

*The Role of Religion in Markandaya's Nectar in a  
Sieve and Farah's Sweet and Sour Milk*

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This paper is an attempt at exploring the role religion plays in people's lives in colonial India and postcolonial Somalia as depicted in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955) and Nuruddin Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979). It will trace the endless suffering of the main characters, who, to escape tyranny and repression, resort to their religious beliefs, mostly mixed up with superstitions, as a refuge that would provide them with a little protection and consolation in horrible social, economic, and political conditions, where callous oppression, grinding poverty, worn-out customs, and awful ignorance permeate every aspect of their lives. However, instead of being a source of hope and tranquility, religion, whether it is Hinduism or Islam, adds up to their despair and anguish since those in power, be it family or political authorities, use religion to achieve their personal goals at the expense of the powerless subjects.

The new elites who have reached power in ex-colonies as seen in *Sweet and Sour Milk* are not by any means better than colonialists in humiliating and impoverishing people as revealed in *Nectar in a sieve*. Not unlike Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Edward Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), emphasizes the continuous process of dispossession practiced by the West against the peoples of ex-colonies, contending that "In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism [...] lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices" (p. 8). Both Markandaya and Farah shed light on this issue in different ways, unraveling the role religion plays during these periods.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, through Rukmani, the protagonist and the narrator, Markandaya manifests how the tannery, built and run by the wealthy whites, has disastrous repercussions on the rural area and its despondent peasants. Being raised according to social mores and religious beliefs to be an obedient and satisfied wife, Rukmani, married at 12 to a man she has never seen before, though shocked at seeing her new home, a "mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch" (NIS13), never complains. On the contrary, she expresses content and even happiness:

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for (p. 17)?

In her *A Study of Markandaya's Women* (2006), Sudhir Arora confirms that in India, "A traditional woman, being deeply religious, develops stoicism that gives mental potency and protects her from tension and conflict" (p. 36). Throughout her life, Rukmani keeps stuck to such religious beliefs despite all the distressing experiences that afflict her.

When it takes her long to get pregnant again after Ira's birth, her mother resorts to religion for a solution. Rukmani recalls, "My mother, whenever I paid her a visit, would make me accompany her to a temple, and together we would pray before the deity, imploring for help until we were giddy" (NIS, p. 30). When all this devotion to gods goes in vain, Rukmani, does not lose faith. Instead, she finds excuses for gods. "But the Gods have other things to do: they cannot attend to the pleas of every

suppliant who dares to raise his cares to heaven” (p. 30). In what clearly reflects Markandaya’s disapproval of such religious superstitions, when Rukmani’s mother gets too ill to take her to the temple, she places in her hand “a small stone lingam” (p. 31), a symbol of the Hindu deity Shiva and fertility. However, despite her deep faith, literate and relatively open-minded Rukmani decides, without telling her husband, Nathan, whose beliefs do not allow that, to visit Kenny, a British doctor, who works with philanthropic societies and devotedly exerts efforts to alleviate the poor Indians’ suffering, planning to build a hospital in the countryside. With Kenny’s help, Rukmani does get pregnant several times – an implication that modern medicine succeeds where old-fashioned customs and false religious beliefs fail. Rukmani is fated to face a similar ordeal when Ira’s husband brings her back home because she fails to conceive. Rukmani again resorts to Dr. Kenny, who treats Ira, but unfortunately it is too late as her husband has already taken himself another wife.

Rukmani and Nathan, like all other peasants who tile a land which is not theirs, are also victims of the fury of nature. The monsoon would not only destroy their humble dwellings but also deprive them of the crops they have been working hard for all the year so that they can pay landowners and keep what would save them from actual starvation. Another year, the rain fails, so “We stared at the cruel sky, calm, blue, indifferent to our need” (p. 100), Rukmani ruminates in a kind of skepticism and hopelessness of her gods. Nevertheless, her goddess is still her sole, though futile, weapon against famine and mounting miseries; consequently, she continues:

We threw ourselves on the earth and we prayed. I took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to my Goddess, and I wept at her feet. I thought she looked at me with compassion and I went away comforted, but no rain came (p. 100).

