

CHAPTER - IV

SEETA

Meadows Taylor's Seeta (1872)¹, deals with the united efforts of the Hindus and the Muslims to overthrow the British in 1857. Though it does not reach the standard attained by Tara, which according to Taylor scholars, is the best expression of Taylor's creative power. The theme of mixed marriage attains a much better attention than Tara because of the encounter between the British and Indians. Taylor's mature style creates characters with better insights as far as Indian women are concerned. Though the novel fails to depict an effective rendering of the turmoil of the period of 1857, it concentrates on exploring human relationships, in such a background, is significantly the object of this chapter.

I

The novel opens with Seeta's husband, Huree Das, killed by the dacoit Azrael Pande in league with Huree's cousin, Ram Das. Seeta and her son survive the attack. They take shelter in the house of Wamun Bhut, the priest. Finally, Azrael and his gang are brought for trial in the Deputy Commissioner, Cyril Brandon's court at Noorpur and Azrael is sentenced to death. During the trial, the young and upright Cyril Brandon falls in love with the beautiful and self-composed Hindu widow, Seeta. In the meanwhile, Azrael escapes

from prison and leads an attack on the house of Narendra, Seeta's grandfather. The attack is foiled by the timely intervention of Cyril and his force. But in the encounter Cyril himself is wounded, and is nursed back to health by Seeta. This culminates into a romance of the two. Finally, the two get married according to Hindu rites and thereby Seeta joins the Noorpur Anglo-Indian society as the wife of the Deputy Commissioner. When the Mutiny takes place in 1857, Azrael and his group of armed men attack the houses of the magistrate, Philip Mostyn and of Cyril Brandon and Seeta is killed while trying to save the life of her husband. After Seeta's death a sad and lonely Brandon returns to England where he marries his former beloved Grace Mostyn and settles there as a Peer. This is broadly the outline of the story.

Seeta is undoubtedly idealised almost to the point of being unreal. However, Taylor displays not only a keen eye for details of Indian social milieu but also successfully delineates the Indian characters in the novel and lays bare the inherent contradictions in both Indian and Anglo-Indian society of the Mutiny period. Therefore on its first publication Seeta scandalized the English reading public because by the Eighteen sixties, and especially after 1857, mixed marriages between Indians and Englishmen were not only seen as aberrations but were also dangerous. But Seeta, as a novel, has much more solid stuff to offer than just bringing about the union of the two idealised types. It offers the

reader a detailed description of Hindu life as well as the author's critical presentation of the Anglo- Indian community of the town of Noorpur. More than any other novel of Taylor, Seeta is crowded with Indian characters drawn from various strata of the society. Huree Das, the goldsmith, putwary and the banker of Gokulpoor is prosperous and therefore is respected by the people. The ancestral lands yield him a comfortable income. He has married Seeta, the grand-daughter of Narendra, the goldsmith and banker of Shah Gunje. He is also a person of reputation because of his great wealth, and has high respectability and influence in the district. He has no son to inherit his wealth and business except the daughter of his eldest son, Seeta. Seeta has a son, Laloo. Her husband's cousin Ram Das is jealous of his growing prosperity and reputation and therefore Ram Das is his bitter enemy. He has dealings with Azrael Pande, the prince among dacoits and Ram Das wants his help to kill Huree. In the encounter both Seeta and her son are wounded and take shelter in the house of Wamun Bhut, the priest. After her husband's death, Seeta seemed scared and absent. Her grandfather, Narendra and Aunt Ella come to Gokulpoor to console her. The house of Huree Das is sealed up. Seeta and the child go to stay with Aunt Ella in Shah Gunje. In outward appearance, Seeta is not changed; she looks as charming as ever. When her husband's death anniversary comes round, relatives think that she must pay him respect by performing rites like a widow. When Aunt Ella hints at the propriety of such a ceremony, Seeta speaks her

mind frankly :

It is not a shaven head or a coarse garment that makes a virtuous widow, Aunt Ella! What I am, I will remain. Am I to disfigure myself to shock my boy when he grows up? No! if his father's death were avenged, this might- might be thought of; but till then, let it not be mentioned. (p.49).

