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ABSTRACT

The paper, keeping in its backdrop the popular and critical readings of Kamala Markandaya’s debut novel Nectar in a Sieve (1954) as a vindication of the fortitude of rural Indian way of life, in the face of displacement through aggressive western industrialization, anatomizes the role played by an European character Kenny in the novel in its representative aspect. The reason for introducing Kenny is shown to be the endorsement of an elite private westerner to live and work in rural India without sharing in either the identity of the rural self or the power the tannery represents in the novel. The paper also goes on to show how Kenny’s inability to fully understand the rural Indian way of life makes him a representative of the Western reader, and thus, ease out the process of the depiction of the East as a distant and mysterious other. The stance thereby seeks to reimburse the lack of verisimilitude, and that of a distinct ethno-geographic specificity that the Western readers and critics may find in this novel. In conclusion, the paper examines the resultant idea that if, on the collective scale, the novel questions the idea of industrial development in a way that is commonly associated with the representation of the West in Indian English fiction of its time, on the personal level; the West provides a kind of authorization and empowerment for the writer herself. It also gives her a paradoxically privileged status of an outsider to the order she apparently authenticates.

1. Introduction

Undulate East had always been too much for the West, and soulful East always came dog-lap fashion to the West, mutely asking to be not too little and not too much, but just right (Markandaya, 1962, p. 107).

The reception of an Indian writer in English fiction in the West has always been a matter of much conjecture. It is extremely difficult to properly gauge the nature and extent of this reception. When it comes to women writers, and women’s issues in works of fiction, in fact Keneally’s comment is about a woman writer in English, the situation is even more problematic. Women’s issues in Indian writing in English are most often issues that occur specifically to Indian women or to women of Indian familial and cultural origin. The present paper takes up one of such novels that centre on the typical Indian experience of a woman and its target readership is mainly Western. It examines how kamala Markandaya has compromised with the Western readership at various levels of narration and implication in Nectar in a Sieve. Rather than defining the novel under discussion against the coordinates of patriarchy, the paper attempts an investigation into how the interactions, of patriarchy and the woman protagonist in the novel, mirror the relationship between the West and the woman writer writing within its traditions of reception.

2. Background to the Study and Literature Review

Nectar in a Sieve is Kamala Markandaya’s first novel, published in 1954 from London where she had been living since 1948. The novel centers on the life of Rukmani, a poor peasant at some unnamed village in south India going through the process of industrialization that happens through the establishment of a tannery. In her struggle for mere existence, she comes close to a divorced English missionary called Kennington or Kenny who is a doctor with a mission to open a hospital in the village out of foreign funds. He helps her and her daughter in treating them of infertility and tries to stabilize the family in a number of other ways. The narration, working through flashback technique, is that of Rukmani herself in the first person, and it narrates how the impoverished family, that braves all possible affronts accompanying industrial change, is thrown out of their land, their occupation and virtually fragmented by the tannery.

At the beginning of the novel, however, we find Rukmani’s family relatively well off. She is a daughter of a village headman and her elder sisters marry in relative pomp. It is the change from the indigenous feudal system to the British administrative system that actually hurls the family into financial volatility. At a later stage of her life, the tannery completes the ruin. One must note that both these agents are imports of the British Raj. The tannery, representative of Western industrialization aggression, takes a huge toll on Rukmani’s family by displacing them from their land which has been the centre of their lives for generations. She loses a son. Two sons migrate to Ceylon to cope with the unemployment they faced in inciting a strike at the tannery, and the only daughter in the household becomes a prostitute. In fact, this is just a projection to the displacement that the tannery has in fact brought in almost every household in the village. The prices of everyday goods soar up and this causes the peasants to move out of their land compelling them to forsake the occupation that has fostered them down the generations. Nathan has to give up the tenure ship of his land to the tannery and go to the city to
search for his son. The city, which is shown to be a hub of Westernization, displaces them even more and they find that their son Murugan has left his family in search of a better fortune. The familial values that they lived by, that had already been deeply scourged when their daughter took to prostitution and bore an illegitimate child, are further threatened as such escapism as Murugan’s is unthinkable in the moral world Rukmani and Nathan live. Their refusal to beg for food in the city betrays how they have been made to be cultural refugees hanging on the last bit of their previous identity.

