



Kamala Markandaya's *A Nectar in a Sieve*: A Study in Indian Sensibilities

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Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004), has occupied a prominent place among Indian English writers. All her ten novels *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffey Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), *Shalimar* (1982) and *Bombay Tiger* (2007) deal with the themes of East-West encounter, rootlessness, human relationships, poverty, hunger and exploitation. The present paper aims at studying *Nectar in a Sieve* which deals with poverty, hunger and exploitation as its major themes. Though her other novels too refer to these themes, the references are merely abrupt and not major.

Kamala Markandaya derives the title *Nectar in a Sieve* from Coleridge, whose lines form an epigraph to the novel:

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And hope without an object cannot live.

(1)

Kamala Markandaya has used the couplet by Coleridge because these lines adequately express the theme of the novel. When work is done without any hope it becomes as futile as nectar in a sieve. If there is no object or goal in life, life becomes futile. Markandaya shows that for a peasant his work is his life. If he is separated from his work he either withers 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 peasant.

M.K. Bhatnagar in his essay, "Kamala Markandaya: The Insider-outsider" rightly observes,

Markandaya's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* illustrates all her basic preoccupations: the protagonist- narrator Rukmani caught in a hard peasant life; the vagaries of nature, the depredations of modern civilization (in shape of tannery), the forced migration to city and so on, revealing how work without hope draws nectar in a sieve. (*Bhatnagar 3*)

The Indian peasant works without hope and leaves everything in the hands of God and bears all sufferings with a sense of fatalism.

Kamala Markandaya has subtitled the novel as *A Novel of Rural India* to disclose the very characteristics of rural India through the life of countless Indian villagers living in dire poverty, hunger and exploitation. She has not named the fictional locale to make a village microcosm of rural India. Kai Nicholson in *Social Problems in the Indo-Anglian and Anglo-Indian Novel* says,

With her impeccable representational realism and innovative description of Indian arcadia, Markandaya achieves a perfect poise between the rural reality and the disciplined urbanity of art. (120)

The novelist has made Rukmani, the protagonist; narrate the tale, in order to show the subtle intensities of the emotional fabric. She has made a woman the central character because she knows that woman is at the centre of the socio-economic structure of the Indian peasant families. Rukmani is a symbol of an Indian rustic woman. Her views are reflections of typical socio-cultural ethos which is designed to make an Indian woman tolerant, submissive, innocuous and easily satisfied with her lot.

The story takes place in one of the small south Indian villages of India. It is difficult to pinpoint the time and the place in which the action of the novel takes place. The historical references reveal that it occurs at the backdrop of India's attainment of independence. However no matter what the setting and time are, the novelist's portrayal of the Indian social system has a timeless appeal. Chandrasekharn in *Bhabani Bhattacharya*. says,

She draws her raw material from reality without sacrificing what Charles Dickens regarded as 'the poetry of fact' (Chandrasekharn 36-37)

Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of a once prosperous village headman is married to a tenant farmer, Nathan, who is poor in all respects. By the time of her marriage the hay days of her father come to an end resulting in her marriage with a poor peasant. Rukmani becomes the victim of the dowry system as her father is unable to pay her dowry. The fourteen year old Rukmani comes to her new home, the sight of which sends a chill down her spine. "This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch was my home." (14) She cannot adjust herself to such a poor insecure abode. But when she comes to know that the hut has been built by her husband with his own hands, her fear and humiliation turns into pride. The Indian dowry system throws her in poverty and Indian value system makes her to accept it as her fate. 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). Till the birth of the sixth child their economic condition worsens to such an extent that they have to remain half fed though not starving till they grow vegetables in their own field. The rise in prices of the essential commodities compels them to sell the cattle. When Irawaddy, her only daughter turns fourteen she marries her to a farmless labourer by spending all her savings on her marriage. Unfortunately the flood destroys their crops in the same year and they have no other way but to survive on roots, leaves and plantain till the next harvest. To make the matters worse, four years after her marriage Ira returns to her parents as her husband abandons her for not giving him an heir.

Arjun and Thumbi, her two sons start working in a tannery and improve their economic condition. But soon they lose their jobs and go to Ceylon in search of daily bread. The rains fail, the year they leave destroying their hopes. As a tenant Nathan is compelled to pay the revenue in order to save their tilling land for which they sell their household material and bullocks. Rukmani's third son Raja dies of brutal beating by the tannery watchmen. The condition of the youngest child Kuti becomes more and more critical. Ira becomes a prostitute to save her brother; her sacrifice however fails to save Kuti. Old Granny, a well-wisher of Rukmani's family, also dies of hunger in the street.

