ‘Brown Sahib’.
6. Royalty
7. Ascetics

Kamala Markandaya’s characters are molded according to these stereotypes and generally speaking, the portrayal of these characters remains true to life. But if one accepts the predominance of the above categories it is pertinent to examine what constitutes Indianness in their depiction. Even a cursory reading of Markandaya’s Novel “Nectar in a Sieve” would make it evident that most of her characters subscribe to these stereotypes- such as,

- i. Nathan in ‘Nectar in a sieve’- the exploited Indian labours.
- ii. Rukmani in ‘Nectar in a sieve’ - The Sati - Savitri or sacrificial mother.
- iii. Kenny in “Nectar in a Sieve” – The Sahib

Indianness of the language found in Indo-English novels is a controversial subject. There are critics who argue that the use of the English language itself distracts from the Indianness of the writing.

According to ShymalaVenkateswaran, “once an artist, of her own free will, chooses a language, it no longer remains ‘foreign’ to her. It would be more sensible to assess the extent to which the writer has, in borrowing a western language, used it effectively so as to conform with the theme of the novel and to convey the sensibility of the characters and the country in which the novel is set.

Kamala Marakandaya’s First novel ‘Nectar in a Sieve’ (1954), is about the rural India. It portrays the story of Rukmani and Nathan, a simple peasant couple from south India. The novel deals with industrialization and its impact on rural human life. The problems of rural India, the tragic predicament of Indian peasants have been depicted with moving realism. It focuses on the theme of hunger. The social problems like poverty, lack of family planning, beggary, the element of crime, unemployment, prostitution, Zaminidari system, caste and class conflict, superstitious beliefs, dowry system, low status of woman and marriage system are very beautifully portrayed by Markandaya in “‘Nectar in a Sieve’”.

The novel presents the life of simple rural people of South Indian village. Rukmani the protagonist of the novel, who is also the narrator, is married to a poor tenant farmer Nathan in a South Indian village. They have a daughter named Ira and six sons named Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvam, Raja and Kuti. Meanwhile the peace of village is disturbed by the arrival of urban builder, who wants to set up a tannery in the village. The evils of industrialization like inflation, ugliness grows up. Ira who is married to a farmer is deserted by her husband as she is barren. The family on the verge of starvation has no option but to set assent to Arjun and Thambi joining the tannery. But due to their voice of protest they are forced to leave the work and they go to Ceylon. Murugan also goes to the city to seek employment as the family starves. Raja dies and Kuti falls ill. The poor girl, Ira, seeing her family starving during the famine, turns into a woman of the street and gives birth to an illegitimate child. Starvation takes away old granny and Kuti. Rukmani and Nathan leave the village in search of Murugan, who himself has left his wife. With the help of Puli, a young orphan, they live on charity and petty jobs. Nathan dies, Rukmani returns to her village with Puli.

The rural people are illiterate but Rukmani, as an exception, knows how to read and write. She teaches her children at home because she cannot afford to send them to school. The village that has been portrayed in this novel has two faces; one the peaceful village before the introduction of technology and the other after starting of the tannery. Agriculture is the main occupation in the village. In fact Kamala Markandaya did not depict the big landlords and agriculturists but the life of landless farmers who are also the neglected people. The landless farmers in particular are held in the clutches of constant fear, as the land being snatched away, the failure or excess of rains, droughts etc. Markandaya gives a very realistic and touching description of such fear, “The calamities of the land belong to its alone, born of wind and rain and weather; immensities not to be tempered by man or his creations. To those who live by the land and there must always come time hardship of fear and hunger”. A farmer has no hopes for the future, but he keeps hope, amidst fear of getting disappointment. Rukmani sums up the life of a peasant when she says: “ Hope and fear. Twin forces that hugged us first in one direction and

then in another and with one was stronger no one could say.... Fear constant companion of the peasant ...Fear, fear of the dark future, fear of the blackness of death”.

In a traditional Indian family, woman is always subordinate to the man. While the sons are considered as assets and the daughters are considered as a burden on a family. When the first born child was a daughter, Rukmani was very much disappointed “for what women want a girl for her first born”. Nathan “wanted a sonto continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pulling infant who would take with her dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind”. Rukmani thinks that it was a punishment for the past sins “ I have no sons; only one child, a girl... why should it be?Am I not cleanandhealthy”? In the village, much more than in city, a childless woman is considered an ill-fated one. The life of a woman, who had no children at all, is worse. Ira’s husband deserts her, because she is barren. Hence, a husband in the rural area had a social sanction to discard his barren his barren or sonless wife. It is natural that Rukmani easily reconciles herself to Ira’s ill fate and consoles her”. You must not blame him, he has taken another woman”.

While social-religious forces create problems of acceptability and respectability for the childless woman, absence of money for survival drives her to prostitution, as happens in the case of Ira. Ira wants to save her ailing brother. She is fed up of poverty and hunger. Kunthi, a village woman also takes to prostitution. Nathan calls Ira a “ harlot” and never touches even food that is bought out Ira’s earnings. Markandaya portrays the fate of the prostitutes very realistically ““But the man who finds a woman in the street , raise his eyebrow and snaps his fingers so that she follows him, throws few coins that he may possess her , holds her unresisting whatever he has paid for. What cares such a man for the woman who is his for a brief moment? He has gained her relief, she her payment.

