

## Chapter V

### THE RURAL THEME:

#### Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*<sup>1</sup>

The inevitably subjective nature of even the most would-be-objective criticism is reflected in the diversity of response to every work. While the Time's reviewer hails Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* as "a simple unaffected story of human suffering (which) does more than a shelf of books on history and economics to explain the people of India,"<sup>2</sup> an Indian reviewer finds in it evidence of "inexperience, not of what village life is, but of a novelist's participation in it."<sup>3</sup> It is significant that the praise should come from the west,

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1. Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* (Bombay, Jaico Publishing House, 1957).

2. Fiction Catalog (New York, H.W. Wilson Company), p.237.

3. See the reference to *Nectar in a Sieve* in a review of Attia Hosain's *Phoenix Fled*, by Foy Nissen, Quest, (No.1, August/September, 1956), p.62.

while the shortcomings are more conspicuous to the Indian eye, nearer to the scene depicted. It should be mentioned however, that there are admirers in India as well, admirers whose views cannot be lightly dismissed. People like Mulk Raj Anand and K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar think highly of Kamala Markandaya's achievement. The truth, as usual, must lie somewhere between the two extreme views. It should be granted that the narration is skilful enough to hold the attention of the reader, at least at the first reading. But simultaneously, a feeling of dissatisfaction is produced due to a sense of something lacking - something vital to the theme. An attempt to analyse the nature of its interest as well as of the feeling of dissatisfaction might throw light on the success (the book has seen several editions) and limitations of the novel.

To some extent, the success might be traced to the subject matter itself. A novel about the

hardships of a village couple is just the thing to endorse preconceived notions of India as a land of villages, and of the peasant's problems as the most 'contemporary', and crucial to the Indian situation. To the western reader at a far remove from the Indian scene, a novel on rustic life bearing testimony to the much publicised facts of Indian rural economics - poverty, hunger and ignorance, is bound to appear as a book on "the real" India. And to the reader at home the evident interest in the "poor" satisfies the requirements of a sentimentalised attitude towards humble folk. However, one should hasten to add, that the success cannot be entirely attributed to the susceptibilities of readers at home and abroad. Kamala Markandaya has the necessary sympathy and talent to weave a readable tale out of meagre and unpromising stuff like that of a humble farmer's life. Credibly worked out bits like the early married life of Rahmani, sustain interest of a kind in the fluctuating

fortunes of her family. The attempt to create the atmosphere of a domestic event, can be effective as in the account of Ira's wedding. The practicality with which Rukmani clears up the remnants of the wedding feast and notes the work to be done on the morrow, is recounted with a studied neutrality, which suggests a sorrow that cannot be indulged in the face of more urgent demands. The 'nectar in a sieve' theme is worked out with considerable authenticity — but, it is more a matter of external details. There lies the limitation of the book.

The effort is to highlight the sense of insecurity that pervades eternally, an Indian tenant-farmer's life, and the human endurance that survives it all. But it tends to fall into a stereotyped pattern. All the calamities that befall an Indian peasant find representation - the monsoon and its ravages, drought and famine, the moneylender who exploits the situation, and the

unsympathetic grain-dealer. Only the cruel agent of the zamindar is missing, for Sivaji is said to be unusually considerate. An additional source of misfortune here is the tannery (an instance of expanding industry crushing the farmer). The author makes feeble attempts to work it into a symbol of destruction, but with little success. Rukmani, the central character, sees it as a source of corruption and the agent of dissolution of her home. But there is a suggestion of romantic attitudinising in her reactions to the tannery, couched as they are in expressions like these:

"No doubt I will," I said. "It will not gladden me. Already my children hold their noses when they go by, and all is shouting and disturbance and crowds wherever you go. Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us."

"You see," said Kunthi. "The tannery is a boon to us. Have I not said so since it began? We are no longer a village either, but a growing town.

Does it not do you good just to think of it?"

"Indeed no," said I, "for it is even as I said, and our money buys less and less. As for living in a town - if town this is - why, there is nothing I would fly from sooner if I could go back to the sweet quiet of village life. Now it is all noise and crowds everywhere, and rude young hecligans idling in the street and dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour, and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his money."

"Words and words," said Kunthi. "Stupid words, No wonder they call us senseless peasant women; but I am not and never will be. There is no earth in my breeding."

"If there were you would be the better for it," said I wrathfully, "for then your values would be true."

These discussions between Rahmani and Kunthi (their contrary views are meant to be in character) do not, somehow, ring true. Rahmani sounds very much like a townswoman idealising village life, standing apart from it. And her economic reasons do not seem very sound either for she herself is not quite convinced about the rightness of her blaming every misfortune on the tannery. Besides granting that it was the source of employment to so many youngsters who could not be absorbed by the land, she gives an elaborate explanation of how, even without the tannery, their economic position was insecure as long as they remained at the mercy of nature and the zamindar.