Kennington, a doctor, another well-wisher of Rukmani gives a job to her fourth son in his mission of building a hospital in the village. One day the landlord gives a notice to Nathan to vacate the land within a week to which he does not protest. The landless Nathan and Rukmani find no other alternative but to go to their son Murugan in the town for their survival. Selvam and Ira however decide to stay back.

As Rukmani and Nathan fail to find out the address of their son in the town, they take shelter in a temple. When they come to know that their son does not live in that town anymore they return to the temple and stay there like beggars. They plan to earn enough money to travel back home within forty to sixty days. But Nathan's health continues to deteriorate day by day and he dies on the very day, on which they collect enough money to return. Nathan loses the battle against hunger but Rukmani does not surrender. She returns to the village with her adopted son. Selvam and Ira welcome them. Rukmani regains her tranquility.

The novel appears circular in structure as the story ends where it begins. Bhagwant Goyal in his book *Culture and Commitment* rightly says,

It indicates the endless cycle of despair and deprivation in which India's rural and urban poor are eternally trapped. (Goyal 98)

The novel deals with the peasants, their activities, hopes and expectations and joys and sorrows. It is a portrayal of goodness living in poverty, hunger and despair. It is a story of landless peasants who are exploited by their landlords and destroyed by the cruelty of nature. Almost all the characters in the novel lead the miserable life and most of them fail to survive. Rukmani is a tragic character but she has no personal hand in any of the misfortunes which befall her and her family. Throughout the novel she struggles against the heavy odds imposed on her by the society and nature. Rukmani is silent, submissive, easily satisfied with her lot, ready to accept everything that comes her way with a calm resignation. Her unflinching faith in God, her strong will power and morality give her strength to face vicissitudes of life. Even during the days of adversity her spirit does not droop. She does not lose her patience even in the most adverse situations. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar 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)

Her most prominent feature is her serenity and the sense of balance even in crisis. Poverty and hunger cannot dehumanize her. Calamities of the flood call for major attack of starvation, but Rukmani does not show any emotional outburst. She considers misfortunes and sorrows as essential ingredients of life and accepts poverty and hunger as constant companions thereof. She considers that there is grandeur in endurance and she looks at hunger in a philosophical manner. She says, "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” (114).

Shiv K. Kumar in his essay “Tradition and Change in the novels of Kamala Markandaya” rightly observes,

Markandaya seems to suggest by the resilient humanism of an individual like Rukmani, whose unbounded faith looks definitely beyond all physical suffering and partakes of that peace that surpasseth all understanding. (206)

She remains a symbol of Indian rustic poor peasant, who has been trained to believe in the virtue of simplicity, of living with the minimum of needs and desires throughout her life. Balaram Gupta, one of the critics, in his book *Indian English Literature* observes,

Rukmani the mother figure, symbolizes the mother earth, is the virgin soil, the source, the origin, the well-spring, the life giver, the supporter, the sustainer, the nourisher and even more, the last resort, the consoler, the healer. It is the positive sustaining force of life... Her integrity is never on the brink of collapse. (92)

Nathan, the husband of Rukmani represents an Indian peasant. He is a stereotype character. He is a passive sufferer. There is ‘an emphasis on rural ethos and rural value system, Nathan fits in this framework, a poor peasant in every sense. On the very day of the marriage he tries to soothe her by showing a dream of bright future.

But while doing so he cannot hide his helplessness. It can be easily seen on his face. Rukmani says, “There was something in his voice, a pleading, a look on his face such as a dog has when you are about to kick it” (4).

Throughout the novel he remains the shadow of his wife. He shows great concern for her. He works for his family but cannot get enough to eat. His hard work and starvation make him ill. He stands only on his wife’s emotional and physical support. Nathan accepts his poverty, hunger and exploitation as his destiny. He does not raise his voice against the exploitation by his landlord, when his agent comes to collect the tax. Nathan’s comment on the exploitation of the peasant by the landlord is noteworthy: “That is why he and his kind are employed,” Nathan said bitterly. “To protect their overlords from such unpleasant task, now the landlord can wring from us his moneys and care not for the misery he evokes, for indeed it would be difficult for any man to see another starve and his wife and children as well; or to enjoy the profits born of such travail.” (73)

Irawaddy, Rukmani’s first child, is another silent sufferer like her parents. Born as an unwanted child, she remains unwanted throughout her life. The parents do not pay any attention to her before her marriage. The gravity of her state can be easily understood by Rukmani’s words. She says, “Poor child, she was bewildered by the many injunctions we laid upon her and the curtailing of her freedom tried her sorely, though not a word of complaint came from her” (30).

