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Local-color in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract:

Indian writing in English reveals the various facets of Indian culture. This multifaceted culture adds the distinctive tones from the Himalayas to the Kanyakumari. The diasporic South Indian fiction writers have played a valuable part in Indian writing in English. Kamala Markandaya was one of the most prolific fiction writers of post-colonial era. She passed most of her life in England; never separated herself from her soil. She represented South Indian regional culture in her novels. Local color is the most important aspect of regional culture. Her renowned novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, represents this aspect very well.

The objective of this paper is to examine local color in Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. To my knowledge no study of local color exists about *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel has been analyzed in the light of the characteristics of local color, containing the framework of realism and regional consciousness.

Keywords: Culture, Regional Culture, Local Color, Regional Consciousness.

Literature is the reflection of human life. It mirrors the different aspects of human civilization. These aspects may be based on social, political, economical or geographical circumstances. As far as English literature is concerned, it has left no aspect of human life.

Culture is also a prominent aspect of human life. Each country is deeply rooted in its culture. If we have a glance at the multifaceted culture of India, we see that each region and religious group has its own characteristics. Authors in Indian writing in English have been successful to add a tone of cultural distinctiveness. Even the diasporic writers who are criticized for exaggerating Indian atmosphere, to cater the western readers, are attached to their soil deeply.

Kamala Markandaya one of the most prolific writers of the post-colonial era, was deeply rooted in Indian culture. Although she left India in 1940 for England and married an Englishman, was always an Indian, from the deep core of her heart. After her husband's death she came now and then in India. She did love India in villages. Some of her novels have a vivid and charismatic description of regional India; which is "as crystal clear as the water of a hilly lake." Markandaya was different from other writers of her era as others represented only social- realism of urban life, she spent a good part of her life to live and feel the hardships and natural life of the simple rustics of South-India. There is regional consciousness in her first published and widely acclaimed novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. This novel is also rich in local color.

Josephine Donovan, who is an American scholar of comparative literature, defines local color in her book *European Local Color*, "Local color literature is characterized by a realistic focus upon a particular geographical locale, its native customs, its physical and cultural environment and its regional dialect."

Markandaya is different from other regional writers as she does not reveal the name of her locale, portrayed in *Nectar in a Sieve*, she names it as 'village'. She captures the daily life of the men and women of an unknown locale. The story of this novel begins through the narration of Rukmani (Ruku), the protagonist, with the picturesque short description of the arrival and departure of her dead husband 'through the mists of the winter season'. She has a nostalgic memory of those days which will come now no more. Local flavour has been brought out through the natural landscape. Rukmani, while returning to her husband's home first time, is too tired and falls asleep in the warm lap of nature: "The air was full of the sound of the bells, and of birds, sparrow and bulbuls mainly, and sometimes the cry of an eagle but when we passed a grove, green and leafy, I could hear minahas and parrots. It was warm and unused to so long a jolting I felt asleep." (NS3-4) Not only landscape, varied major and minor characters of the

unknown village “where life has apparently not changed for a thousand years,” have been portrayed dexterously by this ‘Jane Austin’ of India. Either it is Nathan; Rukmani’s modest husband or her children- Irawaddy, Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam and the malnourished last child Kutty represent parent-child relationship of a South Indian locale. Other characters as Kunthi; the butterfly like woman, Janki and Kali; devoted wives like Rukmani. Granny is among those who have nobody to serve them in their old age, Shivaji; the agent of the landlord, Biswas; the cunning moneylender, Hanuman; the shopkeeper all represent their own category of a traditional village. They never imagine to leave their roots and traditions. They don’t welcome tannery (modernity). Rukmani is resentful when she sees the effect of tannery on her village atmosphere. Rukmani and other villagers don’t accept the change. They are in one tone “never, never.” (NS28) When they are helpless, they love to recall ‘the memory of the past.’

Food is an essential component of local color. Markandaya describes some dishes prepared locally, such as dish of jaggery and fruit, wheat cake; fried in butter, coconut cooked in milk and sugar. On special occasion rice fried in butter and saffron, curries from chillies and dhals, mixed sweet, spicy dishes of jaggery and fruit, coconut milk are served. Plantain leaves are used for serving dishes.

Not only this, Markandaya has sprinkled a lot of local words such as- chakkli, godown, golsu, jutka, khol, ollock, patt-has, colam, bulbul-tara etc.