Rahmani, acting as a kind of spokeswoman for the hard lot of the peasant, narrows down the interest of the book to a generalised consideration of agricultural and economic conditions. Very little is left implicit. Kenny, the queer

philanthropist, acts out his roles as the benefactor and the exasperated critic raging against the ignorance and passive submission of these "Acquiescent imbeciles". His talks with Rukmani drop plenty of information about the conditions of the farmer and his occupation (that bit of talk about the dung used as fuel instead of being used to enrich the soil is pure "economics" however casually introduced into the dialogue). Through Rukmani's reveries we get vignettes of the sufferings of the family - the rice-buying scene after the ravages of the monsoon (the money-lender and the rice-dealer being in league against them); the desperate attempts to collect the money due to the zamindar's agent; the death of two children, one falling a victim to official harshness and the other to the rigours of hunger, despite the sister's attempt to feed him by selling her body.

The economy and impersonality in describing some of these personal scenes, do not always seem

to be a mode of restraint ensuing from the reminiscential technique. The distance of the reminiscer is frequently seen to be the distance of the observer from a situation in which she has no direct emotional involvement. The author's lack of grip over emotional situations is betrayed in the tendency to substitute sentiments where the poignancy of the particular and the immediate should have operated. Take for instance the death of Raja. The attempt to particularise the sense of "numbness" through her "thoughts, dazed and confused" and to bring out the pathos by a matter-of-fact description of the scene, might have been plausible, had it not been for the explanatory sentences and the terms in which the would-be ritualistic meaning expresses itself:

For this I have given you birth,  
my son, that you should lie in the end at  
my feet with ashes in your face and cold-  
ness in your limbs and yourself departed  
without trace, leaving this huddle of  
bones and flesh without meaning.

... These things were you, now  
there is no connection whatever; the sorrow  
within me is not for this body which has  
suffered and in suffering has let slip the  
spirit, but for you, my son.

...

Now not even a heap of bones: only  
a few ashes to show that once a man has  
lived.

(pp. 50-50)

It is not just that Raja has hitherto remained a  
mere name and the sense of Rukmani's loss is not  
concretised. The writer's effort to evoke an  
elemental emotion - the mother's sorrow at the  
violent death of a son - seems terribly contrived.

A similar sense of artificiality is felt  
when the mother confronts the daughter going out in  
the night to sell herself:

"I must know," I said, imploring.  
"It is better that I should know than  
that I should imagine."

Ira gave me a sidelong glance:

"Your imagination would not travel  
that far."

"You do not know me," I said, troubled.  
"And I no longer understand you."

"The truth is unpalatable," she  
replied.

(p.99)

Ira does not sound like a simple village maiden  
driven to an enormous deed by the sight of her  
starving baby brother. Her words echo the  
unnatural shrillness of her reply to the mother  
who tries to comfort her when she is returned by  
her husband for being barren:

Leave me alone, Mother. I have seen this coming for a long time. The reality is much easier to bear than the imaginings. At least now there is no more fear, no more necessity for lies and concealment.

(p. 80)

The pseudo-sophistication in the manner of her cynicism is more the kind one might expect from a city-bred career-girl.

The most conclusive evidence of Kamala Markandaya's failure to get inside the skin of the characters she would portray, is had in the last scene between Nathan and Rukmani. Nathan is dying and Rukmani is attending on him:

Midnight, and, as always before, his paroxysms eased. The fits of shivering stopped, the stiff limbs fell limp and relaxed. In the calm stillness I saw him open his eyes, his hand came to my face, tender and searching, wiping away the unruly tears.

"You must not cry, my dearest. What has to be, has to be."

"Hush," I said. "Rest and grow better."

"I have only to stretch out my hand," he said, "to feel the coldness of death. Would you hold me when my time is come? I am at peace. Do not grieve."

"If I grieve," I said, "it is not for you, but for myself, beloved, for how shall I endure to live without you, who are my love and my life?"

"You are not alone," he said. "I live in my children." and was silent, and then I heard him murmur my name and bent down.

"Have we not been happy together?"

"Always, my dearest, always."

"It is slipping away fast," he said.  
"Rest with me a little."

And so I laid my face on his and for a while his breath fell soft and light as a rose petal on my cheek, then he sighed as if in weariness and turned his face to me, and so his gentle spirit withdrew and the light went out in his eyes.

