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A MOTHER'S PLIGHT – FEAR AND HOPE IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

DANIELA ROGOBETE

University of Craiova

Abstract: *This paper dwells upon Kamala Markandaya's construction of motherhood in post-independence rural India as depicted in her 1955 novel, "Nectar in a Sieve". Caught between changing times, between colonial and postcolonial paradigms, perennial traditions and shifting values, different world views and cultural systems, Markandaya's main character finds solace and strength in her philosophy of hope and endurance.*

Keywords: *humanism, politics of representation, social archetypes, strategies of containment*

1. Introduction

Included within the tradition of the social realist novel, Kamala Markandaya's fiction focuses upon the Indian peasants' hard life in the wake of the Independence, at a time when most Indian authors, living in India or abroad, writing in English or in a regional language, tended to concentrate upon urban social realities. Her work covers a wide range of topics that includes, among others, the plight of poverty-stricken Indian peasantry, the clash of Western and Eastern systems of values and representations, the opposition between a pre-colonial tradition versus the post-Independence modernization as well as various aspects of human suffering and endurance triggered by social inequities. Her texts generally tackle problems of local concern in novels whose actions take place in India and are deeply interested in discussing social problems – such as *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955) and *A Handful of Rice* (1966) – and the cultural clash between East and West that engenders the predicament of people caught in postcolonial political, economical and cultural intricacies – *Some Inner Fury* (1956), *Possession* (1963) and *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977).

This paper tries to place Kamala Markandaya's representation of the Mother figure within the general framework of the politics of representing Indian motherhood, usually located at the intersection of different patriarchal portrayals, of various ideologies, religions, cultural clichés and socio-economical considerations. Though the Mother has always been placed on an ideological pedestal and venerated as an abstract entity, primarily worshiped for her procreative gifts, self-sacrificing nature and the overwhelming power of maternal love, reality has always exposed the degree of discrimination, oppression and violence women have been constantly submitted to. An entire series of patriarchal stereotypical representations of womanhood as feeble, impure, unstable and dependable on men, in permanent need of guidance, control and restraint, has legitimized different aspects of violence against women and reinforced them by means of tradition, religion and state policies, at various moments in history and in different socio-political contexts.

2. In the name of the mother

In literature, media and social life there have been innumerable representations of the Indian mother drawn in the name of the father that have pushed mothers on an ambiguous position between idealization and demonization. The various politics of representation involved in drawing the portrait of the Indian mother have engendered the attempt to fight biased representations, and, in the process, to confine the Other – in this case the woman/the mother – within a set of equally biased value systems that perpetuate a misleading portrayal. This ideology of containment has often generated an entire *ideology of liberation* that focuses, according to Jameson, upon breaking stereotypical representations and sometimes producing a literature of self-hatred, completely endorsing the very representations it tries to fight.

India seems to be a special case in this regard since women's representations have generally acquired paradoxically conflicting, and sometimes even violent, dimensions under the influence of a particular combination of factors related to religion, social class, caste, degree of education, sex of the child and rank in the female family hierarchy. These factors are juxtaposed on a longstanding tradition of worshipping the Mother figure initiated by a powerful Hindu cult of the Mother Goddess and variously appropriated by diverse political ideologies and particularly cemented in social consciousness by the Indian nationalist movement. Violence against women, resulting from socio-economic and political factors, has permeated different cultural spaces in different forms, and its prevalence has rendered it seemingly "normal" in society, hence tacitly accepted and easily overlooked by authorities in spite of the increased awareness of human rights violations globally.

India's particular social and historic circumstances – starting with the British colonial rule, the various nationalist pre-/post Independence movements and the social mutations over the last decades – allowed the consolidation of particular social archetypes of the maternal that generally endorsed the local patriarchal system. The increased awareness regarding the restrictive understanding of Motherhood triggered by the Indian nationalist movement that further reinforced the identification between the mother figure and national symbols, corresponded to a series of successive legal measures meant to improve mothers' legal and economic status. The final outcome was an even larger gap between the ideological veneration of Motherhood and the violent treatment of mothers.

