Chapter Three

A Rural Landscape: Interrogating “Indianness”

Prior to the concept of regionalism which flourished in the post-eighties after the rise of the postmodernism, what had been presented in Indian English novels were stereotypes which strived to homogenise the geography and socio-cultural traditions of the varied regions into a seamless entity. This pan-Indian approach has been referred to in the previous chapter, the sole concern of that approach being to create an “Indianness” to satisfy the West and the Western educated Indian reading public. K.S. Ramamurti in his scholarly treatise, *Rise of the Indian Novel in English* (1987) is of the view that a novel written by an Indian writer would be Indian without any conscious effort on the part of the writer, and the writer should be on his guard against the “Indianness” becoming an obsession (4). A country like India with its vast diversities cannot be brought under the blanket term of “Indianness” and it is this uniqueness of India that makes the concept of regionalism all the more relevant. However, before the rise of postmodernist cultural formation, the “Indianness” that was overstretched to satisfy the inquisitive mind of the Western reader often ended in reducing the work to a mere description of Indian exotica. This obsession for projecting “Indianness” in their work had led novelists to consider factors such as the setting and background only as “the scene-painting against which the action is set” (Brunton 53). Reflecting the regional variations and specifying the locale of their writings, helps the reader to place the characters within a particular frame of reference. Universalising the situation
provides “a fine excuse to justify the shoddy nature of the work and the lack of concrete details” (Rochelle 33). Thus, writers are expected to make an accurate and honest depiction of the ethos and the disposition of the community that their writings seek to represent. With no roots struck down into the region of description, the novelists end up in “snatching the first things that glitter on the top, and trying to be the first one there, too, or these will be gone” (Welty 242).

The reluctance to position their novels is mainly displayed by writers who are settled abroad and write about their home country. The notable writers of Indian English fiction—Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Santha Rama Rau and Balchander Rajan are a few cases in point of the first generation writers who have settled abroad and have tried to recreate their landscape either through their memories or through occasional trips made to establish contact with their native land. What makes the works of a writer like R. K. Narayan more plausible is that he writes from first-hand experience and observations. The Indian English writers of the eighties rejected this pan-Indian approach by foregrounding the distinctive regional ethos and also by introducing linguistic innovations to make the characters and their demeanour strikingly natural.

This chapter proposes to analyse Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* (cited hereafter as *Nectar*) from the purview of the above mentioned facts. The novel has been chosen on account of it being different from the other three fictional works selected, in the sense that the regional elements appear in the novel like the
typical Western response to the Indian rural reality. The analysis by way of illustration will further serve as a launch pad for the study of the three novels in the ensuing chapters. This constant awareness of the foreign reader has led an Indian English novelist like Markandaya to act as an interpreter of India to the West and accordingly intersperse her works with documentary and explanatory details. Descriptions of this sort are found in R.K. Narayan’s *The Financial Expert* wherein he introduces Ravana and Malgonkar’s *The Princes* which details Sati for the readers. On comparing *Nectar* with the Indian English novels of the late nineties, it becomes obvious that the novel though remarkably different from its predecessors, continued in the same vein with a pan-Indian perspective.

Kamala Markandaya’s life has been discerned from the few autobiographical references found in her articles and the few interviews she has given. Born into an orthodox Hindu Brahmin family in Chimakurti near Mysore as Kamala Purnaiya, the name Markandaya was later adopted as a literary pseudonym. The few biographical notes made by Ruth Montgomery in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* tells us that her father being an officer in the railways was posted to different centres which provided ample opportunity for Markandaya to travel not only all over India but also England and Europe. This indirectly led to her blossoming into a creative writer. She joined the University of Madras to take a degree in history but her inclination to write made her give up her studies to join a weekly paper as a journalist. She later moved to England and continued to write with the hope of finding a
publisher. Not much is known of her life in England except that Markandaya settled there along with her English husband Bertrand Taylor and her daughter, Kim Oliver till she passed away in May 2004.

Before leaving for England in 1948, “largely out of curiosity” she lived for an extended period of time in an Indian village which is believed to have led to the creation of *Nectar* (Montgomery 296). This phase often referred to as “the period of her experiment in rural living” (as described in the blurbs of her novel) is reflected in her portrayal of the peasantry in *Nectar*. Her third novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* was the first to be published by Putnam in 1954 and it went on to become an international success. The events that unfolded around her in the early years of the freedom struggle have found expression in her second published novel *Some Inner Fury* (1955) which deals with the Quit India Movement. She established an intimate relation with the West and maintained a sustained interest in Indo-British relationship which explains why she makes the East-West encounter a recurrent theme of her works. Her novels *A Silence of Desire* (1960) and *Possession* (1963) deal with the conflict between Indian spiritualism and Western materialism. Two of her later novels, *A Handful of Rice* (1966) and *Two Virgins* (1973), however, illustrate how the modernism brought in by the Western influence inspires the protagonists to revolt against their traditional environment and seek their fulfilment by shaping their careers independently. The theme of the East-West encounter is presented from a different angle as in the conflict between technological power and the forces
of nature in *The Coffer Dams* (1969) and the predicament of Indian immigrants in England in *The Nowhere Man* (1972). For the first time she tried her pen at historical fiction with the publication of *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), a chronicle of three generations of the princely family of Devpur. Her next novel was *Pleasure City* (1980) (titled *Shalimar* in the American edition 1982-3). A novel *Bombay Tiger* by Markandaya which deals with the changing face of India was published posthumously in 2008 by her daughter.