Both at the popular and the critical levels of reading, the novel is generally taken to be as a kind of authentication of the rural agricultural way of life for the peasant folk and the adversity of Western industrial change on their lives. The nectar of the title is, indisputably, the will power of Rukmani and the like who brave changes that uproot them for life. And the sieve is, again undoubtedly, poverty, but not the poverty that appears naturally in their lives, but that which comes as a kind of fatal by-product of displacement. The West is represented by the imposition of the administrative system that suddenly replaces the village headman with an indifferent collector who comes to the village once a year, and the tannery that almost turns the village economics upside down. It also manifests itself through Kenny, whose only apparent incapability in the novel is that of understanding the Indian fatalistic way of life, which is most often interpreted as the peasant folk’s resistance to change. It is impossible and unnecessary here to provide a catalogue of critical comments to this reading. The average trend of reading can be best summed up by a comment provided by K. R. Chandrasekharan (1968) in East and West in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya, “Kenny has the dual role of a pathetic observer of the Indian scene and the representation of the finer traditions of the West” (p. 62).

Among the major works that appeared before the seventies dealing particularly with these themes is the well known work by K. R. Chandrasekharan (1968) mentioned above in which there is a systematic analysis of the presentation of the Western characters in the novels. Chandrasekharan points out four ways in which the West is presented. The first way of presentation of the West is in the capacity of the ruler. Caroline in Possession (1962) is the perfect image of the Western ruler according to him. The second capacity in which Chandrasekharan (1968) feels that Markandaya presents the West is in the capacity of “a patron and a mentor” (p. 323). Over here again, Chandrasekharan (1968) finds that Caroline is a representative of this tendency of the West. The third of the type is the presentation of the West in the figure of the missionary and he points out Kenny and Hickey to be representatives of this type. And it is here that the novelist’s attitude becomes divergent. If Kenny is the representative of the good missionary, Hickey is that of the biased one. However, in the fourth type, in the representation of the Englishman as an individual, Chandrasekharan (1968) finds that in Markandaya, the representation of the West in their individual capacity has been “objective” (p. 326). In the section that follows, dealing with “The English estimate of India” in Markandaya, Chandrasekharan (1968) places Kenny and Caroline side by side and finds that the Indian spiritual tradition “is powerful enough to resist and defeat any attack against it” as it happens in the displacement of Rukmani and in the way Val is taken over, albeit temporarily by Caroline. In the concluding part of the paper,
called “Summing up” (p. 327), Chandrasekharan (1968) deduces that: “there has not been much understanding between East and West in spite of the long association between them. Neither side has had the correct attitude towards the other. Generally speaking, the West has been self-consciously superior and the East self-consciously inferior” (p. 327). He concludes his essay by pointing out what he poses as the real crux of the representation of the West in Kamala Markandaya’s novels. It is a message of freedom and autonomy in which tradition has to be valued:

The implied message in Kamala Markandaya’s novels is that India should confidently pursue her own path holding fast to her traditional values and using methods appropriate to her culture. It is true that while the novelist recognizes the evils and deficiencies in Indian life and society and warns her countrymen against a slavish imitation of the West, she does not offer any ready-made solutions to the many problems facing the country. Her emphatic teaching is that India should preserve her soul and carve out her own destiny. In religion, she should be proud of her great legacy and her constant aim should be the attainment of the purity, equipoise and altruism represented by the Swamy of Possession or A Silence of Desire (P.328).

Writing in the same vein, Anil K. Bhatnagar (1995) places Markandaya in the general context of the books dealing with the East-West encounter and finds that: “On the whole, the novelist highlights the drawbacks and the qualities of the East and the West by identifying the forces creating a wide gulf between the two. It is only when the East and the West try to understand each other’s qualities, the mankind will achieve its goal through love, affection and fellow feeling” (p. 51).