The ambivalent figure of the Indian Goddess, in its multiple avatars and incarnations (ranging from Durga, the invincible warrior goddess and the benign protector of motherhood, to Kali, the destructive creator of time and space and the destroyer of the evil, to Sashti, the children granting goddess, to Parvati, the goddess of divine love and Lakshmi or Sita or Radha as the ideal consort) both feared and worshipped for her generative power in a ritual that associated sex and fertility, has given rise to a diverse typology of mothers: benevolent, violent, punishing or destructive but always endowed with overwhelming forces. Subsequent economic changes and what has been generally seen as the tension between "official religion and the living syncretic goddess" (Krishnaraj 2010:17) provoked significant changes in the representation of motherhood which has been taken over by various ideologies that operated a sacralisation and idealization of the concept in different socio-historic contexts.

Kamala Markandaya's interest when depicting her characters and, especially, her female characters, lies in the way in which they face the most terrible ordeals (starvation, degradation, rootlessness, disease and death) and succeed in preserving their humanism and dignity. Markandaya's portrayal of motherhood can be characterized as an idealized representation heavily relying on a mythological dimension, only focusing upon a positive side of motherhood, overlooking such harsh realities as domestic violence, discrimination, compulsory childbearing, communal scorn though it cannot be accused of being obviously subsumed to a particular political ideology.

3. Ideal motherhood between fear and hope

In analyzing the predominant fictional modes embraced by Indian writers Fawzia Afzal-Khan distinguishes between the realistic and mythical modes, which she describes as two modes of containing the Other; she ranges realism along with the present or the future, with progress and modernization, materialism and industrialization, as well as with change and transformation whereas the mythical mode is associated to the past, to traditions and customs, to community and a set of pastoral, idyllic values, to faith and religion, sometimes even with stagnation and “petrification” (Afzal-Khan 1993). Markandaya seems to embrace both modes, neither offering a pertinent solution to her characters’ general plight, and she combines them in what has been generally termed as “literature of concern”. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the mythical stands for the Eastern traditional way of thinking and living, for religious faith and the idyllic past, and realism starts with the acceptance of change and progress, with the dignified confrontation with an impossibly harsh reality.

She, however, is not a theorist to dwell upon caste and class problems only. Her concerns being predominantly socio-economic, her novels offer us a strange tale of brutality, ignorance, mental and physical bludgeoning that the ordinary Indian, man and woman, is subject to. (Krishnaswami 1984:162)

The ordinary Indian people’s life is Markandaya’s main concern in her fiction and she repeatedly confessed that her long residence in England did not make her lose touch with India, on the contrary, it enhanced her perceptiveness as an outside observer and brought forth her childhood experiences: “My father was an inveterate traveler and something of a rebel; leaving the traditional preoccupations of his family, he had joined the railways, so that not only was the whole of South India opened to me during childhood and adolescence but also a good part of England and the Continent... I think the role of observer which every traveler assumes is good training for any writer... It makes a good starting point, and I believe it was my starting point” (Markandaya in Kumar Arora 2006:2).

Rukmani is the central character and narrator of the story and she embodies Indian idealized motherhood, offering a significant lesson of humanism, endurance, faith, dignity and love. She becomes the representative of so many other Indian mothers of the 50s, fighting against poverty and the crashing forces of nature and history. She tells a heart breaking story about human solidarity and hope that acquires epic dimensions and transforms Rukmani and her husband into heroic figures. Rukmani (married at twelve with a man she did not know) starts her marital life in peace and relative plenty. She and her husband, Nathan, are soon blessed with their first child. The disappointment of not having a son is compensated by Ira’s extraordinary beauty and her moral qualities while the following six years are plagued by the pressure to conceive a male offspring. With the secret help of a British doctor who treats Rukmani of infertility, she gives birth to other six sons. During all this time they have to struggle to survive terrible famine and draught. The construction of a modern tannery in the village triggers a series of tragic events, wisely foretold by Rukmani, starting with the gradual destruction of an old traditional order and life style, the immigration of the two elder sons to Ceylon, the death of their youngest son out of starvation in spite of the food provided by their daughter, now secretly turned into a prostitute in order to feed her family. The tannery finally buys their land forcing them to leave and try to find shelter in the city, in their son’s household but they discover he has deserted his family. Robbed of all their money and meager possessions, with no place to go and nobody to ask for help they become stonebreakers, getting a few annas per days which they save for their trip back home. Weak and overworked, Nathan dies and Rukmani goes back to the village and to her son and daughter, accompanied by Puli, an adopted nine-year old child.

