

*The Arrow in the Circle:  
Time and Reconciliation of Cultures in  
Kamala Markandaya's  
"Nectar in a Sieve"*

LOUIS R. BARBATO

KAMALA MARKANDAYA structures her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* around the conflict of cultures. A commonplace criticism of this novelist identifies these conflicting cultures in the largest terms, such as between Indian fatalism and British rationalism, or between the encroachments of industrialization, as represented by a hated tannery, and the peaceful rural life of tenant-farmers. Yet Markandaya is careful to modulate these larger conflicts with a series of narrower oppositions—town values versus country values, illiteracy versus literacy (land versus learning)—reverberating even in the minor key of the open fields of the Indian peasant as opposed to the closed doors and shutters of the local Muslim colony. Each of these conflicts, major and minor, produces an incremental step in the learning process for the narrator.

Exemplary of Markandaya's ability to blend major cultural clashes within a carefully observed, homey, and realistic referential system is her treatment of the theme of time. Barry Argyle, writing in *Ariel* in 1973, has observed this emphasis on time in *Nectar in a Sieve*: "Eighteen of the novel's thirty chapters contain in their first sentences a reference to time, to days, nights, years, seasons, to the festivals that mark the seasons. In the first sentence in each of the other twelve chapters, there is a reference to journeys; which is to say, to movement in time" (37). Yet Professor Argyle concludes from these observations that the novel demonstrates that "life is circular, not linear" (36). In fact, both the recurrence pattern

and the journey pattern are fundamental to Markandaya's structure, theme, and metaphor, blending to demonstrate that both perceptions of time—the circle and the line, or the cycle and the arrow, with their attendant philosophical dispositions, constitute the narrator's discovery.

The cultural historian Mircea Eliade defines a dichotomy in cultural perceptions of time, which may be simplified by the emblem of the arrow in the circle. In a volume published in English in 1954, the same year in which *Nectar in a Sieve* appeared, Eliade states that "the chief difference between the man of the archaic and traditional societies and the man in the modern societies with their strong imprint of Judaeo-Christianity lies in the fact that the former feels himself indissolubly connected with the Cosmos and the cosmic rhythms, whereas the latter insists that he is connected only with History" (vii). Perhaps more tellingly for my analysis, Stephen Jay Gould has superimposed on Eliade's scheme the myth of "time's cycle," which corresponds to Eliade's Cosmos, and the metaphor of "time's arrow," the equivalent of Eliade's History.

The crucial point for Markandaya's novel lies in the ability of its narrator (Rukmani) to reconcile these two fundamentally different ways of viewing human experience. Rukmani retains the best of an archaic cultural response to the world which perceives fundamental states as immanent in time, unalterable. Yet she avoids the fatalism that accepts the inevitability of repetition without surcease, perhaps best expressed in the pattern of monsoon followed by drought. She escapes the lawlike structure of "time's cycle" through confrontation with a modern view of human experience as progressive, "time's arrow," refracted through the figure of the Britisher Kenny. Gould insists we must have both perceptions. The purposive action of Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* records the process by which Rukmani integrates these dichotomous cultural perspectives.

The hominess of Markandaya's technique is reflected in the description of vertigo which Rukmani experiences at the outset of her journey into exile, following the loss of her tenant farm to the growth of the tannery. She and her husband, Nathan, are sitting on the bullocks cart with their backs to the driver, watching their

farm, their offspring, their hut, in essence their lives, recede in the distance :

We are further away with every turn of the wheels. I stare at them fascinated until the spokes begin to revolve backwards while the rim is inexorably borne forward. I feel dizzy. (142)

In this description, Markandaya exposes the essence of both the circularity and linearity of life's journey. The initial impact on Rukmani is dizzying, but she will learn to integrate these perceptions before completing her return journey out of exile.

In addition to Markandaya's ability to render fundamental philosophic oppositions in homey metaphors, she is sufficiently skilled to prevent the novel from becoming too schematic. Lesser, if more immediate, clashes are made more complex by overlays of ambiguity and ambivalence, replete with ironic juxtaposition and undercutting. Her treatment of Sacrabani's (her grandson) albinism exemplifies the technique. Through it she is able to oppose land and learning, the farm and the hospital, while simultaneously suggesting that each has positive value.

Sacrabani's albinism is regarded as a prodigious curse by the illiterate peasants, including his grandfather, Nathan. Yet Nathan has been depicted in the novel as an embodiment of the peasant farmer, one to whom the land yields its fruits willingly. Opposed to his viewpoint is Selvam, Rukmani's son, for whom Sacrabani is the same as other babies, "only a question of getting used to" (123). Markandaya mitigates this naive cultural conflict between native superstition and enlightenment with details that develop a rich irony. Selvam is also presented as a foil to his father :

[Selvam] had a knowledge of crops and seasons, born of experience ; but where crops thrived under Nathan's hand, under his they wilted. Despite anxious care, the seed he planted did not sprout, the plants that sprouted did not bear. (113)

As the opposite of the illiterate peasant, Selvam is at ease with learning and study, as well as tolerant of the albino child. But the illiterate Nathan is the realist who comforts his daughter, Ira, when she has to face Sacrabani's questions about bastardy and an "absent father." Moreover, for all that Selvam celebrates reason and learning, he and the rational Dr. Kenny express simple faith

that the hospital will be completed in one year yet become "dark as thunder, unapproachable" (126) when the construction time stretches to seven years. Through the natural occurrence of the birth of a child, then, Markandaya has aggregated several of the binary oppositions which comprise the novel's conflicts, rendering them in such a way as to rescue the novel from an overly-structured design.