In spite of all misfortunes, Rukmani cannot but be an archetypal traditional Indian woman representing what Lakshmi Sharma in *The Position of Woman in Kamala Markandaya’s Novels* (2001) quotes Shantha Krishnaswamy saying:

Indian woman’s essential commitment to her religion and the institutions and rituals, has enabled her to be portrayed as the guardian of culture and religion. It is difficult to summarize the various images of women in Hinduism and Islam, the two dominant religions, through the ages. The women have been described as the embodiment of purity and spiritual power and respected as godly beings on the one hand, and on the other viewed as being essentially weak creatures constantly requiring the protection of man as their lord and master (pp. 61-62).

*Nectar in a Sieve* shows that during colonial period, Indians in rural areas suffer from illiteracy, absence of medication, and miserable economic conditions. Instead of finding solutions, ruthless authorities seem to benefit from people’s ignorance and their unswerving belief in fatalism so that they can easily subjugate them. According to Anil Bhatnagar in *Kamala Markandaya: A Thematic Study* (1995), this is the story

of not only Rukmani and her family but that of all the poor, dispossessed peasants “who believe firmly in fate and accept every misery as their lot” (p. 4). He adds:

The Indian people are generally God-fearing having a profound faith in religion and God. The Indian culture is basically rooted in spirituality and an unshakable faith in divine justice. This faith often takes the form of resignation to one's fate (p. 52).

Markandaya's message about the futility of such blind faith is revealed succinctly when, while literally starving, Rukmani's son Raja is brought home a dead body, having been killed by the guards of the tannery on the pretext of having stolen a calf skin. It is provoking how submissively, Rukmani closes his eyes, ties his jaw with a bandage, and washes his body. Officials from the tannery visit the family, not to apologize, but, shockingly enough, to threaten them that it is useless to think of asking for compensation because simply, “it will not work” (NIS, p. 125). After all, they feel safe because the colonial laws are made to protect them, not the wretched Indian peasants. It is aching and highly provoking how, again, without a shudder, Rukmani and her husband submissively accept what they consider God's will.

Still more miseries are to mount. Their five-year-old Kuti suffers the most as his weak body cannot endure lack of food anymore, and his distressing moans and whimpers make his mother wish him fast death. The one who feels utmost pain and compassion towards him is Ira, who has been treating him more like a son than a little brother. To her surprise, Rukmani notices a little improvement in his condition, and she promptly decides that “the Gods were not remote, not unheeded, since they had heard his cries and stilled them as it were a miracle” (p. 130). However, it doesn't take Rukmani long to discover the unpalatable truth: unable to bear watching Kuti suffering that much, Ira has turned to prostitution and has been feeding him secretly for a while. Only then does Rukmani realize that “it was [Ira] who had been responsible for the improvement in Kuti, not I, not my prayers” (134). Still, Ira's money cannot buy more than milk for Kuti, which causes his health to deteriorate again, losing his eyesight for a while and finally dying. What happens with Ira reflects her rebellion against her parents' vain values and beliefs. According to C. K. Naik in “Rural India in Transition” (2002), Ira's divorce “does not break her heart. Rather, she feels liberated from the decreed social norms and exploitative forces” (p. 24). Similarly, Arora sees that Ira's resort to prostitution “is not an immoral act but an act of supreme sacrifice” (p. 76).

Rukmani's talk with Dr. Kenny sheds more light on how religious beliefs are deep-rooted in Indians' lives. When she knows that Kenny's wife has already left him, she is extremely shocked, as all traditional Indian wives would feel in a typically patriarchal society. Rukmani finds it outrageous that his wife cannot accompany him to India, “Cannot?” She wonders, “She must. A woman's place is with her husband” (NIS, p. 147). Lakshmi Sharma confirms this concept saying, “Indian philosophy and religion enjoining ‘a great respect for motherhood through the sanctification and inviolability of marriage’” (p. 52). According to Naik, Rukmani “is an epitome of the archetypal Indian wife who regards her husband as her God and her children as gifts from heaven” (p. 16). In short, as a stubborn follower of tradition, Rukmani essentially commits to her religion, its institutions and rituals.