At the age of fourteen, she gets married. After five years of 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. Rukmani says,

“With a dowry it was perhaps possible she might marry again, without it no man would look at her, no longer a virgin and reputedly barren.”(62) 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.

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. Though he is an English character he is not portrayed as an exploiter. K. R. Chandrashekhara in his essay “East and West in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya” points out that the novelist has projected,

...a good missionary and philanthropic spin doing his best for a backward country without ostentation or vanity. He is also neutral observer of life in India. (7)

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. But a number of critics allege Markandaya that she has over simplified the rural Indian scene as an absent narrator. M. K. Naik in *A History of Indian English Literature* says that “Rukmani’s village exists only in the expatriate’s imagination of her creator” (Naik 263). She is also accused of making conscious effort to make her work acceptable to the Western eye. However, her picture of village is wellgrounded in reality. She may be careless about minor details but she focuses her attention on so many social evils of Indian society.

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. Parvati Misra in her *Class Consciousness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya* observes:

Nectar in a Sieve is a vivid record of the hungry rural peasantry whose life is afflicted by the existing social institutions and rituals such as child marriage, widowhood, negligence of female child, slavery, landlessness, casteism and illiteracy.”(Misra 2)

All these themes move around the central themes of poverty hunger and exploitation. 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. 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)

She shows her minute observation by describing the effects of hunger on the human body and the human mind. Rukmani says,

For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, walking and sleeping and in your dreams and your belly cries out insistently and there is a gnawing and a pain as of your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you buy a moment's respite even while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this, you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you. Then that too is gone, all pain all desire only a great emptiness is left, like the sky, like a well in draught and it is now that the strength drains from your limbs and you try to rise and find you cannot, or to swallow water and your throat is powerless and both the swallow and the effort of retaining the liquid, tax you to the uttermost. (87-88)

Markandaya gives a detailed description of their efforts to make their two ends meet till the next harvest. They struggle for survival facing the hardships of living like being fed with the food that even animals cannot eat. 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. She says "There flesh melted away and their skin sag and sink between their jutting bones, saw their eyes retreat into their skulls, saw their ribs curve out from under the skin" (88). The youngest Kutti could not digest the things brought by the elders to eat. Being a weak child he suffers. Rukmani says:

At first he asked for rice-water and cried because there was none. But later he gave up asking and merely cried. Even in his sleep he whimpered, twisting and turning endlessly, permitting no one to rest. (88)

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. She says, "What are you crying for?... you have little enough strength, without dissolving it in tears"(89).Kutti turns so weak that he stops wailing. Ira cannot see her brother dying of hunger and she takes to prostitution. Nathan shows his parental anger, "I will not have you parading at night" Ira's reply "Tonight and tomorrow and every night. So long as there is need, I will not hunger anymore"(99) makes Nathan

speechless. Ira's prostitution increases the life of Kuti by a few more days but it cannot save him. Kuti dies of hunger. Rukmani, the mother feels relieved as she says, "I grieved, it was not for my son: for in my heart and could not have wished it otherwise. The strife had lasted too long and had been too painful for me to call him back to continue it" (102).

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.

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. Nathan symbolizes the plight of the Indian peasants when Rukmani says:

To those who live by the land there must always come time of hardship of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty? This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know: that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve. We live by our labours from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children and if bad times are prolonged we know we must see the weak surrender their lives and this fact, too, is within our experience. In our life there is no margin for misfortune.

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Her son, the representative of the younger generation expresses his anger over the exploitation but keeps mum when Nathan expresses his helplessness for not having any law against it. He says, “We may grieve, but there is no redress.”(136)

Rukmani blames the tannery for their exploitation. The tannery becomes the symbol of economic or industrial exploitation. Shiv K. Kumar in his essay “Tradition and Change in novels of Kamala Markandaya” compares it with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The tannery thus lays the foundation of industrialization based on the principles of exploitation of labour and absenteeism. 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.

Markandaya 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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