



‘Nectar in a Sieve’: an apt portrayal of rural India

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Abstract

In the novel ‘Nectar in a Sieve’, hunger breeds thieves, prostitutes, murderers, and subhuman beasts. Not only nature’s whims but also the choices of an unjust society produce the shameful misery of starvation. The novel deals with a number of themes such as beggary, prostitution, lack of family planning, zamindari system, dowry system, superstitions, low status of women and evils of marriage system.

Key words: - poverty, village life, prostitution, hunger, agriculture, social evil etc.

Introduction

After independence, women writing have acquired an importance more than ever before. Women have started questioning the age old oppression and colonization. They have been coming forward to give expression to their feelings especially in the field of fiction. Kamala Markandaya is one of the greatest and popular women-novelists in Indian English fiction.

Kamala Markanday (1924 – May 16, 2004) belongs from Tamil Brahmin family of Mysore, south India. She is also known as Kamala Purnaiya Taylor. The remarkable feature of Kamala Markanday’s novels is the realistic portrayal of her characters. She takes us to the heart of a south Indian village where life has apparently not changed for a thousand years. Now industry and modern technology invade the village in the shape of a tannery and from this impact sinister consequences issue. Markandaya writes that fear, hunger and despair are the constant companions of the peasant.

The title of this novel ‘*Nectar in a Sieve*’ refers to a poem by Samuel Coleridge that talks about hope and losing that hope to misfortune. Nectar is a sweet liquid that comes from flowers. It is also the drink of the Gods in Greek mythology. A sieve is a fine strainer used in cooking. Obviously nectar

would not stay in a sieve, it just slips through, and much like hope slips away in the midst of misfortune.

Kamala Markandaya is an urban person but she knows the Indian village well, knows what the price of rice is for Indian peasants. The novel ‘*Nectar in a Sieve*’ can be called ‘struggle for rice’ because in it she raises the peasant’s problem of India. Such issues were highlighted in the works of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan. During writing novels and short stories they emphasized in presenting the realities of life and they made the Indian villages their theme of writing. Known for writing about culture clash between Indian urban and rural societies, Markandaya’s first published novel, ‘*Nectar in a Sieve*’ (1954) was a bestseller novel. Other novels include *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffin Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), and *Shalimar* (1983).

All her ten novels deal with the themes of East-West encounter, rootlessness, human relationships, poverty, hunger and exploitation. The novel *Nectar in Sieve* deals with poverty, hunger and exploitation as the major theme. When work is done without



any hope it becomes as fruitless as '*Nectar in a Sieve*'. If there is no purpose in life, life becomes futile. Markandaya shows that for a farmer his work is his life. If he is separated from his work he either weakens with poverty and hunger or dies. He has neither hopes nor any goal in life. Markandaya also shows that happiness that stays in life only for a short while is like '*Nectar in a Sieve*' for the farmer. The Indian farmer works without hope and leaves everything in the hands of God and bears all sufferings with patient.

First part of the novel set in an unnamed village in rural India. The villagers live in simple mud huts with thatch roofs and are largely subsistence farmers. The main crop and diet is rice supplemented with vegetables and some fish. They enjoy no modern conveniences - no running water, indoor plumbing or electricity. Most are illiterate or have little education. Marriages are arranged and girls are married young. The arrival of a tannery (a facility for making leather) in the village disrupts the quiet village life. Second part of the novel is set in an unnamed Indian city. Compared to the village it is crowded, loud and dirty. We see mostly the poverty stricken areas of the city where the hungry and homeless struggle to survive.

In Kamala Markandaya's '*Nectar in a Sieve*', the traditional Indian rural community life is brought before our eyes. The novel revolves around a south Indian village where the people live in harmony with Nature. In rural life people have to depend on agriculture or in the other words their life depends upon environment like proper rain, sun, wind which farmers need for their crops. There is land based society in rural areas. In such a civilization, man live up to his needs in a simple and environmental manner. This novel reveals realistic picture of rural life in India with all its sensitiveness to nature, convictions in traditions and attitudes to life.