Besides the East-West confrontation which she has dealt with more comprehensively than any other Indian English novelist, the themes of hunger and poverty and the conflict between tradition and modernity too form the theme of her novels like *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *A Handful of Rice* (1966) and *Two Virgins* (1973). In addition to her ten novels, she has also to her credit published a few short stories and written journalistic articles in Indian and foreign periodicals. The Indo-Canadian poet and academic Uma Parameswaran, who has studied Markandaya's oeuvre, affirms that she is a pioneer member of the Indian Diaspora, and her novel, *The Nowhere Man* (1972) foreshadows many diasporic issues with which we are preoccupied today.

The village has been the setting of many Indian English novels like Rao’s *Kanthapura*, Mulk Raj Anand’s *The Village* and Bhabhani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers*, to name a few. *Nectar* narrates the tragic story of the life of peasants and the hardships they endure. Nageshwar Rao observes that “the novel deals with the peasants, their activities, problems and anxieties, hopes and expectations, and joys and sorrows. It is therefore natural to find in
it an emphasis on rural ethos and value systems” (7). Written at a time after India gained independence, the novel presents the conflict between the traditional agrarian culture and the emerging industrial capitalist society. While Srinivas Iyengar feels that *Nectar* bears resemblance to Venketaramani’s *Murugan the Tiller*, K.S. Ramamurti likens it to Lal Behari Dey’s *Govinda Semanta*. Critics have also compared the peasant couple in *Nectar* to Wang Lung and O-Lan in *Pearl*. S Buck’s *Good Earth*, Maurya in *The Rider’s to the Sea* and Hardy’s Tess in terms of their capacity for suffering and devotion to their land. Parameswaran feels her peasants could be Thomas Gray’s rustics buried in the English village cemetery or the slaves in the American south on Mitchell’s plantations as it is the story that could be that of any peasant in the world (56). *Nectar* is narrated in the first person through the voice of the main protagonist, Rukmani. The narrative of the novel is circular as it begins retrospectively, with Rukmani reflecting on the events that have forced her to return to their village after the death of Nathan, her husband. The novel has two parts – the first describes the life of Rukmani and her family in the village and the advent of the tannery, and the second gives a description of their journey to the city in the hope of meeting their son and the travails they encounter. The couple are forced to work in a quarry where the hard labour takes its toll on Nathan’s life. Eventually Rukmani returns to her village with Puli, a leper boy who helped them survive in the city.

*Nectar*, is undoubtedly set in an Indian village but the exact location remains unidentifiable. Going a step further, it could be
ascertained that the novel has its setting in south India. For Srinivasa Iyengar, the novel is set in Tamil Nad (438). But as researched by Uma Parameshwaran, the lighting of a bonfire for Deepavali, is a custom followed in a remote village near Masulipatanam and hence the novel could be located in Andhra Pradesh (216). However, Parameshwaran observes that the village in *Nectar* could also be located in Markandaya’s home state of Karnataka. The fact that in the early twentieth century many Tamilians left home to work on the tea estates in Ceylon could place the novel in Tamil Nadu as Rukmani’s older sons Arjun and Thambi leave for Ceylon to work as labourers. Towards the end of the novel, Rukmani and Nathan make a two day journey to reach their son who lives on Chamundi Hills, the well-known tourist spot in Karnataka. This is the only topographic detail one is able to pick out from the novel, which again doesn’t contribute to the understanding of the locale. The few Indian words used in her text also give the reader a muddled notion of the identity of the locale (chup[8], patt-has[56], chowkidar[126] and chakkli[136]). This disinclination for regional grounding is found in most of her novels, though her novels like *Two Virgins* and *A Handful of Rice* are set in Madras, the setting of *Possessions* is somewhere near Madras and London and *The Nowhere man* is located in London. The names of her characters too, do not pin them down to any distinct area. Almeida Rochelle, in her well researched study entitled *Originality & Imitation: Indianness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya*, remarks that even the names of various characters fail to give a clue to the setting of *Nectar*. Rukmani and Nathan are south
Indian names but their sons Thambi, Murugan, Selvam and Raja are typically Tamilian. The confusion is further heightened with Biswas (a pawn-broker) who suggests UP or Bengal and a rent collector, Shivaji a Maharashtrian.

Markandaya’s village and her portrayal of the peasants expose a clear attempt on the part of the novelist in constructing a national identity at the cost of repressing the regional specificities. The novelist sketches a typical Indian village, a “village where life has apparently not changed for a thousand years” (Iyengar 438) – where there is a market close by selling vegetables and grocery, a stream where the women go to wash and gossip and the people living in mud houses with no supply of water and electricity. The novelist peoples her novel with stereotypical characters—the illiterate peasant, the suffering woman, the (absentee) landlord, the moneylender, the match maker, the shopkeeper and the village gossip. Markandaya makes clear her description of the Indian peasant in her article “Reminiscences of Rural India”:

Since my first book with its background of rural living was published I have often been asked to describe a typical peasant. Despite my limited experience, my considered reply is that a description of a typical human being will do. Your peasant is Everyman. Those differences which are said to mark him, are not readily visible to me, with one exception: the stupefying degree of endurance and resignation of which he is capable . . . . (109)
This account makes it quite obvious that Markandaya’s purpose was to create a stereotype of the Indian peasant and did not concern herself with their individual specificities. Nathan, the typical Indian farmer has his hopes rested on the small piece of land he cultivated for the zamindar by paying a part of the produce as revenue. His wife, Rukmani fits in the stereotype of the traditional Indian submissive wife and sacrificing mother. Their strength in fighting against the external forces that cripple them lies in harnessing their internal resources of patience and resilience. The text brings out the age old belief that a woman has to produce sons as sons are assets and daughters are a burden on the family. This is evident in Rukmani’s despair on giving birth to her child: “I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?” (16). Further it is not moral to consult a doctor and Rukmani who is childless for six years after their first girl child, Ira, feels guilty in having approached Dr. Kenny for medical assistance for her infertility. The couple have six children who they find difficult to feed and when the rains fail the family is on the brink of starvation. In his study of the Indian social structure, Bernard S. Cohn notes that husband and wife do not call each other or refer to each other by name or kinship terms (India: The Social Anthropology 119). Markandaya enlightens the reader that “it is not meet for a woman to address her husband except as “’husband’ “ (Nectar 6). In an Indian village, a typical sight is a girl, at least eight or nine years old but not yet married out of the village, carrying a small sibling on her hip almost everywhere she goes.
(Cohn, *India: The Social Anthropology* 120). In the novel, Ira looks after her brothers till she gets married. Child marriage was practised in India, as manifested in the novel, where Rukmani is married to Nathan at the age of twelve and her daughter, Ira at fourteen. Education for rural women was not a priority as a woman’s place was in her home, a belief steeped in the traditions of a patriarchal Indian culture as expressed by Rukmani’s mother, Kali, and a few other characters.

The economy in India during the years immediately after independence was basically agricultural. Rice and vegetables were cultivated on rented land, not owned by them, but to which they became strongly attached. People eked out a meagre living from the land, growing most of what they ate and ultimately being left with little to trade, sell, and use to pay the land rent. Poverty and starvation, synonymous to the Indian peasant, feature throughout the lives of the peasant couple in *Nectar*:

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, ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. (81)

The lives of the peasants were extremely dependent on the vagaries of nature. As long as there was plentiful rains, the peasants were happy and well fed. When the floods ruin their huts
and their fields, they wait for it to subside to rebuild their huts and plough their fields anew. Rukmani summarises the regenerative and equally destructive force of nature as experienced by them in *Nectar*: “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 will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat”(41). Markandaya effectively communicates nature’s victimisation of the poor peasants through the incessant rains, a common sight in the rural villages of India. Likewise, the novelist gives a touching account of the famine that strikes the village:

> Day after day the pitiless sun blazed down, scorching whatever still struggled to grow and baking the earth hard until at last it split and great irregular fissures gaped in the land. Plants died and the grass rotted, cattle and sheep crept to the river that was no more and perished there . . . lizards and squirrels lay prone and gasping in the blistering sunlight. (79)

Rukmani’s family belongs to the Hindu religious tradition which again is presented as a monolith. Caste being an overarching institution that influenced almost every aspect of life in rural India remains unmentioned in the novel (the only reference found in the text is when Rukmani mentions that they do not belong to the tanner’s caste). As the rains fail, Rukmani offers a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to the gods. Reference is made to the gods and goddesses who lack in identity as well. Rituals such as the marriages of Rukmani and Ira and naming and funeral
ceremonies do feature in the novel. A description of Deepavali, the festival of lights is also made without any explicit details. Festivals such as the Dasara, Deepavali and Holi have no doubt certain common features all over the country but with their own regional peculiarities. In the case of some festivals, only the name is common all over India but bears different connotations to people in different regions (Srinivas, “A Note” 216). Hence Markandaya proves that by making her village as “Everywhere” and her peasant as “Everyman”, her intention in Nectar is to universalise the whole situation.

Along with the vagueness of the setting, the time frame of the novel too goes unspecified. By creating an ambience of “once-upon a time”, Markandaya is attempting to generalise her description of peasant lives. It is to be inferred from a few instances that the novel is set in the late forties and early fifties after India gained independence. Though economic planning measures were implemented in India during the years after independence under the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the unbridled growth of population in the country forced the people to remain landless and unemployed with inadequate food supplies and low literacy rates. The zamindari system prevailed in India during the British rule and a few years after. That the story takes place in the years following independence is further supported by the reference to pre-metric weights (ollock), currency (anna) and measures (mile) in the novel whereas the metric system was adopted in India only in October 1958.
The general socio-realistic elements of the period like the evils of the zamindari system, the intrusion of the tannery and the migration from the villages to the cities find prominence in the novel. The poor farmers depended on traditional money lenders for loans to pay the zamindar his rent and this indebtedness reduced millions of poor in rural areas to a state of slavery in the form of bonded labour. With the advent of industrialisation, villages in India experienced the same trauma and a sense of rootlessness as does Markandaya’s village in *Nectar*. This led to migration from rural to urban areas in search of work leaving most of the populace incapable of coping with the harsher realities of city life. Their predicament is reiterated in Markandaya’s *A Handful of Rice*: “The cities had nothing either, although they did not discover this until they arrived: but it held out before them like an incandescent carrot the hope that one day, some day, there would be something” (26). A cursory glance at the fictional concerns of a majority of the Indian novelists shows that the changing face of the landscape has been one of the leitmotifs of Indian English fiction. So are the themes of poverty, the East-West nexus and the conflict between traditional and modern values. But Markandaya has endowed these themes with a sensitivity and insight which gives her a distinct position among her contemporaries. In *Nectar*, the encroachment of urbanisation in the form of the tannery disturbs the life of the villagers and leaves them helpless. Markandaya voices the fears of the poor peasant on the advent of the tannery:

Somehow I had always felt that the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day
the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and cleaving its cool silences with clamour. Since then it had spread like weeds in an untended garden, strangling whatever life grew in its way. It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants in a myriad ways. (135-36)

Few, like Kunthi who do not belong to “the senseless peasant women” (48) welcomes the change: “The tannery is a boon to us. Have I not said so since it began? We are no longer a village either, but a growing town. Does it not do you good just to think of it?” (48). Rukmani feels that had Kunthi roots in her land, her “values would be true.” Rukmani and Janaki long for the calm of the village:

‘As for living in a town– if town this is– why, there is nothing I would fly from sooner if I could go back to the sweet quiet of village life. Now it is all noise and crowds everywhere, and rude young hooligans idling in the street and dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour, and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his money.’ (48)

The decline of the age old institutions of political and economic authority in the villages has already been affected as the village headmen have been replaced by the district collector. The change which threatens their way of life makes the poor peasants bend
like the grass lest they break. The ugly head of the tannery raises itself in terms of inflation and disintegration of family and moral values. The villagers find it impossible to deal with the rising prices. With the mushrooming of bigger shops, smaller ones like Janaki’s husband’s find themselves displaced and are forced to fend for their survival. Kunthi who initially welcomes the change, succumbs to prostitution. Unaware of the consequences, Ira too takes up prostitution to save her youngest brother from dying of starvation. Rukmani laments: “Ira had ruined herself at the hands of the throngs that the tannery attracted. None but these would have laid hands on her, even at her bidding” (136).

The tannery, the offspring of modernity, thus establishes itself on the principles of exploitation of the labourers and the commercialisation of the rural life. When Arjun and Thambi raise their voice against the exploitation, they are dismissed from their jobs. The tannery claims the life of their son Rajah who is killed on being caught in stealing a calf-skin. Finally, it dispossesses Rukmani and Nathan off the land they had been cultivating for decades: “This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonged to another. . . .They do not know what they do to us” (137). After being evicted from their land, the couple leave their village and the hostile city environment withers him and Nathan dies.

An aspect which pervades throughout Nectar is “that easy acquiescence to what is called Fate” (Argyle 39). This fatalistic resignation typical of the peasant society is alluded to in the following quote:
It is true, one gets used to anything. I had got used to the noise and the smell of the tannery; they no longer affected me. I had seen the slow, calm beauty of our village wilt in the blast from the town, and I grieved no more; so now I accepted the future and Ira’s lot in it, and thrust it from me; only sometimes when I was weak, or in sleep while my will lay dormant, I found myself rebellious, protesting, rejecting, and no longer calm. (64)

This passive endurance and acceptance of their fate coexists as part of the lives of the poor even in the cities. Markandaya observes in *A Handful of Rice*: “The pattern must have gone on a long time, for generations, because nobody objected, nobody protested, they just kept going, on an on, and were thankful that they were able to“(9). Almeida Rochelle argues that though such a situation was common to other postcolonial societies of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean nations, what makes it typically ‘Indian’ is Rukmani’s outlook:

Her [Rukmani’s] blind faith in the combined forces of her husband and her Hindu gods can find no parallel other than in a rustic Indian setting. In refusing to act against the forces that seek to destroy her, Rukmani depicts the typical attitude of the long-suffering Indian woman towards life and nature’s destructive calamities—boiling it all down to the inevitability of karma. (111)
Succumbing to her fate, Rukmani feels that there is no profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot be changed (115). Kenny, the medical missionary disapproves of this passive endurance and exhorts her to cry out for help: “It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will succour the drowning man if he does not clamour for his life?” Kenny urges her to protest but the spirit of hope sustains them in their moments of adversity as “hope without an object cannot live.” Kenny stands for the Western concepts of science, rationality and empiricism characteristic of the Enlightenment which fails to comprehend the blind obscurities of faith, peasants’ superstitions and religious philosophies. Calling them “acquiescent imbeciles”, he scornfully asks, “ ’do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering?’ ”, to which Rukmani replies: “‘Yet our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments, and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence, and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed’”(116). Like Kenny, the younger generation (Rukmani’s sons), on realising the futility of such passivity urge their parents to protest. In a way, Markandaya’s own sense of bewilderment at the passivity and endurance of the peasant community which she witnessed first-hand is expressed through Kenny’s indignation. The following quote from the text bears out this clash: “‘Times are better, times are better’. . . .‘Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools. Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand–cry out for help–do something? There is nothing in this country, oh God, there is nothing!’”(46). Rukmani and Nathan
remain passive at this outburst: “We shrink from his violence. What can we do—what can he mean? The man is raving. We go our way” (46).