These straightforward rustics don’t miss to fulfill their practices and traditions on any occasions; either it is moment of pleasure or pain and even disaster. These rites and rituals are an integral part of local color. These range from the daily puja to the elaborate rites connected with various stages of human life. Marriage, an important ritual in regional culture is initiated by searching a suitable groom. When this novel was written arranged marriages and child marriages were common in rural India and this was usually done by a matchmaker. Rukmani, the heroine of the novel is twelve at the time of her marriage and her daughter Irawaddy's age at the time of her marriage was fourteen. When Rukmani was married her father, devoid of money, could find a 'poor match' for her, she depicts: "I had to acknowledge that his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband, and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor everything but in love and care for me" (NS 2)

Anyhow, she adjusts herself. At the time of her daughter's marriage, she was poor like her father and could not expect a particular good groom. However, the marriage was settled by Granny, who was the matchmaker of this marriage. On the day of wedding people are gaily dressed and there is much merriment, food, drinks and music by drums.

Rites and rituals of other occasions are also mentioned. When her first son (Arjun) is born, her husband Nathan celebrates his birth. On the tenth day from the birth of the male-child, naming ceremony is performed. As she tells "he invited everybody to feast and rejoice with us in our good fortune." On such occasions villagers help each other:

"Kali and Janaki both came to help me prepare the food and even Kunthi's reserve crumbled a little as she held up my son to show him to our visitors." (NS 21)

Same ceremony is performed when her daughter Ira (Irawaddy) gives birth to an illegitimate and albino male child Sakrabani. Their friends, neighbours come with "sugarcane and sugar and sticks of striped candy for the new baby." (NS 21)

It's a general practice that Hindus cremate the dead and all rites and rituals are male-dominated. Women don't go to the cemetery but attend cremation rituals. When Rukmani and Nathan's son Raja is killed in the tannery, his body is washed by Rukmani. His bier is prepared by Nathan "bearing a few jasmine buds" and "when the sun has risen, the men pick up the bier and depart but women stay behind." (NS 90)

On different occasions they pray to God, rituals and offerings are also made during the harvest season. This they do for a good crop and rain, needed for that. Rukmani and her husband, also do so: "We threw ourselves on the earth and we prayed. I took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to offer my goddess, and I wept at her feet." (NS 72) At other place rituals before sowing seeds, is mentioned by Rukmani: "we took our seed to our goddess and placed it at her feet to receive her blessing, and then we bore it away and made our sowing." (NS 79) These simple folks, though know nothing about king Arthur, believe like him, in the power of prayer. King Arthur expresses his faith in the supreme power of God when he says, "more things are wrought by prayer."

Regional customs and traditions are also important in Markandaya's writing. Being

brought up in a prosperous Brahmin family and her successful trips of rural villages of South India made her a successful observer of regional customs and traditions. The heroine of *Nectar in a Sieve* belongs to a Brahmin family. She passes through the traditional stages of a Hindu, as studentship, householder stage when she is married, after the birth of her grandson Sakrabani, passes through forest dweller stage; in which she wanders like a beggar with her husband and then at last after her husband's death she finds 'peace in oneself' and the 'gods'.

Besides this, there are various other customs and traditions from the beginning to the end. The custom of dowry is existed even today and it is essential for a 'suitable boy'. It was dowry because of which Rukmani could not find her match and has to wed a poor tenant, Nathan. She was able to wed her charming daughter when she could spend one hundred rupees. This was possible as tells Ruku, "Had I not saved from the day of her birth so that she should marry well?" (NS 37)

On the day of her daughter's marriage, she brought out the stores she "had put by month after month-rice and dhal and ghee, jars of oil, betel leaf, areca nuts, chewing tobacco and Copra" (NS 37)

Even today the birth of a female child is not welcomed in an Indian-family; a male-child is preferred.