It is Kenny who highlights the horrible repercussions on people when religious beliefs are blindly internalized so that they silently accept whatever happens as God's will. He blames her and all Indians, screaming painfully and scornfully, "you must cry out if you need help. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence" (NIS, p. 153). Realizing what Rukmani and many Hindus believe in, Kenny adds, "Never mind what is said or what you have been told. There's no grandeur in want – or in endurance. [...] Acquiescent imbeciles, do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering" (pp. 53-154)? As expected, religion is what Rukmani refers to to defend submissiveness and compliance, thus saying, "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" (p. 154). This explains why despite all the anguish that follows, fury, if ever there, stays deep inside.

What makes matters even worse is that they are kicked out of the land they have wasted thirty years serving because the powerful white tanners have bought it. Yet, unsurprisingly, Rukmani tells Nathan, "Do not concern yourself. We are in God's hands" (p. 176). They have no choice but to go to the city to stay with their son, Murugan, to get another shock: Out of desolation, Murugan has already left his wife and kids and disappeared. Like hundreds of beggars, they resort to a temple for a meal and shelter where their last possessions are robbed. While there, Rukmani recalls the faces of loved ones in the village, but soon their images fade, and, she says, "I saw in their place the countenance of the God and his Consort, and it seemed to me that they looked on me benignly and I was at length able to pray" (p. 194). At another moment, she stares at the statues of gods and goddesses and thinks, "They seemed almost to live, their stone breasts gently breathing, their limbs lightly moving. [...] Until dawn, when the stars went out one by one, and the grey light changed the sculptured figures back into immobility" (pp. 199-200).

The role religion plays in the lives of the characters of Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk* is to a large extent similar to that in *Nectar in a Sieve*. In post-colonial Somalia, the new regime has done almost nothing to improve people's lives; on the contrary, "People were kept in their separate compartments of ignorance" (SSM, p. 216). Farah shows how religious beliefs are used and abused, mostly leaving irreparable harm to the weaker members in society, the poor in general and women and children in particular.

Unlike Rukmani, Qumman and Beydan are illiterate, which makes them more blindly involved in religious creeds, clearly mixing them up with false beliefs and superstitions. At the very beginning of the novel, we see Qumman, who "had little faith in the miracles of modern medicines," trying to treat her son, Soyaan, a highly educated politician, with some yogurt including a "dash of herbs the traditionalist savant had administered" (SSM, p. 3). She also asks a sheikh's help because, she believes, "The Koran is all we know that cures without complications" (p. 5). On another occasion, Qumman says while criticizing the poor condition of hospitals in post-colonial Somalia, "I have faith in the Almighty. His word heals. His hand blesses" (p. 144). Like other heavenly religions, Islam, as a matter of fact, encourages faith healing, but at the same time, it encourages scientific knowledge and developments in all fields as long as they are used for the welfare of humankind. She is totally convinced that Soyaan is bewitched by her husband's second wife, Beydan. In this sense, Qumman is closer to Rukmani's mother and other traditional Indian women than to Rukmani herself. Still, Farah shows that Qumman does not always act

as she preaches because she “nevertheless tolerated injections when it really came to making the ultimate choice” (p. 4), which reflects lack of logic and certainty of her beliefs.

Like Rukmani, Qumman loses a son, Soyaan, who dies clearly poisoned by the political regime he has been part of but clandestinely working against their tyrannical policies. She stubbornly refuses a post-mortem, considering it a sacrilegious act. Yet, not unlike Rukmani, her faith helps her to feel relief despite hardships, thus giving some beggars a little food asking them to “Pray for the sick among us, pray for the souls of the dead relative and Muslim anywhere they may be found” (p. 14). Unfortunately, as prayers fail to save Rukmani and her family from starvation, they fail to heal Soyaan. Nevertheless, faith undoubtedly helps Qumman to accept his death patiently. “God gives; He takes that which He only can give” (p. 30).