'*Nectar in a Sieve*' is a saga of the sufferings of the peasants of India. It is a story of a peasant couple riddled with economic factors, social evils and natural calamities. In this novel a peasant woman suffers due to

the hostility of Nature and industrialisation. She is compelled for lead a life of uncertainty, hunger and degradation. Due to the evil forces of Nature, they starve and face miserable poverty. Owing to these odds of life, Rukmani and Nathan lose their land and are caught in the powerful clutches of draught. Evil forces of nature play a significant role in destroying the crops of Rukmani and Nathan as they recall how their paddy crops were ruined by the heavy rains.

"It rained so hard, so long and so incessantly that the thought of a period of no rain provoked a mild wonder. It was as if nothing had ever been but rain ... but Nathan and I watched with heavy hearts while the water rose and rose and the tender green of the paddy field sank under and was lost.... The rains have destroyed much of our work. There will be little eating this year." (*Nectar in a Sieve* 8)

Kamala Markandaya's '*Nectar in a Sieve*' is the story of Rukmani who never lost faith in life or love for the husband and children despite her endless battle against relentless nature, changing times and dire poverty. Rukmani, the youngest of her sisters' Shanta, Padmni, Thangam is the daughter of a village headman who, due to changing circumstances, is forced to marry his daughter to Nathan, a tenant farmer who is poor in everything but certainly not in love. Being the protagonist of the novel, she adopts the dramatic role of a said storyteller of the traditional life of an Indian village in transition.

After the birth of Rukmani's first female child Iravadi, she does not pregnant again till seven years. Her husband wants a son to carry on his name. He waits patiently but she feels his pain and disappointment. At her mother's house, she meets Dr. Kenny and confides her troubles to him. It is by virtue of his treatment that she conceives again and soon becomes the proud mother of six sons Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam and Kuti. She never tells her husband about the treatment that she has



taken from Dr. Kenny. The first six years of married life are spent without much difficulty. However with the birth of every child their poverty starts aggravating. Rukmani says “we no longer had milk in the house except for the youngest child; curds and butter were beyond our means except on rare occasions” (24). It shows mentality of the people who are living in rural areas. The novel shows that son is more important than a daughter and many children in the family cause hunger. Another perception of villagers’ that if a woman is barren then she has to lost her husband, respect from society. She is no more useful for anyone. Nobody will call her in any occasion for child. After five years of Ira’s marriage, her husband abandons her as he considers her a barren woman. She accepts it as her destiny and returns home to live with her parents. She does not raise her voice against this exploitation. She withdraws herself from others. She accepts her future with utter hopelessness. Here too she has to suffer a lot due to hunger and poverty that the family faces. When she realises that her younger brother is dying of hunger, she takes to prostitution. The prostitution cannot save her brother, only it makes her pregnant. She gives birth to an albino. But she becomes happy because the birth of a child proves that she is not a barren. She manages to survive turbulence one after another and survives till the end. In fact it is Ira who gives moral support to her mother in the end. K.R. Srinivasalyengar says, But the heart that is tempered in the flames of love and faith, of sufferings and sacrifice, will not easily accept defeat. Rukmani the narrator heroine is also a mother of sorrow. (Iyengar 438)

Dr. Kennington is portrayed as a kind hearted doctor who has sympathy for every poverty stricken villager. He tries to make them aware of the negligence of the government. He criticizes the dump peasants for not raising voice against their exploitation. A white doctor who ministers to the people in the village. When Kenny helps

Rukmani overcome her infertility, she is forever grateful, and the two become friends. Kenny finds his Indian patients both endearing and frustrating. Their poverty upsets him, and he believes in fighting fortune a Western perspective he voices throughout the novel. Kenny is mysterious, reserved, temperamental, and sometimes sharp-tongued, yet he does what he can from time to time to help Rukmani’s family.