By and large most of the characters in the novel are typically rural , Rukmani, Nathan , Janaki , Kali , Kunthi , Ira , Old Granny. Their way of life, attitudes, manners and speech belong to the countryside. Hari Mohan Prasad calls Nathan and his wife “Symbols of teeming millions, archetype figures like Adam and Eve” Superstitions and beliefs are just fruits of illiteracy. The villagers have many beliefs. It is believed that cobra is sacred and hence they should not be killed. Nathan, though, illiterate does not believe that. The rural people take pride in having more children, considering it not only a concrete testimony of divine blessing but also a fortune in having more hands to work on the farm. When Rukmani fails to get any child after Ira, her mother takes her to temple and then they pray together, before the deity for the son. She also gives Rukmani “a small stone lingam”, a symbol of fertility. The belief paves way for customs. Rukmani is faithfully devoted to her husband, does not call him by his name but address him only as husband. A garland of mango leaves is to be tied up across the doorway , as it is “a symbol of happiness and good future”.

Caste system is a predominant force in the Indian society. In this novel except an occasional reference to the Muslims and cobblers, there is no mention of any other caste. Though there is reference to gods and goddesses, they do not bear any identity. It appears Markandaya makes particular reference to the Muslim woman with an intention to express her dislike towards the purdah system. But Markandya gives a detailed

description of the class system. In the village the landlords are the most powerful in social hierarchy.

Kamala Markandaya has not given description of the village at the height of its glory but at its transitional period, affected particularly by the setting of tannery. Nonetheless slow change was coming to the villages where SrinivasaIyenger feels "life has not apparently changed for thousands years, but now with the invasion of industry and more technology sinister consequences issue". For some people the tannery proves to be a boon " Day and night woman twist rope, since they could sell as much as they made and traders waxed prosperous selling their goods to the workman". Though a village woman, kunthi feels happy with the change that their village is no longer a clump of huts but a small town". But soon the darker side starts to emerge out. Rukmani does not like change, because of its noise, stinking smell and crowds. The bird's seems to have forgotten to sing, or the noise drowns their melodious calls. Rukmani denounces the change also because the money buys less and less. In place of quietness the village has " all noise and crowds where and rude young hooligans idling in the street dirty bazaars and uncouth behavior and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his Money".

Industrialization has brought demoralization in the village. There is nothing but the smell of tannery, the crowds, the shouting and disturbance. Ira also turns to prostitution. The quiet life and village economics both are affected, values have lost their roots and money is what everybody is interested in. Industrialization affects family the very basic institution of a society. A.V.KrishanaRao remarks: "Industrialization with its main emphasis on urban development, the mechanization of the means of production and distribution necessary result in the social dislocation of the family".

Nathan, a landless farmer, has to live on the mercy of the Zamindar. He has suffered under the Zamindari system. Nathan works for thirty years under the illusion of owing up the land. Whether the harvest is good or not he has to pay the revenue of the land. He sells the utensils, two brass vessels of the tin trunk, two shirts of that eldest son, and even bullocks and seeds, so as to retain the land, to clear the dues with a hope that one day he will own land. But when tannery owners pay good price, the Zamindar sells all his land and Nathan and many more like him have to go landless. As A.V.KrishanaRao remarks: "Rukmani and Nathan the peasant couple in south Indian village are victims of two evils, Zamindari system and the industrial economy".

The tragic picture of hunger is pointed out by Markandaya, when Rukmani divides food into 24 small parts to feed the entire family for an equal number of days. Such starvation leads to human degradation. Hunger makes Ira a prostitute; hunger leads to suspected theft of calfskin by Raja and his subsequent death. Starvation forces kunthi's death. As P.P. Mehta rightly remarks: "The struggle between man and overpowering hunger before which, honor, morality and God do not count". The problem of poverty has been realistically depicted by Markandaya the adverse physical condition like drought makes Nathan unable to pay his land revenue. Puli have to face poverty and go on begging because he has none to support and care for. Puli have no mother and he laments "no mother... there is no one to worry about me and none to worry me either, which is a good thing". As N.K Jain feels that the novel presents "an authentic picture of village life in transition, particularly of rural poverty and hunger". The lack of family planning in rural India also forces the rural families poverty as in the case of Nathan's family, Poverty and unemployment leads to many other social problems like prostitution, beggary and crime. Nathan and Rukmani too, the two simple and hardworking villagers, are forced to go for beggary though called free food in the name of charity. Poverty along with social problems gives birth to offences also. Puli engages himself in petty crimes when he fails to get any alms. Murugan engages himself in gambling.

Kamala Markandaya clearly disapproves of superstitious practices of the rural people. On the failure of rain, Rukmani threw herself on the earth, prayed, offered a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to the goddess, but no rains came. The living conditions of the rural people are almost primitive. Nathan's house is a small thatched mud hut near a paddy field held in the vicinity of a couple of similar huts. A Garland of mango leaves has been hung across its doorway to herald happiness and good fortune. The hut has rooms, one of which is a kind of storehouse for grain where as the other is for virtually everything else. For lighting, the village has wick lamps a wick or oil filled coconut shells used as lamps. The village transport is a bullock-cart, moving in the midst of sight and sound from nature, which makes the journey enjoyable to both animals and passengers.

Kamala Markandaya has given a very descriptive and realistic picture of a rural India and its problems in this novel. The problems described in the novel have a typical rural tinge. Whether it is on economic, social religious or human level, the novel belongs to Indian rural in all manifestations. As S.Z.H. Abidi remarks; "the social realism employed by Kamala Markandaya in this novel is very close to the observed condition of life." Thus Kamala Markandaya's novels 'Nectar in a Sieve' reveals Indianness in her handling of setting, theme, characterisation and the use of Indian language.

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