There is a strange aspect of determination in her eyes which showed her changed outlook. She is quicker in decision and more fluent in her speech, more keen in her discussions showing that Seeta is not guided by conventional norms. According to Misra, "She is presented as a new type of Hindu woman who does not blindly follow tradition. Instead she tries to free herself from the trammels of century-old beliefs and even analyses her relationship with her husband, Huree Das. Though a widow of high caste, Seeta refuses to shave her head, or wear coarse garments."²

As a mother, Seeta's love for her child amounts to a passionate devotion. She is passing her entire time either by reading books or by playing with the child. But it does not satisfy her. She is a well-educated girl. Therefore she considers herself quite different from other ill-fated widowed women. Taylor presents an intellectual in describing Seeta. He writes:

"Seeta had never loved she had held her husband in respect; she was even proud of him, and he was fond of her she was his darling! But that was not the love of the books. His life had not been her, nor hers his." (P.51)

The image of the emancipated Hindu widow here appears to be ideal.

(The second phase of Seeta's emancipation begins when she is summoned to appear as a witness in the court. She is accompanied by her grandfather, aunt and the priest. In the court, Cyril Brandon sitting before a small table watches Seeta as she enters the court. He instantly feels that he has never seen a woman lovelier than her:

She had dressed herself in a rich silk saree of a 'green' colour, shot with crimson, which had heavy borders and ends of gold thread, and the end, which she had passed over her head, fell on her right arm and contrasted vividly with its fair colour and rounded outline. (p.61).

Seeta recognises the murderer. After witnesses, and the cross-examinations, the Court orders death sentence to Azrael Pande.)

(Cyril's encounter with the dacoits leave him seriously wounded and is nursed by Seeta at Narendra's house.

He becomes very friendly with Seeta and her son.) He desires to play with the child. On his request, Seeta hands over the child to him and the child looks 'wistfully' into his face as he sits on the bed. Seeta says innocently:

"He is not afraid of you, you see, sir, nor am I. It is so strange," "Why?" asked Cyril. "All children come to me without fear". "Yes, I understand now", she said dreamily. "Children know who are good to them, and I am but a child, for I feel no fear of you - I never felt any; and this is so strange to me. You are English, and people fear you; but I do not." "I would rather they loved me," said Cyril gently, "than that they feared me." "Yes, many love you too", she returned gravely, "but it is a love with fear, and we have no fear. Nor grandfather, nor Aunt Ella, nor my boy, nor I. We only love you and worship you, as we do our gods." (p.109).

(Cyril and Seeta, by now, are an inseparable pair.) After a brief separation, lonely Seeta goes to the temple to make offerings for the ailing child. She takes the child to be blessed solemnly. After this ceremony, Narendra returns from Cyril, saying that Cyril would never forget them. The tears streaming from her eyes Seeta prays silently for the child's safety : "O God! Keep him safe, keep him safe, for the sake of his mother and all who love him." (p.113). Even then Seeta's son dies, leaving her in terrible grief. Her



existence till now was tied up with her child. He was the only sunshine between her present dark state, the dreary widowhood and the bleak future. She was grooming him as an heir to her husband's property. Her aunt tries to console Seeta, and tries to make her take interest in common household matters. But Aunt Ella notices a gentle smile on Seeta's face and she is her usual self only when the tents were rising under the trees outside her windows announcing Cyril's presence again. Aunt Ella meets Cyril in his tent and says: "...because she loves you, sir, because in the night she dreams of you, and murmurs your name, and says love words that I dare not repeat." (p.119). She requests Cyril neither to see Seeta nor to inspire her to love him and further asks him to forget Seeta by leaving Shah Gunje as soon as possible. Cyril obeys. After his departure, Seeta becomes hopelessly dull and melancholic, nothing interests her. Her grandfather is thinking of adopting a child but she responds negatively, saying she could not love another child.