Arjun and Thambi symbolize both positive and negative sides of industrialization. By working in the tannery, they bring money and happiness to their family. But when they raise their voice against the exploitation by the tannery owners, they lose their jobs. Unable to stand the miseries of unemployment and poverty, both go to Ceylon in search of job. By leaving the village they reduce the possible economic burden off their parents, however by deserting their parents they deny possible financial support to their family. Kuti, the youngest member of the family, is a mute sufferer of poverty and hunger. The agonies of hunger he suffers are beyond his tolerance. Hunger works like a slow poison with him. He symbolizes all other poverty stricken children who try to survive the battle against poverty and hunger.

All the members of Nathan’s family contribute to the realistic portrayal of the poor and suffering India. So the novel, rightly described as ‘a novel of rural India’ is an authentic picture of the Indian rural society, in which most people live in perpetual poverty and hunger and often die of starvation. The problems of rural India and tragic predicament of Indian peasants have been depicted with a moving sincerity. Anil Kumar Bhatnagar in his *Kamala Markandaya: A Thematic study* says, she makes her readers realize the true meaning of hunger and starvation. True one cannot judge the impact of hunger and starvation without passing through the terrible ordeal of being hungry. Markandaya lived in South-Indian villages and shared the sufferings of



villagers as independent observer. (Bhatnagar 21)

The exploitation leads to poverty, poverty creates hunger and hunger again reverts to exploitation. Thus it becomes an unending vicious cycle. An old woman, Rukmani who had lost her husband and five of her six sons, who live in her mud thatched hut, narrates her extremely painful life's story which fills us with deep sorrow. Being a daughter of this soil, she knows what it means to be poor. She considers it as the 'sixth great sin'. Poverty breeds hunger. The economic system here is totally based on need and not greed. Only in a village, Nature flourishes in her beauty. Contrasting the current modern civilization where man fulfils his needs in an artificial manner by means of industrialised enterprise, a country dweller is satisfied with the basic necessities of life. The villagers, despite their apparent poverty, are more relaxed than the city dwellers who have enough money and modern facilities. The protagonist Rukmani and her husband in this novel are representation of such a self-satisfied villager. They never hunger after anything. They are totally satisfied with the basic necessities of life provided by Nature. Villagers' simple way of living gives them peace of mind. Rukmani says: "While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful on 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? ... Peace and quiet were ours." (NS: 9)

Farming is the strength of any civilization. Without agriculture, a civilization will be ruined. The village people develop great satisfaction and peace of mind by engaging in agriculture. A villager originates great pleasure in seeing the rich harvest which is the result of his hard labour. Rukmani sums up this in her own words: The sowing of seed disciplines the body and the sprouting of the seed uplifts the spirit, but there is

nothing to equal the rich satisfaction of a gathered harvest, when the grain is set before you in shining mounds and your hands are whitened with the dust of the good rice. (Nectar 107)

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No wonder, hunger turns them into beasts. This description makes us feel the agony of the poor. Rukmani describes the effects of hunger on their bodies. All of them become so weak that on the death of Raja, her son Rukmani does not cry and does not allow her daughter to cry. Ira cannot see her brother dying of hunger and she takes to prostitution. Rukmani feels that her son has escaped from the cruel trap of hunger. She feels that her son should not continue his battle against hunger. She does not want him to struggle again for survival. Thus Markandaya shows her characters willingly accepting the death of their near and dear ones as a permanent escape from the eternal feeling of hunger.

Markandaya brings out the fact that poverty and hunger can lead to degradation. At the root of the acts of immorality there is poverty. It is poverty which drives Kunthi the neighbour to prostitution. It is hunger which provokes Kunthi to blackmail Rukmani. But through some characters like Irawaddy, Markandaya wants to project that not all choose the immoral path to overcome their poverty. Ira's choice of prostitution is not due to her own hunger but to save her brother's life. Even in the direst poverty, Rukmani does not lose her morality. She shows her willingness to share her meals with her neighbour Kunthi. She even adopts a poor orphan child.