Beydan is by no means different from Qumman, thus refusing to see a doctor and depending on an aunt and some herbs despite being seriously ill and about to give birth. She, too, strongly believes in witchcraft and is convinced that she will die because Qumman has bewitched her. Not unlike Rukmani’s mother’s belief in the power of stone lingam, Beydan pays all the money that Loyaan, her stepson, has supported her with to a “super-master witch” to unlock the spell. Such superstitions are in several ways similar to those in Markandaya’s India. In her *A Silence of Desire* (1960), for example, Sarojini idolatrously worships a tulasi plant, not recognizing the difference “between the tulasi tree and its Maker” (p. 8). She also rejects modern medicine and visits a Swami to treat a serious growth in the womb.

Like in rural India, in a Somalia ruled by patriarchal despotism, religion is exploited by husbands, the clan, and the political regime, who do not hesitate to distort it in order to attain their own interests and reinforce their authority. In “Nuruddin Farah: Tribalism, Orality, and Postcolonial Ultimate Reality” (2002), John C. Hawley classifies those who call themselves Muslims in Farah’s first trilogy, which includes *Sweet and Sour Milk*, into three categories:

The cynical politicians, the self-enslaved fanatics, and the devout. There are those characters who use the trappings of religion for political ends, [...] those who use their religion to absolve themselves from involvement in the world around them, or who use their interpretation of its precepts to discipline the more creative and the more daring among their family members (p. 75).

Dissimilar to Nathan, who treats Rukmani kindly despite having cheated on her, Keynaan, an ex-policeman, treats his two wives contemptuously and violently. To justify his misogyny, he, every now and then, refers to religion, misinterpreting Islam to suit his ideas and behaviors. He never deters himself from beating Qumman and Beydan if they ever think of disobeying his wishes and orders. His ruthlessness has left serious damage on their bodies and souls. Knowing that his mother is frequently beaten by Keynaan, Loyaan says, “Also today, she had bruises. Her forehead had bled and dried. There was a scar a night old on her arm as well” (SSM, p. 26).

Before Soyaan's funeral, authoritarian Keynaan cannot tolerate the idea that Qumman is in the room with the deceased. In what clearly contradicts Islam, which he pretends to adopt, he tells Loyaan to bring her out of the room, or he will drag her out himself, because he believes that "her presence defiles the room" (p. 33). At another point in the novel and in a clear example of misinterpreting religion, he blames Loyaan for listening to women, saying:

Women are for sleeping with, for giving birth to and bringing up children; they are not good for any other thing. They are not to be trusted with secrets. They can serve the purposes Allah created them for originally, and no more (pp. 89-9).

Loyaan feels sick of how Keynaan never spares an opportunity to refer to Islam and holy Koran to support his unbending points of view. He recalls:

Women are inferior beings, [Keynan] unhesitatingly would declare. 'talk to whom? Listen to whom? Beydan or Qumman? You must be out of your head, son. The Koran said....!' Yes, I know, I know what the Koran said, when and why. 'Please spare me that' (p. 164).

Keynaan also resorts to religion to hide his ignorance. Loyaan sarcastically says, "When you confront him with a question of a universal character, his answer is tailor-made, he will say 'Only Allah knows, only Allah'" (p. 90). However, when it comes to his authority, this needs no proof. At a moment of rage, in defense of himself and the regime, he screams at Loyaan "I am the father. It is my prerogative to give life and death as I find fit. If I decide to cut you into two, I can. The law of this land invests in men of my age the power" (p. 102). However, this tough patriarchal figure, who takes neither his illiterate wives nor his educated sons seriously, suddenly presents himself as a devout Muslim, thus asking Loyaan to read from the Koran after they know of Beydan's death while giving birth. He says:

Read on. Bless us. Bless your mother who has sinned. Bless your brother who died an innocent death. Bless us all. Bless us so that Allah may deliver us from our sins and the sins we harbor inside ourselves. [...] Bless Beydan. Bless the newly arrived, welcome him (p. 262).

