

## RURAL INDIA AS DEPICTED IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA’S NOVEL, ‘NECTAR IN A SEIVE’

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### Abstract:

Indian English literature has gained unique position for combining its nativity with external influences in its themes as well as techniques. Kamala Markandaya’s novels are the finest examples of such combination. Markandaya is one of the outstanding novelists among the Indian English writers. Her novels are in fact noted for Indian ethos. In her novels she has portrayed India in throes of social change. She succeeds in arresting the Indian minds in fictional forms. The creation of Indian ethos in Indian English fiction is one of the new experiences and the process by which it has been done in her novels is one of the progressive self discoveries for the writer. Indian ethos and its appropriate expression in art distinguish her from other novelists. In fact, some of her best works successfully achieve a universal vision through the representation of a real slice of Indian life.

**Key Words:** Kamala Markandaya, Indian ethos, Hunger, Poverty, Industrialization

### Introduction

Markandaya has occupied a prominent place among the Indian English writers as one of the leading women writers in English. All of her eleven novels deal with the themes of East-West encounter, human relationships, poverty, hunger and exploitation. She started her carrier as a novelist, when India was just at the threshold of newly-won freedom. Everywhere there were poverty, hunger and starvation. Industrialization and urbanization shook the very basis of rural life. Many Indian writers Viz.. R.K.Narayanan, Mulkraj Anand, Raja Rao and Bhabini Battacharya have also dealt with the themes of hunger and degradation, East-West encounter and rootlessness but Markandaya has a unique position in this regard and none better than her.

Kamala Markandaya's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* was published in 1954. It brought her recognition as a novelist and was immediately hailed as superb and outstanding both by the press and critics. Due to circumstances she is compelled to live in a small Indian village. Many critics believe that this brief stay led to the conception of *Nectar in a Sieve*. And this firsthand experience materialized an authentic portrayal of

rural existence and rural characters. She has settled in England after her marriage. Being an expatriate writer, she has acquired knowledge of British Policy of colonialism and imperialism but still she values Indian traditions and culture more than those of the west. She has also highlighted the sufferings of common Indians. In this context S.K.Krishnasamy observes:

“ She is however, is not a theorist to dwell upon caste and class problems only , but her concerns, over being predominantly socio-economic, her novels offer us a savage tale of brutality, ignorance, mental and physical bludgeoning that the ordinary Indian, Man and Woman is subject to”(Krishnasamy,1984,P.162).

In *Nectar in a sieve*, she graphically portrays India's grinding poverty. She gives a realistic picture of Indian rural Life in all its phases with minute descriptions of flood, drought, famine, starvation, superstitions, cycles of abundance and scarcity, struggle for survival, etc.

The novel presents the life of simple rural people of South Indian village. Rukmani the protagonist of the novel, who is also the narrator, is married to a poor tenant farmer Nathan in a South Indian village. They have a daughter named Ira and six sons named Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvam, Raja and kuti. Meanwhile the peace of village is disturbed by the arrival of urban builder, who wants to set up a tannery in the village. The evils of industrialization like inflation, ugliness grows up. Ira who is married to a farmer is deserted by her husband as she is barren. The family on the verge of starvation has no option but to set assent to Arjun and Thambi joining the tannery. But due to their voice of protest they are forced to leave the work and they go to Ceylon. Murugan also goes to the city to seek employment as the family starves. Raja dies and Kuti falls ill. The poor girl, Ira, seeing her family starving during the famine, turns into a woman of the street and gives birth to an illegitimate child. Starvation takes away old granny and kuti. Rukmani and Nathan leave the village in search of Murugan, who himself has deserted his wife. With the help of puli, a young orphan, they live on charity and petty jobs. Nathan dies Rukmani returns to her village with Puli.

The village has been portrayed in two faces. One, the peaceful village before Industrialization and Urbanization. The other after starting the tannery. Before the entry of technology, the atmosphere is not clouded and poisoned by the din and smoke so frequent in the cities. It is indeed as sweet as 'nectar'. The life lived in its midst is pure, calm and quiet the rural dwellers are satisfied and contented. They have inner peace and tranquility, even though they may lack the material comforts which are possible in more sophisticated societies. They may be poor, but they have the nectar of spiritual peace and tranquility. Living far away from the madding crowd they drink deep the sweet nectar, enjoy the sweet bliss, which is possible only in such idyllic surroundings. However, the happiness and peace which they enjoy is short lived. It is like nectar in a sieve.

The novelist presents natural aspects of rural India in her description of ripening mangoes, and setting of flocks of parrots in the trees. Sugarcane grows “as tall as a man on either side of the road. When the wind blew, the canes clashed like the rattling of sabers in a cinema saga.” The paddy bird stalks among paddy fields. The clustering coconut grows in the shade of the palms are well portrayed. Silk tassels of green and umber, and clustering coconut groves in the shade of palms” are well portrayed. The Bullock cart journeys, moving in the mist of sides and sounds from nature are enjoyable to the passengers; they are all vividly picturized by the novelist.

