



EAST-WEST ENCOUNTER IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

DR. SOMAPALYAM OMPRAKASH

Associate Professor
Department of English
Maulana Azad National Urdu University
Gachibowli, Hyderabad (TS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

East -west encounter has been a theme in a number of novels that have appeared in Indian writing in English. Mulk Raj Anand R.K Narayan Raja Rao and a number of novelists of India have addressed the theme in their novels and short stories. Mulk Raj Anand in his novel Untouchable speaks about the theme through the characters of Bakha, an untouchable sweeper boy and the character of missionary who tries to convert him to Christianity. Bakha ends up taking the names of Hindu Gods such as Lord Ram and Krishna. Raja Rao also in his novels Kanthapura and The Serpent and the Rope talks about the theme. He through the characters of Ramaswami and Madeliene throws light on the encounter between the east and the west. Ramaswami is from India who goes to France to peruse his education and meets a French girl Madeliene, who is interested in Indian philosophy. Their relationship ends abruptly as they fail to adjust with each other. Various other writers like Bhabani Battacharya Nayanatara Sehgal Khushwant Singh have addressed these issues in their works.

INTRODUCTION

East -west encounter has been a theme in a number of novels that have appeared in Indian writing in English. Mulk Raj Anand R.K Narayan Raja Rao and a number of novelists of India have addressed the theme in their novels and short stories. Mulk Raj Anand in his novel *Untouchable* speaks about the theme through the characters of Bakha, an untouchable sweeper boy and the character of missionary who tries to convert him to Christianity. Bakha

DR. SOMAPALYAM OMPRAKASH

1 Page



ends up taking the names of Hindu Gods such as *Lord Ram* and *Krishna*. Raja Rao also in his novels *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope* talks about the theme. He through the characters of Ramaswami and Madeliene throws light on the encounter between the east and the west. Ramaswami is from India who goes to France to peruse his education and meets a French girl Madeliene, who is interested in Indian philosophy. Their relationship ends abruptly as they fail to adjust with each other. Various other writers like Bhabani Battacharya Nayanatara Sehgal Khushwant Singh have addressed these issues in their works.

Kamala Markandaya is a famous Indian English women writer who established herself as a great novelist with the variety of themes and characters. She concentrates on the themes such as village life, conflict between tradition and modernity, womanhood in all aspects, east-west encounter, and the effects of modern civilization on the lives of men and women in Indian society. Her characters also hail from both lower and elite class from a beggar to a rich man. For instance, Rukmani in the novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* is a rustic woman, In *Some Inner Fury*, Kitsamy is a westernized person who returns from England and is a Civil Servant. She is the author of various novels such as *Possession*, *A Handful of Rice*, *The Coffey Dams*, *A Silence of Desire*, *The Nowhere Man*, *The Two Virgins* and *The Golden Honeycomb*. Commenting on her novels M.K.Naik says that “Markandaya’s fiction evinces a much broader range and offers a greater variety of setting, character and effect.” (P.236). She also highlights the problems such as gender, caste and class in her novels.

Cultural conflict occurs when two or more cultures clash. This is also a great opportunity where different cultures understand and influence each other and gives way to hybrid cultures. Kamala Markandaya’s novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays the conflict between Indian and Western values and how they influence each other. Indian culture represented in the novel is characterized as one rooted in spirituality and peaceful rural life. On the contrary, Western culture is depicted through British rationalism and industrialization. Rukmani is the central character in the novel. She is a traditional and conventional who believes in the existence of God and trusts like all the other traditional charecters such as the mother of Raju in the novel, *The Guide* by R.K Narayan. The same kind of characters can be seen in the novel, *Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao and Khushwant Singh’s novels like *Delhi* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. They all trust and believe in the Hindu Gods. Another important feature of these women is that they show complete obedience to their husbands. Rukmani also like her counterparts is religious and shows complete obedience to her husband Nathan. She respects him till his death in spite of his rebellious nature and infidelity. Kunthi Rukmani and all the women characters in the novel stand as torchbearers and representatives of Indian values. Whereas, Kennington represents the western culture and beliefs in the novel. Kenny or Kennigton is a doctor from England. He has settled in India and treats the people of their problems. The encounters between these characters open windows to both cultures and influence each other.

DR. SOMAPALYAM OMPRAKASH

2 Page



Kamala Markandaya is an expatriate Indian novelist whose novels predominantly deal with life in newly independent India, cultural transition and the conflict between eastern and western values. Settled in England for a large part of her life, the author seems to understand the nuances of both cultures to a great extent. *Nectar in a Sieve* published in 1954 is the first and most popular novel by Kamala Markandaya. The novel revolves around the life of Rukmani, capturing the difficult lives of Indian peasants. *Nectar in a Sieve* is exceptional in its portrayal of strong women characters, class conflicts and the plight of Indian peasantry. She addresses the problems of women such as infertility and the consequences of these difficulties. Rukmani is blessed with a daughter whom she calls as Ira. Both mother and daughter face the problem of infertility in the novel. When the Indian women are not blessed with children they usually go to the temples and pray to the Gods and Goddesses for the children. Ira in the novel is barren and her husband leaves her as she could not bear the children. Markandaya by portraying these kinds of characters seems to show that in a traditional set up like India women are just treated like machines who serve the needs of male who always dominate them in all aspects of life.