Kenny rejects his family and the comforts of practising in a town for rural doctoring. His dedication to his work is as intense as his impatience with the villagers. Like Kenny, Helen in Coffer Dams is infuriated at the lack of resistance of the natives. Kenny faces an acute identity crisis as he drifts away from his own community only to realise that he can never totally empathise with the Indian community, the diversity between the two cultures notwithstanding. Rukmani, the colonised’s emphatic statement brings home this painful awareness: “But this is not your country and we are not your people. If you lived here your whole life it still would not be” (111). Kenny and Rukmani, representatives of two entirely different cultures, share a bond of intimate friendship in the novel. He cures Rukmani’s infertility and later Ira’s, employs Selvam as his assistant and adopts the role of a guardian to Rukmani’s family. Through Nectar, Markandaya demonstrates that tradition and society encumber the progress of Rukmani and her lot who stoically bear it out without losing hope. Through the voices of Rukmani and Kenny, Markandaya endorses her diasporic stand in being simultaneously anti-colonial and partial to the coloniser.

Nectar communicates the emotional and existential attachment shared by the peasants with their land. When Nathan finds himself bereft of his land all of a sudden, the trauma is reflected in his wail, “where are we to go? What shall we
do?” (135). When the couple migrate to the town, they yearn to return to their land:

With each passing day the longing for the land grew; our plans were forged against a background of brown earth and green fields and the ripe rustling paddy, not, curiously, as they were, but as we had first known them . . . fresh, open and unspoilt, with their delicate scents and sounds untainted, with the skies clear above them and the birds finding sanctuary amid the grasses. And at the same time, keeping pace with these longings, our distaste for the city grew and grew and became a sweeping, pervading hatred. (171)

Selvam’s assurance to his father that they “can always return to the land” (139) testifies the bonds of attachment and hope that the peasant shares with his land. When Rukmani finally returns, she cries out in joy that the sight of her land “was life to my starving spirit” (192). Markandaya also discusses the ecological vicissitudes caused by the tannery. Along with the stink, the noise pollution destroys the serene, quiet atmosphere of the village and deprives the children of their playground, now converted into a bazaar for the workers.

In a novel written in the early fifties, Markandaya foresees the issues of globalization and the erosion of local cultures of the villages. Markandaya rightly refers to her novels as “literature of concern” and expresses her belief in literature’s power to engage with the social realities of the times and to effect change (Shimer
R.S. Singh extols her “sense of involvement in the social life of India, her keen observation combined with critical acumen, and the feminine sensibility” (136). The narrative becomes all the more significant today in the context of displacement of people from their lands on account of industrialisation and economic development as in Nandigram, Singhur (West Bengal) and Raigad (Maharashtra). The marginalisation of rural communities in post-independent India emanates as yet another major concern in the novel. Besides this, the novelist strives to emphasise the emerging consciousness for the preservation of the environment. As rightly mentioned by Tapan Kumar Basu, Markandaya’s *Nectar* is to be read not as a rural novel but as “a story representing the inauguration of the moment of modernity in a simple rural community provoked out of its indigenous pace of life by the ruthless onslaught of a complex urban society” (107).

Markandaya’s diasporic location and sensibility have often been cited as a major factor for the vagueness of the setting of her novels and her loss of touch with the “Indian” reality. Critics have also attributed her inability to relate to the marginalised communities (the peasants, for instance) to her westernised upbringing. Accusing Markandaya of depicting a vague ethos that exists only in her expatriate writer’s imagination, M.K. Naik remarks: “Those who know their Indian village will . . . not fail to notice how contrived a picture of rustic life it offers” (*A History* 236). Others allege that she has oversimplified the rural scene and overplayed the poverty of the peasants. Referring to the novel as “melodramatic”, R. S. Singh considers the ordeals of Nathan and
Rukmani to be “enigmatic, contrived a little too cleverly, rather than developed on chance events alone” (138). Taking a middle stance it could be said that “Rukmani’s village is not a fanciful product of the expatriate’s imagination but an extended world-picture of village life well-grounded in reality” (C.K. Naik 15). This could be a more agreeable standpoint to view Markandaya’s work.

The earlier contention of Nectar lacking in the regional specificities has been on the grounds that Markandaya has made a pan-Indian presentation of rural life. But on closer scrutiny, one finds inaccuracies in her very depiction of the peasant life, irrespective of its locale. Another criticism against the novel wavers between claiming it as a realistic portrayal of Indian village life and denouncing it as a false and misinformed representation. In either case, what can be deduced is that she puts particularly observed or elicited pieces of information into a general framework. In her essay entitled “The Language of Kamala Markandaya’s Novels”, Shyamala Venkateswaran (now Shyamala Narayan) points out several inaccuracies in Markandaya’s presentation of her peasants. Butter is churned from curds and not milk, a common knowledge in Indian homes. It seems unlikely that provisions that could have got spoilt could be stored for months together to celebrate Ira’s wedding. One can understand a poor peasant family trying to make ends meet, saving in terms of money for the expenses regarding marriage but not collecting provisions for months ahead. Venkateswaran feels that the dishes sound exotically Indian but cannot be identified as they are not specific (57). It is very unlikely that a peasant woman could afford
to use saffron and it is certain that Markandaya would have had
turmeric (“the poor man’s saffron”) in mind when she referred to
it. A similar fondness for cataloguing of food, but a more realistic
one is found in *A Handful of Rice* (65). Uma Parameswaran, who
defends Markandaya in terms of her language, is distrustful of her
knowledge regarding the pantry items she might have stored and
the early preparations for her daughter’s wedding and the choice
of the name Irawaddy for her daughter (66). When Markandaya
goes to the extent of describing the naming ceremony of Ira’s son,
the reader is convinced of the novelist’s distancing from her
homeland as no traditional Indian village would “allow so
permissive a code of sexual morality” (Naik, *A History* 236). Further
to note, Rukmani being brought up in a village in rural India would
naturally be exposed to myths and legends that would invariably
be woven into the very texture of her thoughts and language.
*Nectar* is devoid of such myths and superstitious beliefs which form
the very essence of a region.

