



THE ILL EFFECTS OF SOCIAL EVILS ON THE WOMEN IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NOVEL *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

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ABSTRACT

Nectar in a Sieve is Kamala Markandaya's first novel published in 1954. It is her most famous novel. It is a powerful novel of rural India. It deals with the story of Rukmani, a woman protagonist against the background of suffering and agony of rural India. India, basically a land of peasants, got independence in 1947, and the real picture of freshly independent rural India along with all its social evils and their ill effects on the women are clearly depicted in this novel. Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is nothing but an account of the suffering of the rural people and how the cruelty of social evils like the poverty, hunger, starvation, dowry system, want for a male child, crime, prostitution, unemployment and many more are interrelated with one another and finally resulting in the suffering of the people, Specially the women of the society. Though the novel is written more than a half century ago, the social evils of that time are not outdated even in this so called "Modern India". Through this research paper entitled "The Ill Effects Of Social Evils On The Women Of Kamala Markandaya's Novel *Nectar in a Sieve*", tried to throw light on the consequences as well as the plight of the women caused by the deeply rooted social evils in India.

Key words: Prostitution, Untouchability, Starvation, Tannery, Funeral, Infertility, Quarry.

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INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya is one of the finest and outstanding woman novelists of post independence India, internationally known as the writer of *Nectar in a Sieve*. She belongs to both the East and the West. India is the country of her birth and upbringing and England that of her adoption. She lived for some time in a South Indian village and gained the first-hand knowledge of Indian rural life. She was a journalist in India before migrating to London. She married an Englishman and finally settled in England. Thus, she has close acquaintance both with the East and the West.

She was awarded the National Association of Independent Schools Award (U.S.A) in 1967, and the Asian Prize in 1974. Joseph Hitrec has called her "One of the Crispestadn most Warmly personal" of Indian Writers. Uma Parameswaran, who has written about Kamala Markandaya's work wrote:

Markandaya's strength as a novelist comes from her sensitive creation of individual characters and situations which are simultaneously representative of a large collection; her prose style is mellifluous and controlled.

Margaret Parton finds in her work, “ a brilliance and depth outstanding even among India’s current crop of highly talented novelist.”

Nectar in a Sieve is Kamala Markandaya’s first published novel. It was first published in 1954, by Messers Putnam & Co. London. It is her most famous novel. It is a powerful novel of rural India. Its greatness becomes apparent from the fact that it has been frequently compared with Pearl S. Buck’s *Good Earth*, a great “world –book”. The title “Nectar in a sieve” is taken from Coleridge’s famous lines which the novelist has used as the title for her novel of rural India.

“Work without hope draws Nectar in a Sieve,

And hope without an object cannot live”

Nectar means The Drink of the Gods (Amrit). It is sweet and the source of peace and contentment . But it leaks if it is put in a sieve (a small circular utensil of steel with holes in the bottom to separate grain from chaff). *Nectar* in the novel symbolizes the idyllic , poetic aspects of life and *Sieve* is the symbol of social evils. If a man were to collect nectar in a sieve ,it would soon flow out drop by drop. It would be vain, futile , and never ending struggle. Similarly, the peace and happiness of life cannot be received in the society with social evils.

Man by nature is a social animal. He needs society to live in and to face all types of challenges regarding his survival , materialistic development and for raising the standards of his living. Society plays a vital role in the development of human beings both physical , mental and even for materialistic growth.

Etymologically the term “society” has come from the Latin word ‘Societas’, which in turn is derived from the noun ‘socius’(friend, ally ,companion, comrade ,adjectival form socialis) which is to describe a bond or interaction among people that are friendly ,cooperative or atleast civil. Society ,comprises certain rules to run the system smoothly. But at the same time the evils (the bad existing customs or behavior of people) harm a particular group of society. Social evils like poverty, hunger, unemployment, corruption, caste system etc. have their own ill effects on both the gender – male and female. But the other social evils like

dowry system, child marriage, problems regarding infertility, female feticide, female infanticide, constant demand for dowry from the bride’s parents, dowry deaths, domestic violence, sexual harassment, rapes, selling of girl children, prostitution etc. are related to only women of the society.