Markandaya tries to show that lack of family planning is one of the reasons of poverty in the rural India. When Rukmani gets married, they have enough to eat and store. But with the growing number of children poverty also grows. Even literate Rukmani is shown helpless. She knows that the growing number of children is the root cause of their poverty but she feels proud of being a mother of six sons. Markandaya emphasizes the fact that one of the recurring blights of Indian poverty is their inordinately large families. Most of the rustic Indian women are illiterate. By making Rukmani literate the novelist has made the point that though literacy cannot overcome poverty, it can help the women to face the problems successfully. Literacy helps Rukmani to anticipate the possible problems and plan accordingly. It is her literacy which helps Nathan and Rukmani to survive in the city. Exploitation of women is one of the common themes of Markandaya. She knows that a woman is at the centre of rural economy. She is eternally trapped in the endless cycle of poverty, hunger and exploitation. Her exploitation starts on her wedding day. She feels humiliated when she gets married with a poor, illiterate peasant like Nathan. A girl from a well to do family is compelled to marry such a man who has neither land nor money. Poverty is imposed on her by the social system. Rukmani accepts it and adjusts herself with new surroundings like any other Indian daughter of her age. She continues her married life as any other Indian superstitious, conventional rustic woman. Even in poverty she celebrates the birth of her first child but also expresses her disappointment over the birth of a female child. Unfortunately the history is seen repeated in the marriage of her daughter, when Rukmani has to marry her beautiful daughter Ira to a poor person due to her inability to pay the dowry. At the time this novel was written, child marriage was a common practice in India. Ira was married at fourteen and moved to her in-laws' residence to become part of their extended

family. Rukmani was about twelve when she married Nathan. In some cases the ages of children were less than thirteen years, but these brides did not immediately move in with the groom or his family. Today, child marriage is prohibited by law, but the law is difficult to enforce because child marriage is strongly ensconced in tradition.

Markandaya also succeeds to portray the feudal exploitation that is another important characteristic of rural India. Nathan is compelled to pay the land taxes of the Zamindar, even after the failure of the harvest. After nature's wrath, human assault comes like a bolt from the blue. The landlord orders Nathan to vacate the land within two weeks. The tenant who has been tilling the land for more than thirty years is asked to vacate it within two weeks, without any compensation or any provision for his future. The land is sold to the tannery owner without the consent of the tenant. Nathan mutely succumbs to the exploitation. He has his own fatalist philosophy that is representative of all Indian farmers. He feels that the land never belonged to him neither could he ever buy it. As a son of a landless man, he inherits nothing.

The family's extreme poverty did not permit them to dress elaborately. They wore functional everyday clothing and possessed a few items for special occasions. The females wore a sari, which is a five-yard piece of fabric skillfully wrapped and tied around the body. It is usually worn over a bodice, and a part of it can be thrown over the head. The males wore a dhoti, also a five-yard piece of fabric wrapped around the loins and legs and skillfully tucked in at the back to keep it in place. A shirt and sometimes a turban were also worn by the men. The influence of the British in India at the time of the novel caused some people to dress in shirts and trousers. In fact, the female doctor Nathan and Rukmani met in the city wore trousers. They were surprised by her dress because traditional Indian women considered wearing them immoral.



In remote villages, such as the one in the novel, there were no modern laundry facilities or piped water. Women washed their family's clothes in the river and spread them on the grass to dry. However, like Rukmani, rural women often used detergent. The food the family ate consisted mainly of rice, dhal (Lentils), vegetables, occasionally fish, and on rare occasions a little milk or butter. At times they might have sugar-cane and fruit. In times of plenty, Granny sold guavas and Rukmani sold pumpkins. With the exception of some brief periods of prosperity when the family ate relatively well, they survived on the bare minimum, sometimes going without food. Kenny occasionally helped them. In the city there was a wider variety of food. Pancakes, for example, were available from street vendors. Flour and potatoes may have been available in the village, but the family in the novel, like most peasant families, could rarely afford to buy what they did not grow. Their diet was commensurate with the level of poverty at which they lived.