Markandaya did not depict the life of Zamindars and agriculturists but the life of landless farmers, the neglected people of the society. The landless farmers in particular are held in the clutches of constant fear, as the land being snatched away, the failure or excess of rains, droughts etc. Markandaya gives a very realistic and touching description of such fear, “The calamities of the land belong to its alone, born of wind and rain and weather; immensities not to be tempered by man or his creations. To those who live by the land and there must always come time hardship of fear and hunger” (N.S.181). A farmer has no hopes for the future, but he keeps hope, amidst fear of getting disappointment. Rukmani sums up the life of a peasant when she says: ‘ Hope and fear. Twin forces that hugged us first in one direction and then in another and with one was stronger no one could say.... Fear constant companion of the peasant ...Fear, fear of the dark future, fear of the blackness of death” (N.S.110). In Nectar in a sieve says A.V.Krishna Rao,

“Markandaya dramatizes the tragedy of the traditional village and a peasant family assaulted by industrialization: Rukmani and Nathan, the peasant couple in a south Indian village are the victims of the two evils: Zamindari system and the Industrial economy,” (Rao,1967, P.56).

The rural people are illiterate but Rukmani, as an exception, knows how to read and write. She teaches her children at home because she cannot afford to send them to school. In rural society, sons are considered as asserts and the daughters are considered as burden for the family. So, women without child and women with daughter and not a son are not accepted in the rural village. The husband in the rural areas has the social sanction to discard his barren wife. So, Ira was discarded by her husband for her barrenness.

While social-religious forces create problems of acceptability and respectability for the childless woman, absence of money for survival drives her to prostitution, as happens in the case of Ira. Rukmani patiently submits to her fate. She tolerantly accepts the ups and downs of life. In fact, she represents the women folk of rural India.”Rukmani’s calm acceptance of the reality of the situation is more in agreement with the traditions of an Indian woman,” (Rao, 1967, P.57.).

In the novel, most of the characters are typically rural, Rukmani, Nathan, Janaki, Kali, Kunthi, Ira, Old Granny. Their way of life, attitudes, manners and speech belong to the countryside. Hari Mohan Prasad (85) calls Nathan and his wife “Symbols of teeming millions, archetype figures like Adam and Eve” Superstitions and beliefs are just fruits of illiteracy. The villagers have many superstitious beliefs. Markandaya disapproves of these superstitious beliefs. It is believed that cobra is sacred and hence they should not be killed. When the rain falls Rukmani threw herself on the earth, prayed offered a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to goddess, but no rains came. The rural people take pride in having more children and consider it a divine blessing and also a fortune in having more hands to work on the farm.

Similarly, Markandaya had depicted other customs of peasants. As soon as the rains are over, and the cracks are healing and the land is moist and ready, the peasants take their “seed to their goddess and place it at her feet to receive her blessings and then they bear it away and make their sowing.” A similar custom is followed at the time of harvesting, “all the peasants go to offer prayers, bearing camphor and Kumkum, paddy and oil.” A garland of mango leaves has been hung across the doorway of the huts, since it is a symbol of happiness and good fortune. For lighting, the village has wick lamps or oil filled coconut shells are used as lamps. As such they have customs in their way of life. The novelist has observed the rural settings and manners very keenly and it shows her hold over rural settings.

Caste system is a predominant force in the Indian society. This novel is an exception that only there are occasional reference to the Muslims and cobblers and there is no mention of any other caste. But the novelist has given a detail description of class system. In rural India Zamindari system had created a great havoc in the lives of innocent peasant. When the crops fail Nathan has to sell his mud pots, brace vessels, bullock carts and a handful of dried chilies to pay his dues. Finally, he was driven away from his land and home.

Industrialization has brought demoralization in the village. The advent of tannery creates sordidness, loss of traditional values and social degradation. The quiet life of village and village economics, both are affected. Social values and ethics of life lost their roots. Everybody’s interest is to earn money. Family, the basic institution of a society is affected by the industrialization. As A.V.Krishna Rao remarks: “Industrialization with its main emphasis on urban development and mechanization of the means of production and distribution result in the social dislocation of the family,” (Rao, 1967, P.64.).

The tragic picture of hunger is vividly portrayed when Rukmani divides food into 24 small parts to feed their entire family. Nathan and Rukmani silently suffer what life inflicts upon them. They never complain, but accept silently. She becomes a shockproof when she receives blow after blow, the ruin of crops, the death of their sons and their

eviction from their home. As N.K. Jain feels that the novel presents “an authentic picture of village life in transition, particularly of rural poverty and hunger,” (155).

Markandaya has not given the description of the village at the height of its glory but at its transitional period, affected particularly by the setting of tannery. None the less slow change was coming to the villages where Srinivasa Iyengar feels “ Life has not apparently changed for a thousand year, but now with the invasion of industry and more technology sinister consequences issue,”(43). For some the tannery turns to be a boon. But soon the darker side starts, money buy less and less. The quietness of the village is replaced by all the noise and crowds. No one cares for others but schemes only for his money.

### Conclusion

Thus Markandaya has given a very descriptive and realistic picture of rural India; Markandaya presents South Indian life both in its traditional, conservative and rural aspects with convincing sincerity and fascinating power. It is perhaps due to her great acquaintance with the rural scences of South India. Critics have opined that she has fictionalized the sociology of India, but her approach is absolutely realistic. Since she avoids naming the location of her novel. She portrays how the winds of change blow across the rural India with new social forces. As S.Z.H.Abidi remarks: “the social realism employed by Markandaya in this novel is very close to the observed condition of life”. The problems described in the novel have a typical rural tinge. Whether it is on economic, social, religious or human level, the novel belongs to rural India in all the manifestations.

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