The novels written in the post independence period were predominantly preoccupied with the social-political themes to the exclusion of other ones. The social and political awareness gave a bright hope to these writers. School of social realism was established. Mulk Raj Anand as its main exponent wrote his novels about the underdogs of society with a concern for the society milieu. The novel *Coolie* can be taken for its instance. R.K. Narayan has successfully produced ‘comedies of sadness’ through his works. Gandhian myth is shown in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas has produced progressive novels of social reform, protest and Marxist Ideology. The socio-economic themes along with the theme of struggle for independence loomed large in the novels of Post –Independence Indo Anglian Novel. In this period the novelists were free from the moral obligation of voicing the political aspirations of Indians in throwing of the foreign yoke and the national freedom had made their revolutionary activities to a standstill. Their attention was diverted to the internal problems of India. The novelists came to interpret the real problems of the teeming millions-their financial improvisation, their terrible problem of poverty, hunger, starvation and other social issues of independent India. Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *Untouchable*, which is mainly about the caste-system and social malaise of untouchability. Dr. Meenakshi Mukherji says:

Many of the Indo-Anglian novels written in the fifties seem to participate in the all-India trend. The serious Indo-Anglian novelist no longer seems interested in simply documenting or hopefully improving the country, but in trying to depict the individual’s groping towards self-realization.

The women novelists have their own contribution to the development of the Indo-Anglian novel by

inclusion of new themes and thereby given to it a new awareness of female society. They have penned their sweets and spoils, pleasures and pains, banes and blessings. In this regard Shashi Iyer says:

The women novelists have made a definite contribution in their intuitive and clear perception of a woman's role in the present society. Jhabwala gives a penetrating analysis of domestic friction, Attia Hussain writes powerfully about the intense life of a Muslim girl in purdah and its collision with the modern world; and Kamala Markandaya in her "A Silence of Desire" presents a subtle study of the husband wife relationship. Her novel "Two Virgins" (1973) gives a sensitive portrayal of girl's growing awareness of the adult world, and the irrevocable loss of childhood.

Nectar in a Sieve is Kamala Markandaya's first and the most famous novel. It is a powerful novel of rural India. It deals with the story of Rukmani and Nathan against the background of suffering and agony of rural India.

Rukmani is the narrator of the novel. The technique of stream of consciousness is employed in the novel. Rukmani is married to Nathan, a farmer. Their marriage is successful. They are quite happy. First Rukmani gives birth to a girl, Ira. Nathan wants a male issue. Their life, however, goes on with the treatment of Kenny, an English doctor, who works in the rural area, Rukmani gives birth to six male children –Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvan, Raja and Kuti. The rhythm of their of their life is broken by the arrival of the town men who build a tannery on the maidan near the village. Rukmani is unhappy with the change that the tannery has brought. Ira is married at the age of fourteen to a farmer. She is unable to become a mother and is returned by her husband to her parents. Crop is not good and fails due to heavy rains. Rukmani's family verges on starvation. Arjun and Thambi get employment in the tannery. But after some time, they are dismissed from their duty and go to Ceylon. Murugan also leaves for the city. Rukmani and Nathan once again are in the grip of natural calamity-a terrible drought. Raja dies in an accident and Kuti falls ill. In order to feed her younger brother Kuti, Ira involves herself in

prostitution. She gives birth to an illegal child with albinism and names him Sacrabani. All the members of the family love Sacrabani. In the meantime, old granny dies of starvation. Kuti's condition doesn't improve and soon dies. Nathan is evicted from his land by the Zamindar and then Rukmani and Nathan decide to go to the city to live with their son Murugan. Ira, Selvan and the boy Sacrabani stay back. Rukmani and Nathan reach the city but Murugan is to be found nowhere. The city also rejects them, they are not smart enough to fit into its hectic atmosphere. They lose their belongings in the temple, take up petty jobs and are forced to live on charity. Nathan dies on the way back to the temple from the quarry. Rukmani has no option but to return to the village. She returns to the village with Puli, who has helped and guided them in the city. Rukmani loves him as he own child. Ira and Selvan welcome them. Rukmani's wounds are healed with the passing of time.