In India, especially in rural areas a woman doesn't refer her husband by his name; Ruku too obeys this custom of her culture. She tells about an event: "It was my husband who woke me my husband, whom I will call here Nathan, for that was his name, although in all the years of our marriage I never called him that, for it is not meet for a woman to address her husband except as husband." (NS 4)

Indian culture is male-dominated. Those women who cannot give a male-child are humiliated. Rukmani's daughter Ira is left by her husband because as he says "she has not born in her first blooming, who can say she will conceive later? I need sons." (NS 50)

'Atithi Devo Bhav' is a part of regional culture. When Kennington comes first time to Rukmani's home, she gives him as much welcome as she could. She "spread a mat and he sat down while we grouped ourselves about him." (NS 32) Her daughter Ira "strained the rice water-

-----added a handful of cooked rice and a little salt.” (NS 32) Rukmani's husband also welcomes him with 'namaskar' and Ruku is happy, that “he should honour our poor household.” (NS 33) When her son-in-law comes first time she welcomes him in this way-“on the doorstep I traced out a Colam, a pattern in white rice flavour to welcome.”(NS 49)

Traditionally elders are paid due respect. When Rukmani's sons Arjun and Thambi leave for Ceylon, they “kissed Nathan's feet, then mine and we laid our hands on them in blessing.” (NS 68) When Rukmani and Nathan go in search of their son Murugan, their children Selvam and Ira 'bow their heads.' On the other side this is a regional custom that if elders visit to their daughter -in-law they are expected to give some gift, small or big, according to their capability. Ruku expresses her disappointment when her vessels are lost on the way:

“I go to her without even cooking vessels, like any beggar of the streets.” (NS 150)

If a man or a woman marries below his/her caste or do anything below caste, he/she is looked down upon. In the novel, Kunthi the village girl marries below her caste, she is not given respect in society. When Ruku's sons try to earn their living through tannery, Ruku opposes:

“You are not of the caste of the tanners. What will our relations say?” (NS 51)

The philosophy of the locale of *Nectar in a Sieve* is that any deviation from tradition creates disorder and unhappiness. Happiness can only be restored by confirming to traditional views of optimism and fatalism. When Ruku is married with Nathan, she accepts it as her fate. On many occasions she is stuck to fate and custom. This is also a fact that in the saddest circumstances, Ruku tries to find her sweetest moments. She is of the hope “If winter comes, can spring be far behind.” Even in the last, when everything is lost after coming back to her home, Ruku feels satisfied, “so good to be home at last.” Markandaya throws light on the tolerant aspects of traditional culture. When other religious group enters the village, the villagers are perplexed but not intolerant. At one side Ruku says “their way of life was quite different from others.” (NS 47) Other side she is amazed when notices their women, “they stayed mostly indoors or if went out in burqas.” (NS 47) Her husband Nathan asks her that “their life is theirs and yours is yours, neither change nor exchange is possible.” (NS 48)

Markandaya is conscious enough about folk beliefs also. These beliefs are inseparable

part of local life. There are some folk beliefs and blind faiths in *Nectar in a Sieve*. After the six years later of her first child Ira's birth, Rukmani visits to see her weak and sick mother. She is given a small stone called 'lingam'. This was a symbol of fertility. While giving it, her mother tells her about the belief behind this stone. She asks Ruku "wear it", she said, "you will yet bear many sons." (NS 18) After sometime Rukmani bears five sons; although not because of this stone but of the treatment given to her by Kenny, the doctor. The simpletons of *Nectar in a sieve* believe that cobras are sacred though they are harmful. When Nathan kills a cobra, a village woman Kali tells Ruku, "It is a pity your husband killed the snake, since cobras are sacred." (NS 15) They believe in the sacredness of the cow and rivers. Ruku names her daughter Ira on the name of 'one of the great rivers of Asia.' These simple rustics believe in the 'karma theory'. Before the advent of starvation, Rukmani dreams many evil dreams. Days after she dreams the same dream, she grows increasingly suspicious. She thinks that something uncommon is about to happen. Second time she feels the same fear before the untimely death of her husband. She "saw the faces of men who were not there and of children from whom life had been filched yet it was a black night blacker than the black." (NS 187) These villagers believe that after death one's soul liberates from body and goes away. About Nathan, tells Rukmani- "his gentle spirit withdrew and the light went out in his eyes." (NS 188)

Markandaya believed in 'art for human's sake'. Through her writing she has been successful to mirror the various aspects of regional culture. While going through this whole novel, this is enough to prove that Markandaya is deeply attached to her native soil. A look at the local landscape, manners, customs and tradition of the local community reveal that the novel is absorbed in a particular locality of South India. The regional flavor is pervaded throughout the novel. Markandaya's intense interest in regional things has given rise to local color. She loved rural culture, even than when she left her country for England. Her rural perspective governs this novel and it can be concluded that Markandaya is the exceptional practitioner of local color fiction. Without any prejudice she has been successful to present the local color of her unnamed 'Wessex' and the polluted effect of modernity on the simple dwellers of *Nectar in a Sieve*.

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