Markandaya carefully plots the incremental steps in Rukmani's education by encapsulating these smaller lessons gleaned from minor clashes between differing beliefs within major, more easily definable conflicts. A major cultural conflict is precipitated by the building of the tannery and the effect of its growth on the values of village life. Markandaya defines the conflict through the responses of Rukmani and her foils to the incursion of industrialization. Of the other "village girls," Kunthi, closest to Rukmani in age, exults over the new shops and tea stalls. But Rukmani regrets the lost silence of the birds. And while her neighbours Kali and Janaki gradually accept the greater economic opportunities afforded by the tannery, Rukmani laments that [they] "threw the past away with both hands that they may be the readier to grasp the present, while I stood in pain, envying such easy reconciliation and clutching in my own two hands the memory of the past, and accounting it a treasure" (33). Ultimately, none of the villagers profits from the tannery, losing businesses, sons, husbands to its inevitability. Nor do they profit from the exposure to the alien culture, for example, between themselves and the Muslim foreigners who have followed in the wake of the tannery. As Kali's husband observes, "Their life is theirs and yours is yours; neither change nor exchange is possible" (52). Yet Rukmani, aware of the difficulty, struggles to attempt an exchange, even though she prefers the natural openness of a warm sun and a cool breeze to the shuttered homes of the Muslim colony.

Juxtaposing the theme of change and amplifying the theme of growth, an additional minor clash of beliefs serves a microcosmic function for the novel's broader design. When Rukmani experiences six years of childlessness following the birth of her first child, her mother, continuing the custom of the village, presents her with a curative in the form of a small stone lingam, a symbol of fertility

and of the Hindu god Siva. Yet Rukmani instinctively seeks help beyond this traditional device. In her first encounter with the outside world of reason, Rukmani overcomes her apprehension and consults Dr. Kenny, whose treatment helps her to give birth to five sons in rapid succession; but Rukmani withholds from her husband the fact that she has sought the help of the British doctor. This pattern continues into the next generation when Rukmani again turns to Kenny to cure her daughter's barrenness, again without Nathan's knowledge. Kenny is successful. Yet, lest the recurring success of modern medicine seem too easy a victory of one culture over the other, Markandaya purges this incident of sentimentality: the cure comes too late to restore Ira to the husband who has cast her away for barrenness, and the ironic offspring of Ira's fertility is the albino child. No single conflict in the novel is resolved unambiguously, thereby reinforcing the motif of the costliness and complexity of the contact between cultures, not merely their opposition.

This initial meeting with Dr. Kenny is the first of the incremental steps in Rukmani's journey, the first forward movement of the arrow in the circle. Her encounters with him carry the burden of the traditional confrontation between East and West through the novel. No fewer than ten of these meetings plot the progress of Rukmani's learning: she grows from a dumbstruck child-wife terrified at putting herself in the hands of a foreigner, to the assertive woman whose native instincts and intelligence excite Kenny's admiration. The central chapter (12) of the long Part One of the novel provides the locus for a climactic clash between opposing values and their attendant, ambivalent subthemes. It also represents the midpoint in Rukmani's journey to recognition and the turning point in her series of encounters with Kenny.

The clash in Chapter 12 may be reduced to a variation of the "land versus learning" theme. Ironically, farmers' children are able to live well only because they are employed by the tannery. What is more, these same children, who are too literate for the farm, also prove to be too learned for the factory. Rukmani's two oldest sons, identified by Markandaya as "able to read and write better than anyone" (67), attempt to organize the tanners. The sons are defined in terms of their literacy so that the unrest they

incite is a direct result of learning. To underscore this point, the sons insist that those tanners who sabotaged the strike by returning to work before the demands were met are ignorant "People who will never learn" (69). Rukmani's illiterate neighbour Kali also places blame for the strike on learning: "So much for reading and writing . . . did I not say no good will come of it" (70). Unlucky winds of change exile Rukmani's sons to Ceylon in the aftermath of the unsuccessful strike. But she recalls Kenny's voicing the same phrase taken up by her sons: "People will never learn." While she remains confused by the strike episode, she has grown aware that there is more in the world to understand. And before Chapter 12 concludes, Rukmani's understanding increases, once again through direct conflict with Kenny as an ambiguous representative of another culture.