After long waiting and yearning with the meditation of Aunt Ella, Seeta is ready to marry Cyril. She is dressed in a sari and wears new anklets and ornaments. Cyril wears a red bridal dress and a turban on his head. The religious ceremony is conducted by the Hindu priest. Taylor does not give the details of the marriage saying: "I am afraid, too, that the tedious ceremonials of a Hindoo marriage would hardly interest my readers and I therefore omit them." (p.132). On Cyril's request Narendra and Aunt Ella put

Seeta's hand into the hands of Cyril and bless.

Cyril and Seeta lead a happy life in camp. Seeta has brought with her only one servant, Bheemee, who is her nurse since her infancy. Seeta spends her day by reading books, playing with the children of the village goldsmiths, hearing many a tales of poverty, and distress of them and distributing the wealth which Cyril places at her disposal. She is often a steady help-mate to Cyril in his evening work. She reads the current vernacular papers with a great ease. Added to her happiness is the news of Cyril's appointment as Deputy Commissioner of the Noorpur District.

After Seeta's marriage with Cyril, the Guru, the spiritual director of the goldsmith caste, arrives at Shah Gunje to do inquiry into caste disputes and irregularities. The event of Seeta's marriage is considered by the Guru to be of much importance and so he proceeds to the town without delay. He receives many letters on the subject from members of the goldsmiths' guild in different towns and villages. Marriage of Cyril and Seeta become a popular topic for discussion and gossip in the station. But Cyril is busy in attending the parties given to him by his friends for celebrating his promotion as Deputy Commissioner. During his absence Seeta is lonely, without friends or relatives except old Bheemee, who is growing deaf and disabled day by day. Seeta learns writing and speaking English. Cyril is very proud of this when she speaks 'slowly, but with a faultless

accent', he is very happy to show this skill to his friends.

| Meanwhile Seeta starts reading part of the Sanskrit Classic Savitri. For her efforts in learning and reproducing the classics makes the whole of the English community, especially ladies, grow jealous of her. | Women, selling bangles, tell Seeta that she is very lucky to supercede them. The English ladies cold shoulder Seeta saying that she is not married to Cyril by right. They also tell her that Cyril is getting married to the Judge's sister. This news breaks Seeta's heart and she broods heavily. However, when it is time for her to give company to Cyril and friends on outdoor camps, when others are busy in sight-seeing, Seeta is busy with her little Hindu ceremony and some Brahmins and their wives help her.

Letters of warning start coming from various parts of India to the Judge, Mr. Philip Mostyn and Cyril to leave India and to go to England. Amidst the political unrest, there is also discontent on home front. His brother Lord Hylton is showing his distress and disagreement about Cyril's marriage, and his office is accusing him that he has violated the laws of morality. He is told that he will be removed from all active duty, unless he assures that there will be no cause for discontent. Cyril hits back saying that his marriage is through Hindu rites, which cannot be broken and he respects Hinduism. He also writes that he is ready to discharge his duties with all the zeal.

Aunt Ella tells Seeta that she is not to eat with Seeta because she is now a "Bhagat", and she has devoted herself to a religious life. She also tells her that Seeta cannot cook for her grandfather, since he too has taken the "Moodra" sacrament, he is a "Bhagat" too. These things shock Seeta. Some of her old companions come to her. But they stare at her in a curious manner. They do not ask her for a dolls' feast at the garden beyond the town as they used to have it before. She takes this as their humility, and they are shy because she is the Commissioner's wife. Seeta, on her own, with the consent of her grandfather and Aunt Ella, decides to give them 'dolls' feast' and sends her invitations to her old friends of all castes, 'from Brahmins downwards, to Mahomedans'. Taylor gives a vivid description of dolls' feast to show Seeta still plays with dolls. The preparations for the feast is in progress. The Brahmin cooks are busy in preparing various good dishes. All the dolls are set out on a carpet covered with white muslin, with small cushions for their backs. They are looking very solemn and stolid. Then, as the evening sets in, they ask Seeta to sing. This she does with joy but suddenly starts sobbing for not receiving her old friends of her own caste. When she reaches home from the garden, she kneels down at her grand-father's feet and clasping his knees, bursts into tears. She is ostracized.