(p. 188)

The human interest of the book is sought to be concentrated in the enduring love and understanding between the couple, who are the only two dominant figures in the story. But the deathbed scene, instead of gathering into itself the poignancy of happy and bitter moments shared together, fritters away whatever feeling of genuineness the earlier scenes might have generated. The emotional cliches, jarring enough in themselves, sound absurd coming from the mouths of these rustic characters. Detached from the book, one would certainly not be able to guess the identity of the speakers. It could have come from any sentimental story in a popular magazine.

The chief defect of the book appears to be the writer's inability to sustain through a full-length novel, the make-believe of a village woman unfolding her story. The discrepancy in the stature of the character and the quality of the consciousness that is superimposed makes itself strongly felt. Rukmani, of course, is described as being above the average village woman. She is literate, and the daughter of a headman, socially a rung above Nathan. But she is not convincingly raised to the stature required of the narrator. She is depicted in the story as any ordinary village woman. Though prudent and hard-working, she reflects the village woman's impotence and ignorance. Her 'exceptional'ness is nominal and not sufficiently particularised in terms of heightened awareness. Her observations of nature - fields, birds etc. - seem external impositions. They are too 'mental' to belong to a daughter of the soil, responding to nature without the self-consciousness of a town-dweller lyricising over it. Consider these passages:

He coaxed me out into the sunlight and we sat down together on the brown earth that was part of us, and we gazed at the paddy fields spreading rich and green before us, and they were indeed beautiful. The air was cool and still, yet the paddy caught what little movement there was, leaning slightly one way and the next with soft whispering. At one time there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingoes, striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close - except crows and kites and such scavenging birds, eager for the town's offal, or sometimes a pal-pitta, skimming past with raucous cry but never stopping, perhaps dropping a blue-black feather in flight to delight the children.

Not in the town, where all that was natural had long been sacrificed, but on its outskirts, one could still see the passing of the seasons. For in the town there were the crowds, and streets battened down upon the earth, and the filth that men had put upon it; and one walked with care for what might lie beneath one's feet or threaten from before or behind; and in this preoccupation forgot to look at the sun or the stars, or even to observe they had changed their setting in the sky; and knew nothing of the passage of time save in dry frenzy, by looking at a clock. But for us, who lived by the green, quiet fields, perilously close though these were to the town, nature still gave its muted message. Each passing day, each week, each month, left its sign, clear and unmistakable.

The tender budding of our new year, the periwinkles and the jasmine, the soft, scented champak blossom, had yielded place to the fierce flowering jacaranda and gold mohur, before Ira's time came for giving birth.

The neat descriptions could have been culled out of a tourist's sketch book. Besides, Rukmani often sounds bourgeois in her sentiments and expressions. Phrases come pat. A feeling of disharmony is produced, whether it be in the tone, the turn of a thought or the wording of a reflection:

... such dreams, delightful, orderly, satisfying, but of the stuff of dreams, wraithlike.

(p. 45)

Into the calm lake of our lives the first stone has been tossed.

(p. 65)

When Kuti was gone - with a bland indifference that mocked our loss - the abundant grain grew ripe.

(p. 103)

The tannery! That word brought instant understanding. Realisation came like a rocket, swift and fiery.

(p. 132)

The time of in-between, already a memory, coiled away like a snake within its hole.

(p. 133)

Sticks and stones lay scattered wildly in angry confusion.

(p. 41)

... Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear; fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger; fear of the blackness of death.

(p. 79)

At dusk the drums of calamity began; their grave, throbbing rhythm came clearly through the night, throughout the night, each beat, each tattoo, echoing the mighty impotence of our human endeavour. I listened. I could not sleep. In the sound of the drums I understood a vast pervading doom; but in the expectant silences between, my own disaster loomed larger, more consequent, and more hurtful.

(p. 42)

One feels the presence of the writer behind the narration which is ostensibly a village woman's. It is interesting to see the similarity, in tone, idiom and movement, to certain passages from Kamala Markandaya's Home Inner Fury, whose narrator-heroine belongs to the life to which the novelist herself belongs. The striking similarity endorses the feeling of discrepancy that Nectar in a Sieve creates.

Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together. Then morning comes, the wavering grey turns to gold, there is a stirring within as the sleepers awake, and he softly departs.<sup>4</sup>

... I trembled like a coward standing there, ... and then the slow pain came seeping up, filling my throat with grief, flowing from throat to temple; I could feel it behind my eyes. I closed the box gently and put it away, waiting for the ebb; a little frightened that I could still be hurt so easily, that time should be so powerless to stanch that flow.<sup>5</sup>

... In the straining darkness I felt his body moving with desire, his hands on me were trembling, and I felt my senses opening like a flower to his urgency. I closed my eyes and waited, waited in the darkness while my being filled with a wild, ecstatic fluttering, waited for him to come to me.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Nectar in a Sieve, p. 1.