Kenny — living alone, away from his people — is a clouded figure for Rukmani, and he comes at the end of the chapter to represent all that she is now aware of but does not understand. But the events of the strike episode have moved the arrow in the circle for Rukmani to the point where she acutely recognizes Kenny to be "A strange nature, only partly within my understanding. A man half in shadow, half in light, defying knowledge" (75). Her newfound ability to reflect on and to assess experience represents a midpoint in Rukmani's difficult and costly journey toward accommodating cultures which provides the through-action for the novel.

The emblem of the arrow in the circle attempts to reproduce the nearly geometric scheme Markandaya employs for her novel. She invokes the theme of nature and its rigid cycles as a correlative for both the faith and fatalism of the peasant farmer. Yet this pattern, while cyclical, is also static, offering neither hope nor recourse from catastrophe. Markandaya opposes to this pattern a steady inclining line, tied to the theme of hope yet incorporating a will to power, an innate desire to overcome catastrophe, a will and struggle that reflect western thought in opposition to eastern thought. The immediate focus for these fundamentally different world views is formulated through the opposition of praying and planning. The old world response to catastrophe is to place all in the hands of the gods. Confronted by a cycle of natural disasters, floods followed by

drought, the peasants' instinctive response is a fatalistic acceptance manifested by Nathan's belief that things will get better. Rukmani ostensibly shares this attitude, best expressed in her response to being forced off their land after thirty years: "We are in God's hands" (133). But Kenny — who, despite his eccentricity, represents for Rukmani a western approach to events which posits man's ability to take control of his destiny — chastises her for not planning ahead.

Part Two of *Nectar in a Sieve* demonstrates how well Rukmani has learned this final lesson from her western friend. Through the years in the city, Rukmani singlemindedly plans and provides for her return. She survives hunger, torturous labor, and her husband's fatal stroke during a monsoon. When the rains extinguish the flaring light of the temple, she ceases to rely solely on gods or fate. Her own spirit, her will to overpower human conditions, guides her return: "I picked up the fragments and put them together" (188). Significantly, she supplies the missing piece by a *promise*, a trust in the gifts of medicine to cure the leper Puli. Rukmani's ability to commit to a future act, to make a promise with inherent knowledge that those who confront life may be able to appropriate it, is also the climatic act in this novel of risk, struggle and growth.

*Nectar in a Sieve* opens with a scene which expresses the integration of cultures. In the background of this scene stands a large hospital, "spruce and white," built by the hopes and pities of two peoples, the British — as represented by Dr. Kenny — and the Indian, embodied in Selvam, Kenny's assistant and the son of the narrator. Into the early morning sunshine sleepers awake, among them the oddly collected extended family over which Rukmani serves as matriarch. Puli's once-ulcerated hands are now "clean and sound," his flesh a healthy pink, his limbs untouched. The lesson signified by this scene is one learned through the course of the ensuing narrative, told in flashback. Through hardship and deprivation, the loss of her husband and many sons, Rukmani has discovered a way to reconcile her optimistic trust in the land and her gods with a sense of man's ability to control, to plan, to make good on his promises. Through the experience of the novel, the lesson of hope survives unsentimentalized and unromanticized.

Rukmani emerges comforted — in the words of the Coleridge sonnet which supplies both title and epigraph for the novel:

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

through a pair of objects — Puli's clean hands and the shining hospital which have been achieved by the blend of old world faith and new world science.

From the cauldron of conflicting cultures, the protagonist of *Nectar in a Sieve* has divined a way of assimilating the mighty opposites of hope and will. The flashback technique joins the final movement of the novel to the opening movement. These movements force an integration of a return to the land, which revives Rukmani's spirit, with a willingness to make a promise for the future. "Things fall apart" in this novel where cultures conflict, but the author puts them back together through her central character's ability to reconcile the potentialities of these cultures and to overcome their restrictions. *Nectar in a Sieve* reinforces the ideas represented by the circle — a belief in immanence — and the arrow — an acceptance of progress. As repeated in the emblem of the land and the hospital, and the concepts of extended family and science, Kamala Markandaya has shown the way for clashing cultures to undertake the difficult process leading to reconciliation and rehabilitation.

Markandaya carefully prepares for Rukmani's gradual reconciliation of these conflicting cultural perspectives, rejecting both capitulation and total victory for either. The encounters between Kenny and Rukmani are never one-sided, and through the course of the novel's action Kenny comes to discern and appreciate Rukmani's instincts and intelligence. Moreover, Markandaya uses the time structure of the novel to reinforce its reconciliatory theme. By beginning at the end, she substantiates the cyclical nature of human experience, reinforcing the idea of exile and return or, in Eliade's more precise formulation, "the myth of the eternal return." After the opening scene, however, Markandaya gradually reveals the process of Rukmani's awareness and discovery, so that the novel's purposive action may be plotted as a steadily rising line. The imaginative journey that is *Nectar in a Sieve* absorbs



binary cultural impulses about time and belief into a unitary image, the arrow in the circle, a powerfully suggestive expression for the integration of Eastern and Western perceptions of human experience.

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