Fawzia Afzal-Khan (1993) divides Markandaya’s novels into two groups. The first comprises of “those dealing primarily with native Indian (mostly rural or small town) life” (p. 98), he puts Nectar in a Sieve, A Silence of Desire, A Handful of Rice and Two Virgins in the first category, and the second group comprises of novels “set either in India or in England and India that deal primarily with the interrelationships between the two peoples and cultures” (p. 98). He puts Some Inner Fury, Possession, The Coffer Dams, The Nowhere Man, The Golden Honeycomb and Shalimar (Pleasure City) in it. Afzal-Khan finds Markandaya’s selection of the novel genre as reflective of a realistic mode of representation “a genre that will help restore the dignity of her people, so that they no longer appear ‘inferior’ either in intellectual or spiritual terms when compared to their European counterparts” (p. 98).

Rochelle Almeida (1998) makes a detailed and systematic analysis of the Indianness of the characters of Kamala Markandaya’s novels. Among the different classes of characters she studies under as many as seven heads, she studies what she calls the Memshibs, the sahibs and the anglicized Indians. She finds that in the representation of the memsahib there is recourse to what she calls a “derogatory image” and she holds that with exceptions of only the few of them “English women conform to the norm created for them in the Indo-English novel. Millie Rawlings in The Coffer Dams, Caroline Bell in Possession, the arrogant anonymous Memshibs in A Handful of Rice to whom Ravi must deliver the finished garments, and Lady Copeland in The Golden Honeycomb are examples of this sort of Englishwoman” (p. 339). In the part dealing with the Englishmen, Almeida again finds the same typecasting attitude and it is here that she quotes Joan Adkins in...
which Adkins finds out a progressive degeneration in the Englishmen represented in the novels of Markandaya. However, dealing with each of the novels and the European characters represented there, Almeida comes to the conclusion that there is a “mixed impression” (p. 347) of the British Sahib that comes out in her novels. If on the one hand the sahib represented “conforms entirely to the type that Indo-English fiction has always propagated”, on the other sometimes “he is depicted very differently, as a warm and memorable individual” (p. 347). Kenny, quite clearly, is one such character.

3. Kenny’s Dual Characterization

Kenny does not belong to the tannery, but he is largely ineffectual in opposing the forces that foster and accompany it. If this ineffectuality is not by choice, then at least part of it is obviously by his innate resistance to really work for a change in the system. His role is mainly remedial. And it is this that aligns him not only to the liberal but unfeeling West, but also with the Westernized Indian elite, the class to which Markandaya and a part of her readership belong. In spite of his speaking their language and eating their food, Kenny is not their own people. He never becomes so in the course of the novel, and given the representation of the West in Markandaya’s other novels, the author does not, in fact, want him to be so. His attitude ranges from wonder to disgust often interspersed by a casual admiration that comes from a socio-economically distanced placement.

Kenny, however, is a demigod to Rukmani. At a point in the novel, she addresses Kenny in a language and gesture, overcharged with passionate reverence, that is normally used to address a god like Krishna: “My lord, my benefactor,” I cried. “Many a time I have longed to see you. Now at last you come,” and I bent down to kiss his feet, shod as they were in leather shoes (Markandaya, 1954, p. 47).

In fact, the word she uses for her husband in the novel is Nathan, which is an Indian equivalent for lord. At another place in the novel, narrating the conversations they have had about Ira’s illegitimate son, she likens Kenny’s attitude to that of Nathan (Markandaya, 1954, p. 149). These minor details do not suggest much, but they reveal the regard she has for Kenny. Once she carries a garland to greet him but is too awe struck to actually present it. Kenny has indeed rescued her from social ignominy, but he has not made her aware of her social position as a woman. He is aware of the meaninglessness of her pride when he jocularly retorts her thankful boasting of five sons by commenting that he should not be blamed for their excesses. But a little later, he pays compliment to the family when Nathan expresses their gratitude at his having visited them with an air of assurance of a social superior in a way consistent with their culture: “Yet not so poor,...for the women of your house do you credit, and you have begotten five healthy sons” (Markandaya, 1954, p. 49). In keeping with his own cultural tradition, he mentions the role of the women first, but he also congratulates them for their sturdy sons almost in a way a common village headman would do. A much more direct approach to the matter comes from an insider, at the beginning of the novel, from a person who really faces the brunt. Speaking of the frequent pregnancies of the village women, Rukmani’s neighbour Kali comments, “Men are all the same” (Markandaya, 1954, p. 15).