5. Some Inner Fury, p. 7.

6. Nectar in a Sieve, p. 57.

Slowly my senses awoke and responded, the buds of feeling swelled and opened one by one. In the trembling silence I heard the blood begin its clamor, felt its frantic irregular beat; then the world fell away, forgotten in this wild abandoned rhythm, lost in the sweep and surge of love.<sup>7</sup>

Whether the use of the third person narrative would have mitigated matters is purely conjectural. A possible reason for Kamala Markandaya's preference for the first person seems to be the limitation of her experience of rural life which necessitates a deliberate limiting of the field. She is treading safer grounds in restricting herself to the range of experience that is likely to fall within the span of a village woman's life. The third person narrative carries an implicit omniscience, besides a possible widening of the canvas. The means that

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7. Some Inner Fury, p. 134.

Kamala Markandaya has at her command do not seem to be adequate for answering such a contingency. The descriptions of social life - whether it be a wedding or a naming ceremony or neighbourliness in day-to-day living, and of occupational particulars like sowing and harvesting and household chores, are skilfully woven into the narrative making for verisimilitude of a kind that also has an 'information' value. But very often her attempts to create the atmosphere seem to be a kind of cavaleguing of details. We do not get the vivid feel of community life as we do for instance, in the more successful parts of Mulk Raj Anand's fictional writing. He writes like one who knows his village from the inside. Though the quality of his writing is uneven, and tends to get spoilt by a blatant, reformistic zeal making his characters mouthpieces for his ideas, many of them come alive before getting lost in the author's predilections. The same cannot be said of the

characters that appear in Kamala Markandaya's book. Rukmani's neighbours Kali, Kuntki and Janaki leave but a faint impression. Even Old Granny remains shadowy. Biswas, the moneylender, is obviously the more readily manageable character, being a well-established type. In the few scenes he appears, he remains true to type, though not as lively a figure as the moneylenders in Mulk Raj Anand's books, Lalla Birbal of The Old woman and the Coy and Seth Ghasan Lal of The Village, for instance. Rukmani's own children remain more or less names. It is significant that Puli, the city urchin, becomes much more vivid in comparison. Apparently he has been more directly within the experience of the novelist than village children.

As for Rukmani and Nathan, they may be plausible, but somehow do not have the compelling appeal, for instance, of Wang Lung and O-lan of Pearl Suck's Good Earth<sup>8</sup> (a book that invites comparison

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8. Pearl S. Buck, The Good Earth (New York, Pocket Books, Inc., 1964).

by similarity of theme). The Chinese couple are at once archetypal and individual -- Wang Lung in all the humanness of his desires, ambitions, conflicts, jealousies and passions; and the hard-working O-lan in the very passivity and loyalty of her being. Pearl Buck has found the style suited for the portrayal of the Chinese farmer who rises from humble beginnings to be a rich landowner of his place. The familiar pattern of alternating hardships and prosperity is only a framework for revealing elemental passions operating in characters of a particular stature and quality. The writer does not intrude or prompt her characters, but uses her literary resources to let them grow to life, their thoughts and feelings emerging with an inevitability that goes home. In comparison with Hector in a Sieve, especially, we seem to have here not the semblance to actuality, but actuality itself, a presence we miss in the verisimilitude of Kamala Markandaya's descriptive writing. The realism of The Good Earth has the

immediacy of direct participation, and besides, is functional since it communicates to the reader the power of the unsaid. It is this suggestive quality that makes it the more compelling creation. Pearl Buck has an illuminating epigraph to her book:

... "This was what Vinteuil had done for the little phrase. Swann felt that the composer had been content (with the instruments at his disposal) to draw aside its veil, to make it visible, following and respecting its outlines with a hand so loving, so prudent, so delicate and so sure, that the sound altered at every moment, blunting itself to indicate a shadow, springing back into life when it must follow the curve of some more bold projection. And one proof that Swann was not mistaken when he believed in the real existence of this phrase was that anyone with an ear at all delicate for music would have at once detected the imposture had Vinteuil, endowed with

less power to see and to render its forms, sought to dissemble (by adding a line, here and there, of his own invention) the dimness of his vision or the feebleness of his hand." - Swann's Way, by Marcel Proust.

Considering the two books in this light, one might say that Pearl Buck has found the secret of the little phrase, while Kamala Markandeya appears to have failed owing to inadequate realisation of her theme.

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