The villagers usually traveled on foot even for long distances. On Diwali night, for example, the villagers walked to town. No mention was made in the novel of even a bicycle in the village. The people also traveled by bullock cart, a cart pulled by bulls. In the city, however there were cars, bicycles, and horse-drawn carriages. One can assume there were buses, too. There was mention of a railway to the city, but it was not used by Rukmani and Nathan because they did not have enough money for fare. It is likely that motor vehicles did not go to the village because there were no roads. Although no direct reference was made to a postal service, there probably was a fundamental one possibly mail was delivered by drivers of bullock carts. When the couple met their daughter-in-law (Murugan's wife) in the city, Rukmani mentioned that she should have written before the visit. In such a remote village, all the mail was probably delivered to one person who then distributed it to the

addressees. Personal communication was difficult and relatively rare; no attempt was made by any of the family members to communicate with each other even though most of them were literate.

All social ills like prostitution, crimes, demoralization, dishonesty, corruption, alcoholism etc. gradually overcome the villagers and they start behaving in a different way. Prices of essential commodities shoot up, inflation clenches the vulnerable villagers and everywhere there are crowds, filth and noise. The tannery, besides spoiling the village, succeeds in polluting the body and minds of the villagers. It spoils Nature and distorts the village life totally. Rukmani's daughter turns as prostitute because of hunger and her husband leaves her because she is childless. Now she has no option except to become prostitute. In the novel RahmatJahan points out: Though a sign of modernity, this industrialization spoils the natural beauty, up hauls village economy, destabilizes a tenant farmer, sets in social degradation and erosion of traditional and human values. (*A Tale of Hunger*: 202) The owners of the tannery behave in an abnormal way. They seem to be callous hearted people who treat the poor without any compassion for them. Saxena remarks: The owners of the tannery did not behave like normal human beings. They were devoid of any feelings of compassion and kindness to the poor. The tannery had made them savages. (TBVC: 180, 181)

Despite their advancement and economic development, modern, unhealthy, crime ridden cities are unable to even provide fresh air and food, what to speak of peace of mind. Modernization has totally destroyed the traditional culture and values and modern man has descended to a level of a massive hard-working machine. Lust, greed, anger, sense gratification, avarice etc. have become the constant companions of modern men and women. Though modern man does not believe in hell, he is busy creating it on earth by leading a machine life. The



motto of ancient Indian Rustic life is to lead a simple life without any anxiety. It teaches people how to utilize the rare human form of life for a higher purpose of living in harmony with Nature.

It shows the way to the people to lead a life of tranquility without striving hard for the basic necessities of life. The ancient Indian culture is not a primitive one; it is pragmatic and universal. By following the traditional Indian life style, modern man can indubitably find the oasis of peace in the desert of material miseries.

Conclusion

The very existence of the rural life is endangered by the advent of tannery as the industry brings prosperity as well as its ill effects. Through the character of Nathan, Markandaya shows the picture of Indian peasant at the advent of Industrialization. Industrialization makes peasants landless. Peasants know no other skills but for tilling the land. Industrialization makes them rush to the towns and cities. But due to their illiteracy and lack of any other skill they either turn beggars or die. When Nathan becomes landless he goes to the town. He loves his land more than anything else. Knowing no other skills, he becomes helpless when he is compelled to live in the town.

He has to become a beggar in order to survive in the town. His hard work on the quarry aggravates his illness and brings him closer to death. He dies on the very day they plan to return. His fight against poverty and hunger comes to an end only with his unfortunate death.

Markandeya thus succeeds in proving through this novel that it is the socio-economic condition that is responsible for various kinds of social evils. Poverty, hunger and exploitation can give birth to the social evils like prostitution, disintegration of family, and a mad rush towards city. So long as poverty exists various social evils and malpractices will continue to thrive. The hope for betterment lies only in the surviving morality in a few human beings.

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