East West interaction is a repeated theme in Markandaya and the private Westerner in her novels is not always a
missionary figure as is Kenny. In Possession Caroline is indeed an egotistical counterpart of the imperialistic project. She has more regard for Val’s art than for him as an independent human being. Hickey in Some Inner Fury is much more complex in development. He is another missionary but eventually becomes a part of the corrupt system when he bears false witness against Gobind at the latter’s trial for murder. When the natives close on him, he is protected by his white brethren “his missionary robes flapping proclaiming uselessly that he was not one of them; that he did not want to be one of them; but you had only to look at his face to see that he was.” (Markandaya, 1955, p. 283) Kenny stands apart in being and not being. At one place in the novel he described the unquestioning acceptance of people like Rukmani by calling their existence a kind of simplification, a “being without understanding” (Markandaya, 1954, p.147). In fact, he himself is so when it comes to the ideals that Rukmani lives by. At a point in the novel he exclaims in exasperation: “My God!... I do not understand you. I never will. Go, before I too am entangled in your philosophies” (Markandaya, 1954, p.154). He is remarkably near Rukmani, yet far apart when the question of understanding Rukmani comes. It is also a fact that his failure to take in Rukmani’s fortitude and fatalism clearly reveals the exemplification of Kipling’s maxim in him. At another level, he acts as a kind of the representation of the reader, the reader who is supposed to find themselves in Kenny, one who can sympathise, can be involved in egalitarian work, but cannot understand the essentially other. Kenny does nothing to reform the system that dislocates, but remains in the system itself. To him it is important that the family lives on. His vision into the Indian family bondage is superficial. At a place, being deeply disgusted in his broken marriage, he admires the family bondage of the Indians with a rare touch of admiration, “You have sound instincts” (Markandaya, 1954, p.147) he admits. As a matter of fact, Kenny drops his patronizing attitude rarely in the novel. Nevertheless, when such an adulatory idea of the family is thought about, the situation of Ira, deserted by her husband for infertility, and her ultimate resort to prostitution stares one in the face. The way the family looks upon the matter when the son in law brings back the daughter to the house on the pretext of infertility does not betray “sound instincts”. Nathan’s observation is that “I do not blame him ...He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient” (Markandaya, 1954, p.71). Rukmani is unable to accept that excuse at that point of time. But later, on being treated back to health, when Ira is refused by her husband on the ground that he has “taken” another wife, Rukmani comments “You must not blame him, ... He has taken another woman” (Markandaya, 1954, p. 86). Such a kind of family value system may be a result of socialization, but cannot be called products of “sound instincts” (Markandaya, 1954, p. 147). Even the information that Nathan has fathered two children of Kunthi does not come out so much as an act of disloyalty on his part; it becomes one of the ways of machination of the “evil” Kunthi to extort her living from this family by blackmail. Marital incompatibility of the type Kenny is going through is not a luxury people like Rukmani could possibly afford.

Thus if the West operates on the two levels of the collectively exploitative and the personally comforting, the personally comforting however, does not contribute much in the way of changing the situation of the collective exploitation. The nectar that Kenny brings to Rukmani’s life is not
ambrosia. It only provides temporary solace by limited empowerment. Kenny is just what the Western readership is to Markandaya; it is a culture she has married into. It can feel but can disguise its ineffectiveness in not being able to understand. And it is this that happens to be an escape route for the inaction and the looking upon as the “other”, a kind of irresponsibility disguised in the genteel veneer of cultural difference, an adequate excuse for being a part of the establishment and being philanthropic on demand.