People in the assembly shout: "Caste her out! Kill her for her witch-craft! Shave her head! Let her be sent to



wash in Gunga Mata, at Benares." (p.248). Seeta had to tell her grand father, that she is pure and did not 'eat cow's flesh or drink 'with her friends in the camp in 'Gao Mookh'. She pleads that whatever she tells is the truth. The Panchayet orders Narendra to purify his house because the house is defiled of Seeta's presence. Unless she goes to Benares and puts on widow's clothing, she is not to be received into their caste. Otherwise let her stay as an outcast. On this count Ram Das, who thinks of avenging Cyril, seeks help of Nawab of Futtehpoor, Dil Khan Bahadoor.

Seeta, shut at home, engages herself in reading and understanding writings of Milton and Shakespeare and also Pilgrim's Progress. Suddenly, when their camp is under mutineers attack, Cyril is at the mercy of them. He fights furiously as they have given a tough fight. He fights and draws back his deadly weapon to strike', and there is a loud cry from Seeta and she receives the wound before Cyril receives it. Taylor describes her death in a very pathetic but compassionate way. When they lift her wounded and bleeding and bring her down for the doctor to help her breathe, all the English community stands with folded hands, praying for her life. After the struggle for survival, for the whole night, Seeta opens her eyes in the early morning, stretches her hands to pray to the Sun God with Gaytri', the Vedantic invocations. Then she faintly calls Cyril and Grace to kiss her good bye. She, in her revery, thinks that her mother is calling her and there are bright flowers of heaven

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everywhere. She dies saying 'Lord! I come'. (p.383).

Seeta, according to Bhupal Singh, is and devotion to Brundon improbable:

a creation of romance; her very faithfulness in real life... the character of Seeta is that of an idealized Hindu wife, a copy of the character of her namesake of the Ramayana which it is the ambition of every Hindu lady to imitate. She dies saving her lord and husband, and she dies a Hindu in spite of her marriage to a Christian.³

The ladies, around dying Seeta, feel she is a martyr because she saves an Englishman from death and thereby she dies for the cause of empire. Others like Mrs. Pratt, the missionary think that it is the 'good seed' which she has sown in Seeta 'has germinated and, therefore, she sacrifices her life. Perhaps Taylor has not depicted them as Christian couple. Cyril loves Indian Ballads sung by Seeta and therefore, in all fairness to Taylor, one may conclude that Taylor is only interested in realistically depicting Cyril and Seeta's ever lasting love relationships.

II

Aunt Ella, another major female character in Seeta, according to Bhupal Singh, "She is a 'hide-bound Hindu widow, who not only tolerates but actually helps in the love-intrigue. Aunts of her type would rather see their daughters

or nieces dead than married to a Christian.⁴ According to him it is a fundamental error. She, in fact, performs the role of an ayah like in Romeo and Juliet. Aunt Ella and her brother bring up the motherless child with love and care. All their hopeful dreams of Seeta's married life with Huree Das are shattered. As care-taker of Narendra's household, she used to get up early in the morning to 'trim the sacred fire' and prepare the 'oratory for her brother's morning sacrifice', to sweep the house, to wash the floors with 'liquid mud', to carry water and to prepare hot water for her brother's bath. This is her routine. She leads a simple pious life of a widow, sleeps on the bare floor using a mat, a carpet and a sheet. When she gets up, rolls them up and puts them away. When Seeta settles at Shah Gunje after the death of her husband, Aunt Ella becomes her guardian and almost a mother. She watches Seeta anxiously, presses her to perform her duties as a widowed wife. Like a proud mother of Seeta, she listens to her giving witness in the court. She withstand all the agonies in which Seeta is passing through. She gives moral support to her when Seeta serves Cyril to bring him back to health, and also when Seeta's son dies. She prepares the mind of the weeping girl to take interest in everyday chores. Quite often she reminds Seeta of her duties as a widow and tries to put her on the track of reality by making her see the world around her. She behaves as a messenger of Hindu Customs and goes and pleads for Seeta's safety because she foresees the danger of Cyril's interest in Seeta. Even