Rochelle accuses the novelist of endowing her traditional,
orthodox Indian characters with modern, liberal European traits.
“This”, she opines, “not only makes the characters totter
precariously in the reader’s mind, but also detracts from their
Indianness” (259). She cites the case of Nathan’s infidelity and his
extra-marital affair with Kunthi to prove her point and further adds
that keeping in view Nathan’s character as an honest and faithful
husband, this does not seem realistic as Markandaya does not
build up to it. Rukmani’s friendship with the Englishman, her
acceptance of her daughter-in-law’s infidelity and her own
daughter’s prostitution are cases in point. Such cultural inaccuracies might appeal to the Western reader but to an Indian it divulges the novelist’s ignorance of Indian customs and traditions. Both her critics, Parameswaran and Venkateswaran firmly agree that it is the distancing from her native country that accounts for the inaccuracies pertaining to the social and cultural features of her village. Justifying the case of the diasporic writer, Rushdie observes that “our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (76).

The text has been prescribed for study throughout universities in India and abroad, a probable reason being that the novel has been written by an Indian novelist in English putting forth a generalised and simplistic description of the socio-cultural realities of Indian villages. The presentation of Rukmani as a peasant woman who faces the oddities of life “only strengthens the popular Occidental perception of ‘Indian womanhood’ as an embodiment of meek and long-suffering service to the cause of Indian society in general and Indian men in particular” (T.K. Basu 107). The stereotypical presentation of peasant life in Nectar successfully aids the purposes of both the colonialist and nationalist discourses in perpetuating this portrait of the subservient peasant. Nectar does little to challenge the representation of a “homogenised” Indian village of the early fifties. On the contrary, by standardising their experiences, the
narrative reaffirms the hegemonic constructs of “India”, the “Indian woman” and the “Indian peasant”.

Markandaya’s peasants lose their authenticity as she fails to grapple with their local and regional realities. In an interview with Rochelle, Markandaya claims that she inserts explanatory details into her text only when she feels her readers (both Indian and Western) require it and considers it to be part of her writing technique and not a flaw in her style (82). However, it is quite apparent that the glossary and the frequent authorial intervention reveals “the eagerness of a tourist guide to interpret the social customs and beliefs for fear they will be lost on the readers” (Paul 183). P. P. Raveendran observes that the West are not willing to recognise in India distinct cultures represented by the several Indian languages: “India for them is still a cultural monolith which communicates with the international community through what they consider to be the only pan-Indian language, English” (“Indian Diaspora” 33). The generalising sweep with which she describes the social reality of south India, by mixing traditions and customs makes her appealing to a Western reader who fails to decipher the subtle nuances of varied cultures existing in the composite strata of Indian society. The elaborate descriptions of the process of farming, poverty and hunger, the mention of a lingam that Rukmani wears as a charm to bear sons and the snake found in her garden are aspects of India that a Western reader would anticipate in a novel set in India. Rochelle accuses her of “injecting Indianness into her novel” which she does so by “inserting superficial ethnic and regional peculiarities when least called for”
(96). The need for crafting her novels with a Western reader in mind has been substantiated by Markandaya herself in a talk delivered at the ALCALS Conference at Sterling, Scotland which was later published under the title “One Pair of Eyes : Some Random Reflections”:

I am not arguing against exoticism per se, because I recognise there is a place for it. Many people both in India and the West crave romance and colour. The Indian film industry has perceived this hunger, and there are huge audiences for the sumptuous, escapist films they produce. So why not exotica in books, why not give people all the rajahs, cobras, tigers, lotuses and dancing girls that they ask for? (24-5)

Thus it is plainly evident that she finds it quite natural to fill her novel with exotica.