4. Other Compromises in the Text

The alterations that Markandaya has brought in to adapt the novel to the necessities of Western reception are not only there in the character of Kenny. The tension that one notices in the representation of a life the reception of which may be uncertain is evident in the layout of the novel. The novel begins with a short blurb called ‘about this book’ which is actually a short summary of the plot. It is after that the title page comes followed by the epigraph from Coleridge from which the title derives. Next comes the glossary with the header ‘Some Indian Words’ which even explains words like “Peons” and “Zeminder” (Markandaya, 1954, p. 6). For a novel published from London in 1954, this was perhaps the best way to introduce an Indian text. There are many places in the novel where the language not only discards its ‘Indianness’ but also becomes distinctly Western. In normal casual conversations Rukmani often addresses Nathan as beloved (Markandaya, 1954, p. 71). This is not probable in the given setting of Indian rural peasantry. The use of the phrase ‘ashes and dust’ (Markandaya, 1954, p. 247) when speaking of Nathan’s death, for instance, is more reminiscent of the Christian incantation for burial than the Hindu rite. All these reflect the concern in her to fit to the needs of her readership. The fact that there is a distinct insecurity in dwelling on the unfamiliar in an alien mode so far as the Western reception is concerned is clearly revealed in the stylized language with which the novel opens. The first paragraph of the novel is a kind of exercise in the traditional public school variety of English used to do away with any feeling of uneasiness of association in the Western reader.

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 (Markandaya, 1954, p. 9).

The language is highly metaphorical, but that does not bring it closer to the simulation she tries to make of the native syntax later in the novel, in fact just in the next paragraph. The use of expressions like “coming gently through the mists”, “wavering grey turns to gold”, “he softly departs.”, are not the expressions one could possibly expect from a narrator of Rukmani’s class in spite of the fact that she is literate. One finds that Markandaya is stylizing her language a little bit to facilitate the entry of the Western reader into the text. However just in the following paragraph, the style radically changes. It comes closer to what Markandaya and her contemporaries syntactically associate with Indianness.

One by one they come out into the early morning sunshine, my son, my daughter: Puli, the child I clung to who was not mine, and he no longer a child. Puli is with me because I tempted him, out of my desperation I lured him away from his soil to mine. Yet I have no fears now: what is done is done, there can be no repining. ‘Are you happy with me?’ I said to him—yesterday—being sure of the answer. He
nodded, not hesitating, but a little impatient. An old woman's foibles. A need for comfort. (Markandaya, 1954, p. 9)

Similarly, Rukmani's wide eyed query about the possibility of inflow of foreign aid for Kenny's hospital, "I do not know why people who have not seen us and who know us not should do this for us" (Markandaya, 1954, p. 153), has all the qualities of a rhetorical question. It answers itself. Kenny's answer, "...because they have learnt your need" (Markandaya, 1954, p. 153) only underscores the assumption.

This kind of adaptive alteration happens on the plane of gender as well as outside it. Remarkable is the scene where Rukmani encounters a Muslim woman covered in her veil. It is not very plausible that Rukmani a woman who works outside her household, and is capable of emotive communication with a white doctor, had never seen a veiled Muslim woman before. Even if that happens, her immediate conclusion that this attire is a symbol of subjection seems to be rather imposed from without: I felt desperately sorry for them, deprived of the ordinary pleasures of knowing warm sun and cool breeze upon their flesh, of walking out light and free, or of mixing with men and working beside them. (Markandaya, 1954, p. 68) While her companion notes that such a servile subjection is far better than the life of compulsive poverty that they go through, Rukmani's narration at every point over there makes her seem sticking to that point of dominance of the system, though at the same time admitting the relative luxury and ease in which these women live.

Her face was very pale, the bones small and fine. Her eyes were pale too, a curious light brown matching her silky hair. She took what she wanted and paid me. Her fingers, fair and slender, were laden with jewelled rings, any one of which would have fed us for a year. She smiled at me as I went out, then quickly lowered the veil again about her face. I never went there again. There was something about those closed doors and shuttered windows that struck coldly at me, used as I was to open fields and the sky and the unfettered sight of the sun (Markandaya, 1954, p. 69).

There is nothing to believe that Markandaya's voice is being heard through, still the typical association of the veil and Islamic conservative tradition with patriarchal domination, the association that they readily evoke in the West, is another way of adapting the text to the Western readership.