The irony is that Keynaan is dating a girl younger than his daughter, Ladan, and he is planning to take her a third wife. This, nevertheless, is not among his sins; as a Muslim male, he uses his right to four wives, but he neglects the restrictive condition that he has to be fair and treat them equally. He, for example, hasn't slept with Qumman for more than two decades, sexually preferring younger Beydan to her.

There is no doubt that like Markandaya, Farah believes that blind faith and total compliance with mores and traditions make subjects like Qumman unable to recognize their real interests, thus becoming self-contradictory and acting against their own rights. Although Qumman is brutally abused by Keynaan, she, not unlike her husband, hates liberated, educated, and independent women like Margaritta, Soyaan's

half-Italian girlfriend, who firmly stands against oppressors like Keynaan and the regime. Margaritta, in fact, “represents the type of woman Qumman’s generation detests” (p. 178). Unable to change their mother, Soyaan and Loyaan educate their younger sister, Ladan, and they “would invest in [her] their hopes, they would trust their future with her” (p. 117). When Loyaan needs to hide Soyaan’s dangerously secret papers, it is Ladan whom he chooses for such a serious task.

In addition, Religion is used by many clergymen and politicians to ensure themselves certain privileges and power. On the seventh day of Soyaan’s death, and before saying their prayers, the sheikhs are the first to eat and are served the best meat, together with other important guests, mostly politicians and tribal chiefs. Other men follow them, and later, women, who work hard to prepare the feast, eat “the intestines, the plain and the honeycomb tripe [...]. What the women wouldn’t eat went to the beggars” (p. 243), something merely traditional and not religious at all.

The family patriarchal system according to the novel is just a symbol of the oppressive political patriarchy, using it to ensure unquestionable supremacy. In an epigraph to part two of the novel, Farah asserts this relationship, quoting psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, “In the figure of the father the authoritarian state has its representative in every family, so that the family becomes its most important instrument of power” (p. 103). Peter J. Schraeder, in turn, confirms in “The Sociopolitical Evolution of a Somali Writer” (2002) that “Keynaan epitomizes the patriarch who rules his family with an iron hand and has become a willing instrument of the clannish policies of the [General’s] regime” (p. 204). The dictator is the grand patriarch, who claims a new type of rule supposedly based on Islam and Marxism, but actually using the tribe and its values to dominate every single aspect of life in post-colonial Somalia. The regime arrests opponents, including women, throws them in jail, and executes them in the name of Islam, which seems sarcastic knowing that “Orientation Centers” have been built and “it was to them that people went, not to mosques anymore” (SSM, p. 95). In “Nuruddin Farah: A Combining of Gifts” (1989), an interview with Maya Jaggi, Farah says “For a Muslim believer, it is God who decides the destiny of all people; for a mortal to have a whip in his hand and to judge and determine the fate of someone in the name of the Lord is profoundly unIslamic” (p. 181).

Dr. Ahmad-Willie, a friend of Soyaan’s, tells Loyaan that many are shot and buried in “unnumbered tombs. No member of their immediate family is allowed to see their dead bodies;” otherwise, people “garland them with flowery secrets [and] call on these tombs as you would on martyrs” (SSM, p. 44). He adds that he was called by the police the other night to treat a woman lest she would die under torture. In a clear example of what Kate Millet calls sexual politics, Beydan herself was forced to marry Keynaan after he caused her ex-husband’s death during a violent interrogation.

Although Islam is incompatible with the socialist rule the General claims to adopt, in “Opposing Dictatorship” (2002), Barbara Turfan writes:

[He] has been able to distort his subjects’ interpretation of Islam, bribing or coercing the sheikhs to support his rule and to lead their followers in singing his praises and comparing him, grotesquely, with the Prophet or even

with Allah. [...] The provision of an Islamic legitimacy for a dictatorial, Marxist-Leninist regime is something the General obviously finds of extreme importance in securing at least the passivity and at best the full support of the populace (p. 270).