Almost all her critics have spoken against her choice of idiomatic English in her narrative which severely lacks the vernacular flavour. The poet and critic, Yasmin Gooneratne relates Markandaya to an English Romantic in her evocation of nature, as Shelley does, by using such words as “winged, wondrous” (14) and phrases such as “the veil is rent” in the description of her garden. Commenting on the artificiality of her diction, Gooneratne observes that “its limited romantic range that excludes any suggestion of village wit and humour more damningly betrays the author’s lack of close participation in village life than would any number of examples of inaccuracy on authentic detail”( 125-26). The
epigraph to the novel which also includes the title of the novel has been drawn from the poem "Work without Hope" by the English Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge composed in 1827. The last eight lines of the sonnet are as follows:

Yet well I ken the banks where amaranths blow,  
Have traced the fount whence streams of nectar flow.  
Bloom, O ye amaranths! Bloom for whom ye may,  
For me ye bloom not! Glide, rich streams, away!  
With lips unbrighten’d, wreathless brow, I stroll:  
And would you learn the spells that drowse my soul?  
Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,  
And Hope without an object cannot live. (emphasis added 329-30)

The final couplet has been used by Markandaya to discuss the central issue of her novel. Unlike Coleridge’s speaker who is without hope and fails to participate in the wealth of the natural world, Markandaya’s peasants never lose hope, although nature fluctuates precariously between her benevolence and hostility. This affirms Gooneratne’s association of Markandaya with the English Romantics who even remarks that Rukmani has more in common with Wordsworth’s Michael than with the Sita of the Ramayana (127).

Markandaya herself states that she kept to standard English (“public school” as Meenakshi Mukherjee calls it in Twice Born [162]) and feels that Indian words should not be employed with the
purpose of imparting a little local colour ("One Pair of Eyes" 23). Defending Markandaya’s use of standard English, Parameswaran comments that she does not specify any geographical location or identify any particular linguistic group in her novels, as her purpose is to make use of “a literary device to transcend regional barriers” (45). She makes no attempt to adapt the vernacular idiom but at the same time, claims Parameswaran, she “succeeds in bringing out the texture of the speech of the social classes by varying the degree of simplicity and articulation” (36). Nowhere in the text do we find any evidence for this claim made by Parameshwaran. On the contrary, the reader finds it quite unnatural that Rukmani and Dr Kenny converse in the same language. Markandaya admits in an interview that she lacks the skill to bring regional variations into her Indian English idiom. She continues:

However, I don’t approve of writers who deliberately distort English in the mouths of Indians because many Indians speak very good English, and making them speak broken English or pidgin-English is, I think, an insult to them. I suppose it might have been easier for me to reproduce the idiom if I were living in India; but since I don’t, I have to try to imagine how my characters would speak. However, I don’t see that it is completely possible to reproduce the Indian idiom when one is writing in English. (Rochelle 245)

The same writer who used “rice cakes” and “pancakes” for idlis and dosais in Nectar does not hesitate to use phrases like
“Maharajkumar ki jai” in her later novel, *The Golden Honeycomb* and even brings about certain cultural and regional variations in the English language spoken by some characters in *Pleasure City* (Rochelle 238-41). This demonstrates that Markandaya could have made conscious efforts to steer from standard usage of English by incorporating the regional nuances in *Nectar*. One of the commonly expressed charges against Markandaya and the early expatriates is, as rightly expressed by Uma Parameshwaran, that they have not experimented with Indian English and contributed to the development of the dialect envisioned by Raja Rao (his concern has been discussed in the second chapter) in his foreword to *Kanthapura* (43).

In his study on the stylistics of *Nectar*, S. K. Wali considers the language which does not have roots in the Indian culture and ethos to be a major shortcoming of the novel and opines that her writing throughout the novel is “a patchwork of an incongruous combination of widely divergent styles” (107). A case in point that aptly signifies this marked difference could be the plain description of Rukmani’s sisters’ marriages and the dowry they carried (3-4) contrasted with the sophisticated description of hunger (89-90). Markandaya has forged a style to express a sense of timelessness by “using a wide range of syntactic patterns and semantic choices” (Wali 53). The technique of endowing her novel with this ‘timelessness’ helps to universalise the plight of all Indian peasants and their unquestioning attitude to life. Meenakshi Mukherjee’s discussion of the archaic style employed by Raja Rao holds true for Markandaya as well, who possibly used it as a device “to create a
distance between the reader and the happenings of the novel and
give the impression of timelessness” (Mukherjee, *Twice Born* 169).
Some illustrations of the archaic use of language are –“It is for my
daughter I come” (61), “I go to her without even a cooking vessel,
like any beggar off the streets” (153), “No sugar . . . have we
tasted since they came, and should have had none so long as they
remained” (30).

Critics share the opinion that the language of the narrative
fails to keep in tune with the speaker’s background. The reader
finds it difficult that Rukmani should speak in such a fluent and
poetic language. The language of Markandaya’s protagonist, an
uneducated peasant woman, is at times infused with a
sophistication uncharacteristic of a villager. Rukmani who is made
to talk about the tragedy in *Nectar* has been severely criticised by
P. Shiv Kumar in his essay “The Mask that does not Hide: A
Perspective on *Nectar in a Sieve*”: “Markandaya blithely endows
her peasant-narrator with the reflexes of an intellectual and this
spells disaster for the narrative” (94). The language is
unconvincing and Rukmani’s complex thoughts seem to be an
imposition of the author’s thinking on her character. Commenting
on Markandaya’s language, Margaret P. Joseph observes:“The
language Rukmani uses is impressive in vocabulary and effective
in metaphor: in short a fine literary style that sits strangely on an
unsophisticated village woman. Markandaya the writer, has
stepped too close to Rukmani the character, and credibility is
endangered” (22). The following utterance of Rukmani about Kali
and Janaki who were reconciled to the present turmoil illustrates
this: “So they were reconciled and threw the past away with both hands that they might be readier to grasp the present, while I stood by in pain, envying such easy reconciliation and clutching in my own two hands the memory of the past, and accounting it a treasure” (31-32). The reader who is made to believe that he is listening to a peasant woman with little education using archaic, formal language becomes confused when she switches on to modern colloquialisms and expressions as in – “She was a great one for babies” (24), “Here you are. This is as far as I can take you” (145) or in phrases like “jockeying energetically for position” (150) “catalogue your needs” (110) or the utterance of an English proverb like “‘After the horse has bolted?’” (153) by the illiterate Indian peasant, Nathan.