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she goes to the extent of dissuading him and urging him to leave Seeta's town. But like a gentle mother, she helps Seeta to join Cyril when she knows that both of them are in love with each other. Then she did not want to be a hindrance. Afterwards, she becomes a part and partial of Seeta's family. She enjoys when Seeta is happy and is unhappy when Seeta is in trouble.

When Seeta's new family life flourishes with Cyril as a 'knight at arms, like a Hindu widow goes to Banares for penance. When she comes back she accepts the life of a 'Bhagat'- a devotee to God.

While drawing this character, we feel, Taylor has shown great sympathy unlike most Anglo-Indian fiction writers. However, his knowledge of India is inadequate in probing into the socio-psychological bonds which brought the Hindu and the British together. For example, Seeta's giving a dolls' feast at her grandfather's place when Auntella has the idea that the persons-married to a foreigner is not a welcome at home and the society does not accept it. Under such situation, Aunt Ella allows Seeta to hold the ceremony. Taylor poses very difficult questions to readers, perhaps, as to what is wrong if such things happen? Aunt Ella is an eye-witness to what is happening around she is the silent observer and who is non-committal in the drama of mixed marriage and its hazards.

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III

It is interesting to note that like many other Anglo-Indian writers he too introduces an ubiquitous servant, Bheemee, in this novel. she does not play a decisive role in the real sense of the term. She has been introduced to give the feeling of an Indian household. She is the maid of Seeta from her childhood. She accompanies Seeta even to her new house which Cyril has built. She works silently and does not expect anything in return. That way, she is solely dependent and gains no credit from the Englishman - not even a word of praise - which hurts her feelings. Still she is happy and content because her daughter-like Seeta is happy. Now a derilict and hard of hearing, she keeps the house for Seeta and takes care of her household like a watchdog. The typical slave of master-slave relationship obedient, submissive and does not report even when the master is not right. Such characters are plenty in Anglo-Indian novels because the homes of the Englishmen used to be full with servants. Therefore every writer gives the authentic description of them while boasting of their acquaintance with India and their Indian experience.

IV

There is another slightly sketched, muslim woman, Mama Jumeela, who lends the novel the colour of Indianness. She is presented as the Nawab's confident who is therefore, a

'mama'. She is a tall and well-dressed person but not a beautiful one, being too fat with coarse features', having 'bristly hair which looks like a moustache'. In addition, the Mama Sahiba wears heavy ornaments of gold and silver. Her dress is of vivid scarlet in Indian satin with yellow stripes, the 'doputta' of thin 'Benares muslin' of brilliant green. Above all, she smokes her 'silver hookah'.

Jumeela comes to Brandon as a messenger of the Nawab, brings the letter to him. Seeing that he is away, she starts praising Seeta, compares her to a dove in a case. She also offers an expensive gift of a gold necklace. When it is refused, she becomes furious and threatens Brandon that Nawab will 'beat thee with his shoes' (P. 311). She has supreme confidence in her master, the Nawab. However, in the end she succumbs to the bullets of Brandon when the Mutineers attack him.

The Indian female scene in Seeta is crowded with a number of women, some very scantily sketched and others are probed deep. On the whole, the novel gives the glimpses of all the communities -the British, the Anglo-Indian communities - the British, the Anglo-Indian and the Indian, while the concentration of Taylor seems to be the Indian Hindu family.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All the references quoted in the chapter are to Taylor's *Seeta* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and com. Ltd., 1872).
2. Udyon Misra, *The Raj in Fiction* (Delhi: B.R. publishing Corporation, 1987), pp. 94-95.
3. Bhupal Singh, *A survey of Anglo-Indian fiction*, London, p. 49
4. *Ibid*, p. 49