After he gets rid of his opponents by imprisonment, exile, or bribe, the General, to use Soyaan's words, presents himself as "The father of the nation. The carrier of wisdom. The provider of comforts. A demi-god." (SSM, p. 11). In a direct reference to Allah's ninety-nine names in the Koran, Soyaan says that assemblies of more than five persons are against the law unless they are "there to chant the chorus of the General's ninety-nine good names" (p. 95). Individuals like Keynaan who prove blind obedience and participate in praising the general are provided official jobs although they are humiliated by their superiors every now and then. Keynaan, the supposedly religious person fabricates lies about his son's last words in a desperate attempt to regain his job, which he lost as a kind of penalty for not proving professionalism during interrogation, thus leading to Beydan's husband's death. Without the slightest pang of remorse, he claims that before his death, Soyaan said, "labor is honour and there is no general but our General" (p. 107), in reference to the Islamic belief in the oneness of God. This same Keynaan never utters a word when the General executes ten Muslim sheikhs who, ridiculously enough, are accused of using religion for the purpose of weakening the nation. In *The Novels of Nuruddin Farah* (1994), Derek Wright succinctly depicts the similarity between Keynaan and the dictator concerning religion, saying:

Like the General, [Keynaan], takes refuge in religious obscurantism and he misuses the Koran to deny equality to men and to marginalize women as 'inferior beings,' [...] to cow them into submission (the General's execution of the rebel sheikhs and Keynaan's inheritance, against her will, of the widow of a deceased kinsman are, in fact, both *unKoranic* (p. 49).

One more example of the abuse of religion by authorities is their carelessness about the dire poverty which, like in *Nectar in a Sieve*, pervades the country. Similar to Markandaya's India, the streets of Mogadicio overflow with fatherless children and beggars and all the regime does is collecting them and putting them in jail whenever a foreign diplomat visits the country. Farah sheds light on the fact that while a lot of people can barely find something to eat, the general and his ministers live in outrageous luxury. Farah's narrator makes it clear that the general cares the least about Islam and justice; what he really cares about is power. He writes:

That is what the Koran promised men of equal birth. But the General himself, disbelieving in the teachings of the Koran, denied men equal to himself the right to have their sales beat untampered with in the openness of God's air. Think of the general as another infidel, quoting and misquoting Linen in order to remain in power [...] To rule, the general hoists the mast of his

flagpost which he feels is secure more with the KGB than with the Koran (SSM, p. 165).

Soyaan has been courageous enough to confront the general with all these cruelties, thus telling him, "It is unconstitutional to pass laws, sign decrees, run a martial-law government and then sentence these sheikhs to death. It is against the teaching of the Koran on which they base their arguments" (p. 251).

At this point, the General gets furious and screams, "I am the constitution. Now you know who I am, and I want you out of here before I set those dogs of mine on you and you are torn to pieces. Out" (p. 251). It is worth mentioning that Farah does not introduce Soyaan, who pays his life as a result of being true, as a devout Muslim. On the contrary, he drinks alcohol and has a child out of wedlock, while many other supposedly pious individuals not only keep silent towards all the cruelties and brutalities but also participate in praising the General, despite all the verses in the Koran and the Prophet's Hadith that urge believers to speak truth to power.

In a nutshell, in both novels, blind religious faith never provides a solution for people suffering from different kinds of oppression and cruelty. Rukmani's religious practices do not make her crops grow and save her family and other peasants from famine and degradation; nor do they give Qumman, Beydan, and other poor Somalis the means to get rid of domestic, social, or political dictatorship. Religious faith is definitely a source of relief on the short term, but if it is not accompanied by education, open-mindedness, and willpower to act, it will be another means of repression and persecution and a symbol of speechlessness and powerlessness. Hope, though, seems to lie in the new generation represented for Markandaya by rebellious, determined Ira and her brother Selvam, who has learned a lot from Dr. Kenny, and for Farah by strong-willed, educated, and independent Ladan who, unlike Rukmani, Qumman, and Beydan, refuses to surrender to prevailing beliefs and values. Such individuals can be both religious and knowledgeable, rejecting superstitions and embracing the essence of religion, be it Hinduism or Islam, which stimulates believers to work hard for righteousness, equality, goodness, and justice.

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