Lexical items like cow dung (134), loincloths (28), copra (39), headman (4), palanquin (40) and namaskar (35) pertain to the Indian background. Culture bound words like (golsu [57], chakkli [136], kum-kum [107], pandal [23]) found sparingly in the narrative have been separately identified and explained in the glossary. Items of food like pancakes (184), potato fritters and others like the fiddler (38), flautist (39) and juggernaut (136) sound alien and do not blend naturally with the narrative. Her imagery is drawn from those aspects of nature familiar to all, but lacks an acute sensitivity as in silence fell like a shroud (88), eyes the colour of a kingfisher’s wing (21), a heap of stones, most of which were about the size of a child’s fist (176) and struggles of the body beneath like the feeble fluttering of a trapped bird (98). Nevertheless, she makes occasional use of images that relate to
the rural background in *Nectar* such as -Ira’s albino child to a grain of wheat among the rice (128), the sick Nathan to a hollow bamboo stick(103) and Rukmani’s mind that worries over the loss of the land to a paper kite dipping to every current of air, unsure of its mooring(139).

Today on analysing the novel using the postcolonial exegetical tools, it becomes apparent that Markandaya has made no real attempt to indigenise the English language and to express “that spirit of one’s own” which Rao speaks of. To conclude, the main charges levelled against her work of presenting a pan-Indian village and her usage of standard English holds true. Markandaya’s inability to specify a time and place for *Nectar* has given her novel a universal perspective totally lacking in regional nuances. Almeida Rochelle aptly sums it up:

> Without being rooted in a particular *milieu*, novel writing would deteriorate into fantastic voyaging of the human imagination through realms unknown. While modern science fiction proves the potential of such a principle, any novel that does not fall within this *genre*, must convince the reader of its accuracy and realism. (252)

In this context, a comparison of *Nectar* with Premchand’s *Godan* (1936), a Hindi novel would be appropriate. Unlike *Nectar*, *Godan*, a saga of rural life in north India is specifically rooted in the village of Belari. Premchand succeeds in authentically capturing the tragic lives of a poor peasant couple (Hori and Dhaniya),
encumbered by the debt trap set up by the zamindar and the village middlemen. *Godan* critiques cultural institutions and traditional power structures laying bare the ill-effects of caste and religion that cause needless sorrow and suffering to the protagonists. In Bhibhutibhushan Banerji’s Bengali novel, *Pather Panchali*, the reader connects intimately with the lives of Apu and Durga and the natural surroundings of the village of Nischindpur which provides a glaring contrast to *Nectar* wherein the reader occupies the role of “an observer rather than a participator” (Gooneratne 126). Pearl S. Buck’s *Good Earth* to which *Nectar* has been often correlated to, depicts the trials and travails of the Chinese peasantry. Where the narratives differ is in Markandaya’s inability to authentically breathe life into the locale and its characters.

Critics like K.R. Chandrasekharan, on the other hand, commends the novel in his essay entitled “East and West in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya”, for transcending the barriers of region and caste. He is of the view that Markandaya’s intention was to deal with her characters as individuals and not as representatives of any narrow section or creed and goes on to say that “the India of Kamala Markandaya is a united India with a culture and soul of her own” (323). Though Markandaya’s village lacks in specificity, it can be in some respects compared to Narayan’s Malgudi and Rao’s Kanthapura. It is these universalisitic presentations of village life that Markandaya too attempts to picturise in her novels. Though Mulk Raj gives the identity of Punjab or U.P to his characters, Narayan and K.Nagarajan have the
south Indian towns of Malgudi and Kedaram as their settings, and Rao’s Kanthapura is recognisably a village in Karnataka, they are basically the prototypes of any Indian village. Most Indian English novels of the period were “set in” (Williams, Writing 230) some region, though the descriptions of the locale may refer only to the surface realities without delving deep into the inherent lives of the characters. Nevertheless, these novelists, especially the trio, have paved the way for the entry of regionalism into Indian English fiction. By referring to “the village” or “the city” or “the town” and by blurring the identity of the characters who speak in “our language” (28) and celebrate “our new year” (117), Markandaya makes sure that she discloses no clue about the location they belong to. Writing in the early fifties, along with the “Big Three” (Walsh) who had already attempted to bring innovations into Indian English by employing transliterations and dialectal rhythms to give a strong regional flavour to their novels, such techniques are sparingly used by Markandaya. New Indian writers in English have tried to portray the distinctive ethos of their fictional works through experimenting with the language and by exploring the subtle nuances of the region. Markandaya’s locale fails to justify the concept of the regionalism as discussed in the previous two chapters and the regional vagueness accentuates her isolation from contemporary Indian English fictional writers.