The interminable series of hardships Rukmani and Nathan have to put up with prove their strong determination to preserve their family values, their sense of identity and their communion with nature. For Rukmani the most important thing is to keep her faith and her hope for a better future. Hope and fear are the two extremes between which the entire novel is constructed. Hope is generally associated to the mythical realm of tradition and religious belief, to the human capacity to overcome the hardships of life and the dignified strength of endurance: "We are all in God's hands, and He is merciful" (Markandaya 54) is Ruki's motto. Hope primarily comes from family solidarity, whose emblematic image is marriage in all Markandaya's novels, and is sustained by the permanence of the land, however elusive this turns out to be.

To those who live by the land there must always come times of hardship, of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty. This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know: that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve [...] Still, while there was land there was hope. (136)

Their connection to the land gives them a sense of purpose, an identity and a constant reason of hope. The vegetation symbols abound in the novel and the treatment of nature is essentially romantic. The description of the daily tasks of working the land in the first chapters of the novel establish a domestic atmosphere of tranquility and calmness, in which the family and their household start putting down solid roots in love, respect and solidarity, just as the seeds planted by the young Ruki yield a juicy golden pumpkin, at that time, a sure sign of their future prosperity and bliss. The fertility of the land speaks of the ever stronger bonds between them and their increased sense of belonging. Rukmani makes a symbolic association between sowing and writing as two life fulfilling activities, the latter offering "a solace in affliction", "a joy amid tranquility" (16), both standing for the double knowledge that might be passed on to the next generation: knowledge of the land and knowledge of the mind. The small garden she tends next to her house, the clever management of her household and her ability to write and read earn her husband's respect. Nature synecdochically reduced to "the beans, the binjals, the chillies and the pumpkin vine" (18) inspires in them a permanent sense of wonder, of respect and veneration for the miracle and "the very essence of life" (17). But in Markandaya's fictional world hope is always mixed with fear as suggested by the cobra hidden under the pumpkin leaves, the omen that foretells a troubled future.

Fear, as a constant presence in the peasants' existence, is primarily inspired by nature's ravages (floods and draught), its uncontrollable fury and dangerous outbursts: "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long it will give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat" (43). Fear is intensified to paroxysm by the threatening changes brought about by progress and industrialization and everything they entail – the aggressive invasion of technology, noise, agitation, bigger prices at the bazaar, increased consumerism, the takeover of children's playgrounds, then people's lands and houses – which will finally lead, in Rukmani's opinion to the destruction of their world and their families, to the severance of the link between human beings and their land, to the loss of the youth lured by the false promises of the tannery. Since "there's no going back," Nathan's advice is "bend like the grass, that you do not break" (32).

Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger, even 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. (83)

All these fears are also a mother's fears and perhaps the biggest one in Rukmani's case is hunger and the constant terror that she and her husband will not be able to provide for their children. Hunger is the real cause of degradation and of the "end of humanism" in *Nectar in a Sieve* as it gives the real measure of people's courage, will and determination. "Hunger appears like an octopus in the novel," Hari Mohad Prasad remarks. "It is the real evil, stronger than the original Satan, that disturbed the bliss of the Eden Garden" (Prasad 99). Markandaya offer relates hunger to immorality and it sometimes becomes quite difficult to extend moral judgments over her characters. Both Kunthi and Ira enter prostitution for the same reason, the feeding of their families.

