

Indo-Anglian Fiction and Criticism

KAMALA MARKANDAYA

Nectar in a Sieve

New York: Signet, 1975. Pp. 190, \$1.25

SAROS COWASJEE

Coolie: An Assessment

New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976. Pp. 62, Rs5.

The reissue of Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) by Signet, (1975) in an attractive paperback edition is warranted. Although this plea in novel form for understanding of a part of India addressed to English-speaking people contains awkwardnesses in expression it does indicate the width of the gap between East and West and the desire to close it. Markandaya and other Indo-Anglian writers find their search for identity is hindered by attraction to both East and West cultures. These writers feel their quest is aided by using English as the medium of expression and by rejoicing in the advantages English gives of a potentially vast readership. Also, a sense of accomplishment comes in the competent use of a foreign language.

Kamala Markandaya presents with mounting tension the life of a landless rural family in southern India. The wife and mother, Rukmani, tells the tale of her life from the time she was married at the age of 12 to her time of serenity in old age. She can look back on her hard life with no regrets. The beginning years go smoothly. Smugly and self-righteously Rukmani describes how good a wife she is, how marvelously well she manages, how efficiently she raises her husband Nathan from his poverty level of life. As a character she seems overdrawn. Her incredible efficiency gives her control of the bits of money income and frequent decision-making tasks that contradict this Westerner's idea of the role of farm women in India.

However, after six years of marriage, she has produced only one daughter and no sons. An encounter with Kennington, an English doctor who has given Rukmani's mother comfort during her dying days, helps Rukmani, unbeknownst to her husband, to overcome her sterility. The doctor is white, a foreigner, and speaks Rukmani's language. He, too, seems flat in his mannered brusqueness and abrupt, infrequent shifts into a few gracious phrases. Five sons are born in as many years. Two sons become workers in the newly built tannery, but soon lose their jobs because of their protest against low wages and emigrate to Ceylon; one son becomes a domestic servant, through Kennington's help, to a doctor in a city a hundred miles away. Another son is killed when he is caught stealing a hide from the tannery. The fifth son is trained by Kennington to be his assistant and to help build a hospital in the village. The tannery is credibly personified as an ominous threat to the peasant way of life, a vicious exploiter.

Rukmani's narration leaves its preciousness and takes on dignity as the blows from fate or God hammer down this family. Monsoons and drought result in near death from starvation. A neighbor's wife turns prostitute and blackmails Nathan, her former lover, into stealing for her the last bit of rice belonging to his family. In spite of the enormity of Nathan's transgressions, "a new peace

comes" because Rukmani finds it possible to tell Nathan of Kennington's having cured her of her barrenness. However, a further grief is brought to them when their daughter Ira's husband brings her back because she has borne no children at all. In a time of starvation, Ira turns prostitute in order to provide food for Rukmani's weakling sixth male baby. The sacrifice is useless; the baby dies. Ironically, Ira then gives birth (father unknown) to a male albino. Rukmani and Nathan must bear this sorrow too. The traditional naming ceremony and feast is given with stolid resignation.

Dispossessed as tenants from the land, Nathan and Rukmani go to the city expecting to find their son who had gone there as a domestic. They find only his pitiful, deserted wife. Their belongings are stolen; they become dependent on meagre handouts from the Temple. Puli, an urchin with stumps for fingers, aids them in getting work at a stone quarry. When enough money has been saved for their return trip to their village, Nathan dies. The misery of his wretched life in these last moments takes on a glow of peace as he and Rukmani acknowledge that their numerous and devastating sorrows have not extinguished their happiness of having been together.

The preponderance of gloom made vivid in Markandaya's novel seems part of the ceaseless quest of the Indo-Anglian for an elusive identity. (This quest has been poignantly expressed, for example, by K. S. N. Rao in "The Indian Novel in English: A Search for Identity," [*Studies in the Novel*, 4 (1972), 293-393] and Saros Cowasjee in "The Indian Writer in Exile" [*Commonwealth Writer Overseas* (1976), pp. 53-62].) The difficulty of writing in a nonnative language to describe an essentially native milieu is increased in this novel because here the author describes a social milieu far below that of her own upbringing. The narrator of this saga of precarious subsistence speaks cogently and poetically if somewhat overly precise. Perhaps it is this precision, occasionally founded on strained and stilted phrasing, that keeps the English reader from becoming completely immersed in the tale. The story attracts the reader with a promise of understanding a way of life that is based, in spite of its foreignness, on the eternal verities of human behavior and ultimate satisfaction in the human condition.

Rukmani persuades the city urchin to return with her to her village, where her son has been providing for his sister and her illegitimate albino and assisting the white doctor. Rukmani and Puli are received with warmth. Here within the mutuality of family love no question of identity need arise. The promise of encirclement has saved the urchin from the crime of city streets and he, in turn, in Rukmani's words, "drew from me the arrows of sorrow" (p. 188).

Markandaya has taken her title from the terminal couplet in Coleridge's despairing poem "Work without Hope": "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,/And hope without an object cannot live." Coleridge means the title to depict his condition—actually he states he has neither hope nor work. Markandaya surely takes the positive meaning. Even as John Stuart Mill found these same lines helpful in pulling him from his despair, so does Rukmani always work and always hope, frequently under conditions that would defeat a lesser person.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* also ends positively, according to Saros Cowasjee recent work: *Coolie: An Assessment*. Professor Cowasjee, the biographer of Anand and frequent critic of his work, is encyclopedically informed about this author

and his work. He has condensed and sifted this vast knowledge into a readable, fast-paced presentation of the author, his literary credo and a thorough and perceptive analysis of the novel *Coolie*, Anand's best known and most representative work.