The relationship between the West and Rukmani, on the personal as well as on the collective scale is thus a kind of reflection of that of her creator and the Western patriarchy. On an impersonal scale it dominates, wiping out anything to cling to. Rukmani loses her all to the tannery. On the personal plane it patronizes, but it is a little unfeeling. It is necessary, almost a life saving indispensability, but is an equally remote order, unable to get to the core of life and belief. This is remarkable as Markandaya's position as a woman writer not only necessitates added empowerment, but the fact that the protagonist in this novel and in fact most other novels is a woman placed in the general context of patriarchy, further equates the situation to her. Rukmani and Kamala are poles apart in their socio-economic context, but they share the same predicament of a kind of identity. Rukmani is pressurized by her situation to assume a part that society dictates. Kamala is similarly defined by her language and her identity is defined by the cultural literacy of her readership. Both are cases of compromise.

Thus, on a deeper personal level, the empowerment that Markandaya seeks from the West is closer to the security Rukmani seeks in Kenny. In Kenny she finds the free...
humanist West, but it is a West that as Nirad Chaudhuri points out in his well known dedication of The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, “conferred subjecthood upon us, / But withheld citizenship”(Chaudhuri, 1951, p. v). Its humanism does not dispute the dehumanizing system. For a reception there she has to change her literary identity, her commitment to verisimilitude. These compromises are inevitable. And they manifest in a number of ways ranging from the mode of representation that comes close to the public school variety of English to a kind of excusing the Western escapism by the so called inability to understand and cultural difference. Rukmani’s fatalism is not typical of her culture in the way Kenny takes it to be; she simply does not have the resilience to suffer forces beyond that of nature without being uprooted the way she is. Rukmani was in fact originally very apprehensive at the intrusion of the tannery. Nevertheless, she adapts herself to it as she had nothing else to do. It should not be very difficult for Kenny to understand her fatalism and what he feels as her resistance to change. This is a common experience to Kenny working among the rural poor. He has indeed taught nothing to Rukmani for her to change her view except the fact of her faith in what Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak would call the “enabling violence”(Chambers, 2005) of Western medicine.

5. Conclusion

There is undoubtedly a kind of “anxiety of Indianness” (Mukherjee, 1993, p. 2706) to borrow from Meenakshi Mukherjee, that often goes by the name of “unadorned realism” (Rao, 2002, p.133) in the conception of the unnamed India in the novel. There is at the same time an anxiety to be received by the West. And it is this anxiety that manifests itself in the narration and the representation of the East and the West in a way palatable to the target readership. The empowerment Rukmani derives from Kenny is, to some extent, similar to what Markandaya derives from the language and the culture of her reception. It empowers but it does not feel or fully understand. Kenny’s inability to understand the eastern way of life and its fatalism comes as a sort of justification for failed or converted missionary projects in the sub continental context. Further, Markandaya’s anxiety of uncertain reception in the context of the West and her necessity for empowerment mirrors that of Rukmani working through an essentially patriarchal set up. The empowerment that Rukmani initially draws from Kenny is, peculiarly enough, that of fertility, a kind of physical equivalent to what Markandaya draws from the Western reception she affords through her compromises, a promise of future creative fecundity. Her ambivalence in depicting the dual West was triggered by a necessity for the identity of a successful writer just as Rukmani’s interactions with Kenny satisfied her necessity for the identity of a woman bearing male children. Kenny does not ever try to impress upon this rather intelligent devotee of his that she is fine in what she biologically is. He subverts her identity in fostering the demands of patriarchy by enabling her to supply in accordance to the demand. Markandaya’s reception in the West is a kind of fostering of the type of literature that will give the liberal private West a clean chit for its unreliability. The peace of mind that Kenny cannot account for in Rukmani is not the peace which passeth understanding, it is a peace that is better not understood.
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Saurabh Bhattacharyya hold M. A. and Ph. D. degrees in English and is working as an Assistant Professor in English with the department of English of Chandraketugarh S.S. Mahavidyalaya, a degree college affiliated to the West Bengal State University, West Bengal, India. His Ph.D. thesis ‘The Changing Image of the West in Indian Prose Writing in English’ got him the doctoral degree in 2010 from Visva-Bharati Central University, Santiniketan, India. He is recently researching on Dystopia Indian English Fiction through a project grant sanctioned by the University Grants Commission, India. His areas of teaching and research interests include: Postcolonial Literature and Shakespearean Studies on which he has published papers in various national and international journals. He has also participated and presented papers in various workshops, seminars and conferences.

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