For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and there is a gnawing and pain as if your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you buy a moment's respite even while you know, fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull, and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you. (91)

Kamala Markandaya preserves this oscillation between hope and fear until the end of the novel and makes her metaphorical images and symbolic elements fall into categories ranged according to this binary opposition: the village and the city, the land and the tannery, the family's hut and the temple in the city, etc. The land, reason of both fear and hope, the essence of these people's existence and one of the metaphorical representations of the mother, offers them a lesson of life, endurance and dignity as it "disciplines the body" and "uplifts the spirit" (107). If the soil marks the reliable consistence of tradition, belonging and identity, the tannery, the epitome of progress and modernization, stands for all the evils of civilization and for Markandaya, the end of humanism. It claims Rukmani's elder sons, it kills the youngest one, destroys Ira's future and makes them leave their home, dashes their hopes and finally provokes the disintegration of their family.

The hut and its small garden concentrate in their small but poignantly significant details the sense of belonging and the old traditional ways, fragile in the face of progress and change, functioning as symbols of a life together and a repository of happy memories; its symbolic opposite, the tannery is a destroyer of everything pure in the novel and becomes Rukmani's direct enemy. Most images are feminized and translated in terms related to vegetation, food, gardening or domestic tasks. Rukmani's exceptional force of endurance and survival is equated to the spicy chillies: "I was especially pleased that I had not been forced to sell all the chillies, for these are useful to us; when the tongue rebels against plain boiled rice, desiring ghee and salt and spices which one cannot afford, the sharp bite of a chillie renders even plain rice palatable" (57). Finally, everything is rendered "palatable" according to Rukmani's words, "one gets used to anything" (66).

The one who is not so willing to accept the fact that everything is "palatable" is Kenny, the British doctor, who provides the Western arguments, though commonsensical and highly practical, against Rukmani's Eastern philosophy of fatalistic resignation and acceptance. For Kenny the Indian "ghastly silence" (48), the foolish acceptance of pain as a spiritual experience, the extreme simplification of all social and political intricacies, the injustice and deprivations are simply unacceptable. Instead of crying out their suffering and demanding their rights, as Kenny advises her to do, Rukmani offers a lesson of dignity by sticking to her philosophy of life: "We go on our way (48) [...] Is not a man's spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes? Want is our companion" (115).

4. Conclusion

The final lesson Markandaya offers us is related to “the importance of a nation’s maintaining its own cultural identity, dancing its own dances, in the face of encroaching westernization” (Drum 1983: 327). Though achieving a very flattering portrait of the Indian mother figure, though striking the right balance between a realist and the mythical modes, between East and West making them function in a symbiotic relationship, Kamala Markandaya still refrains from offering solutions for the depressing realities of life. In this “tragedy of economics” where “the characters transcend the bludgeoning of economic mischance and assert the unconquerable spirit of man (and woman)” (Iyengar 1962:332), Markandaya manages to realistically depict the socio-economical predicament experienced by the Indian rural communities, the plight of motherhood and the impressive struggle to survive and still preserve a “seed” of hope and a sense of purpose, reinforced by humanism and dignity. The essence of Rukmani’s philosophy of hope and unquestionable acceptance of fate is summarized by Kamala Markandaya in the two lines taken from Coleridge’s poem *Work without Hope* that represent the motto of the novel:

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And hope without an object cannot live.

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Notes on the author

Daniela ROGOBETE is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of English, American and German Studies, Faculty of Letters, University of Craiova, Romania. She holds a PhD in Postcolonial Studies and this continues to be her major field of study with a particular focus upon Contemporary Indian Literature written in English. Her most important publications include the books *When Texts Come into Play – Intertexts and Intertextuality* (2003), *Metaphor – Between Language and Thought* (2008), *Deconstructing Silence – Ambiguity and Censored Metaphors in Salman Rushdie’s Fiction* (2010), articles and studies published in national and international journals as well as literary translations.