Markandaya portrays Indian values as traditional and western values as modern and material throughout the novel. Kenny is a doctor by profession and represents British rationalism in his words and actions. Rukmani, Kunthi and Ira on the contrary are spiritual and rely on the almighty for deliverance and healing. However, Rukmani seeks the help of Kenny and places her trust in modern medicine to cure her's and her daughter's infertility. Rukmani is so scared even to reveal that to her husband. She does not tell him about her visit to the doctor as she believes that he may doubt her virtue. She is caught between the joy of the treatment bearing fruits and the embarrassment of someone finding out Kenny's role in it.

There are several instances in the novel where eastern values and beliefs come in conflict with western rationalism. Family forms an integral part of the Indian value system. Rukmani's woes stemmed from her infertility is alleviated with Kenny's treatment. However, Kenny views the abundance of progeny in her family as excess and the reason for their poverty in contrast to Rukmani who perceives children as a blessing.

"You are my benefactor", I said stoutly. "Have I not five sons to prove it?"
"Am I to blame for your excesses? said he grimacing, but his eyes were alight with laughter, no doubt at my crestfallen face. "Come with me," I said, recovering myself. "You shall see them, excesses or not" (Markandaya 29).

Rukmani's adherence to tradition and skepticism towards change in the name of development arises when the peaceful rural life comes in contact with industrialisation. She is firmly rooted in her beliefs and feelings even while being chided by her husband and neighbours for



the same. Markandaya attributes tradition and reluctance to change as a characteristic of Indian culture as opposed to the modernity in western culture. Rukmani defines happiness as,

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? (8).

The novel further highlights the philosophical divide between the east and west. Kenny blames the poor people for not crying out loud demanding justice. He is shocked by their ignorance of rights and how they choose to suffer in silence even when famine and injustice hit them. However, eastern tradition views suffering as a way of purification. Rukmani gains more endurance as she experiences one loss after another. Her faith in God increases even when they are hit by famine, followed by Raja's death. She focuses on the purgation of one's spirit through sufferings,

"Privately I thought, Well, and what if we gave in to our troubles at every step! We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak, for is not a man's spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes?" (101).

Cultural transactions occur when different cultures come in contact with and influence each other to a great extent. In the *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani chooses to place her trust in western medicine as a solution to her and her daughter's infertility despite her blind faith in God. Towards the end of the novel, she comments that granny would've been alive if western medicine was administered on time. Rukmani also easily comes to terms with her son's reluctance to follow his father's occupation and work in the land. Such an instance was unlikely in the Indian scenario where generations are expected to be tied to their family occupations. However, Rukmani who herself understood the importance of education taught her children to read and write. She accepts the choice of her son to work with Kenny in the hospital without hesitation.

Kenny's character acts as the antithesis of Rukmani. However, Kenny's exchanges with Rukmani undergoes a considerable change towards the end of the novel and he considers Rukmani's views on family and faith alongside his. While Kenny reveals about his estranged wife and sons, Rukmani comments that it is unfair to deprive a woman of her husband's presence in the name of work. Kenny's usual disdain for Rukmani's beliefs is replaced with admiration for her worldview.

"You simplify everything, being without understanding. Your views are so limited it is impossible to explain to you." "Limited, yes," I agree. "Yet not wholly without understanding. Our ways are not your ways." "You have

DR. SOMAPALYAM OMPRAKASH

4 Page



sound instincts,” he said. For the first time since I had known him, I saw a spark of admiration in his eyes (97).

Thus, like all the novelists, Raja Rao R.K Narayan, Kamala Markandaya also through her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* seems to show that the east and the west cannot adjust with each other. Despite the influence both Indian and western cultures exert on each other, Markandaya through her protagonist Rukmani seems to underline the fact that the twain shall never meet. In one of her exchanges with Kenny, Rukamani tells him, “Have I not so much sense to see that you are not one of us? You live and work here, and there is in your heart solicitude for us and love for our children. But this is not your country and we are not your people. If you lived here your whole life it still would not be.” (98). Kenny is a man of action. His material worldview heavily contrasts the eastern values which Rukamani upholds. According to the author, there is always a chance of respecting and understanding each other's culture but never embracing it.

REFERENCES

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable* New Delhi: Arnold Heinmann, 1935

Markandaya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. Stellar Classics, 2013.

Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. NewDehi Sahitya Akademy 1982

Rao, Raja. *The Serpent and the Rope*, Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1968