The very first thing of the novel begins with Rukmani's wedding. Being the fourth daughter to her parents, who could not offered a huge dowry had to marry a tenant farmer. The social evil of dowry system is found in both the cases of Rukmani and her daughter Ira. Rukmani got married at the age of twelve and Ira got married at the age of fourteen. This portraits the social evil of child marriage. The freedom of choice is completely absent for women in choosing their life partners.

India, even today is a 'son worshipping land' where the birth of a daughter is a disappointment. Rukmani, the protagonist's agony on her daughter's birth-" *I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?*"

The ill effects of this foolish desire of having a boy made Nathan to pay scant attention to his daughter Ira. Because " *he wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a puling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind;*" some times this wish of having sons becomes the sole reason of large families. And leads the people believe in superstitions-Rukmani's mother places in her hand a small stone lingam, 'symbol of fertility' and asks her to wear it-another social evil of blaming only wives

for infertility is shown, which is exist even in this 'world of science'.

The contempt with which a childless woman is regarded in certain sections of Indian Society is indicated in Nectar in a Sieve. Rukmani and Nathan's daughter, Ira, is rejected by her husband because she is childless even five years after marriage, and by the time she is cured of her barrenness by medical treatment and taken to her husband's , he has taken another wife. The significant thing is that nobody thinks of protesting. Even the rejected girl's mother merely tells her daughter: You must not blame him. He has taken another woman. Nathan also says, "I do not blame himHe is justified, for a man needs children." And even Ira calls herself "a failure" for she cannot even bear a child. It is not only the poverty that drag Ira into prostitution but also the rejection of her husband on the grounds of her barrenness. The effects of poverty on the character of the Indian engage the sympathetic attention of Markandaya. The sad recourse of Ira to prostitution in a desperate attempt to save her dying child, brother, Kuti is a revelation of how immorality is born out of sheer poverty. Referring to the decent funeral provided for the old woman, Granny, after her death from starvation, the novelist makes this comment:

Once a human being is died there are people enough to provide the last decencies; perhaps it is so because only then can there be no request of further or recurring assistance being sought. Death after all is final.

Money lending on high interest is n another popular social evil both in rural and urban areas and an innocent needy people are victimized by rural Shylocks like Biswas. As a result Rukmani had to sell even the red saree, that had served for both her wedding and her daughter's. There is also a popular distaste for the money-lending class and this is seen in the stiff attitude of Rukmani towards Biswas.

Conclusion

In my study of the novel Nectar in a Sieve, on the ground of the social evils and their ill effects especially on women, generalizes the plight of Indian women through ages. Indians are extremely conservative and orthodox. The process of social

change is a slow one, particularly in rural India. The Age Old customs are meticulously observed and any deviation from them is frowned upon and not accepted at ones. Though the novelist Kamala Markandaya has not offered any ready -made solution to the many problems and social evils facing the country but has recognized the evils and deficiencies in Indian life and society and indirectly warns her country against their ill consequences. Though India is free from foreign rule, it is still in the clutches of social evils. And I strongly believe that a country can never develop as long as the people of it to be caught like flies in the spider's web of social evils. And a society can't be imagined without women. And the women suffer the whole society gets its reflection. The novel *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays many social evils which are still exit in this modern age. Unlike the women of novel, the modern women of India should not accept these social evils as their fate, but should stand against them and fight for their rights.

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