Anand was born in Peshawar in 1905 into a second highest caste Hindu family. Cowasjee chooses biographical items which focus on Anand's rejection of religion and the caste system and his fuming wrath over his arrest and caning by the police for innocently breaking curfew. This early disgust with social conditions is reflected in all Anand's work.

Anand's life in England began in 1924 when he started work at University College, London, for his Ph.D. which he obtained in 1928. A Welsh girl with whom he fell in love inspired him to write his life story modelled on Rousseau's *Confessions*. His effusiveness extended to 2000 written pages in a short time. Some of this was later used in his first novel, *Untouchable* (1935). Anand had tremendous help during his early writing career from friends and critics including E. M. Forster, Bonamy Dobrée, Herbert Read and John Strachey. In less than twenty years after his first novel, eight more had been published. Each novel's main character is a step higher in the social scale than the preceding novel's main character. The progress goes from sweeper to coolie, to uprooted field worker and ends with the prince in Anand's best novel: *The Life of an Indian Prince* (1953). No matter the status of these characters, they are all victims of capitalist exploitation, the colonial system and British inattentiveness to social welfare. Cowasjee might have pointed out that Margaret Atwood uses the same term to describe nine-tenths of Canadian writers who suffer from psychological inferiority brought about by colonialism. Anand's victims suffer physical pain, abject squalor and starvation as well as degradation and humiliation. Atwood's victims concern themselves with the questions "Who am I? Where is here?" Anand's victims cannot indulge in this luxury of sophisticated questions of identity. Their struggle is a struggle for life. Like characters of Wordsworth and Hardy, states Professor Cowasjee, they acquire dignity and wisdom through long and real suffering.

Anand's childhood disappointments in the status quo and the sympathy he expressed for the British General Strike in 1926 during his stay in England, exposure to the Communist Manifesto and to Marx's "Letters on India," which he read in 1932 before his return to India, all stimulated his enthusiasm for Marx. Later, resenting being called a fellow-traveler and fearful of the Indian middle class uncritical association of Marxism with propaganda, he claimed to base his socialism on Tolstoy, Ruskin and Gandhi. As a goal for writing he posed a social realism which he defined as imaginative awareness. On his return to India in 1945, he abandoned this social realism because he felt it was chained too closely to facts. Neorealism or poetic realism, the fusion of realism with romanticism and the resultant insights now better describe his purpose in writing. However, Cowasjee points out that although each of his novels ends with some sort of optimism which might be equated with romantic insight, Anand will be remembered not for this optimism or the literary quality of his work but "for his faithful picture of low Indian life."

The novel depicts the cowherd Munoo on his travels from his northern mountain home to work in a pickle factory in the feudal town of Daulatpur and then on to Bombay. Munoo is a passive character. He lives miserably throughout his short life; he is constantly exploited and unjustly treated. He meets a variety of people from many levels. Some are kind and he learns

thereby the humanism of the very poor. Munoo returns to the northern hills at the end of his life. He is hired to pull the rickshaw of Mrs. Mainwaring who resides in Simla. The strain of this labor brings on his fatal attack of tuberculosis.

Anand treats his English characters with scorn. Professor Cowasjee considers these characters authentic types. There is the ineffectual and ignorant cashier, W. P. England; the brutal and sneering head foreman, Jimmie Thomas and his sluttish wife; the vain Anglo-Indian, Mrs. Mainwaring.

Cowasjee's analysis of Anand's prose is a helpful guide not only to Anand's writing but provides terms applicable to other Indian writing in English. Anand does not use Babu English, that English that clothes Indian modes of thought in exotic English phrasing, though he gives a splendid example of it in a letter written by the rich public prosecutor and flatterer of the British, Todar Mal, to the English Public Health Officer: ". . . the omission on my part to render you a tribute of the heart's best regard and esteem due from man to man in the shape of common epistles . . ." Anand does sometimes write bad English; sometimes lets his efforts to be forceful push him into the use of purple passages. Professor Cowasjee in his discussion of this Anand trait, let himself be pushed into a gross, pedantic situation, indicating, perhaps, thereby his condescension to his audience (this volume is the first in a series on British, American and Indian fiction intended for university students in India and abroad) by stating, "Note the passages I have italicized and you will see that most of them are diffused . . ." Anand's best English is his Indian English which embodies Indian thought and imagery in correct English and creates an Indian idiom of English as separate from British English as is Canadian English.

Professor Cowasjee has not let his close friendship with Anand interfere with his objectivity. He is highly critical of Anand's denial of his Marxist bias, his turgid prose, his slowing down of plot to add meaningless, repetitious scenes. Cowasjee also shows the excellencies of Anand; he makes the reader eager to get to the novel *Coolie*.

The book has a helpful, annotated bibliography. It unfortunately has no index. Pertinent biographical information is also lacking. There is no mention of Anand's marital and domestic life, nor is there a discussion of the reasons for his return to India in 1945.

One can hope that the other items in this series will come up to the high level of this concise monograph. To judge from this brief sample, Cowasjee's full and definitive discussion of Anand, *So Many Freedoms: The Major Fiction of Mulk Raj Anand*, to be published next year (Oxford University Press) will bring great understanding of "India's most controversial novelist."

Orlene Murad
University of Regina