



## KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S "NECTAR IN A SIEVE": A NOVEL OF RURAL INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004), a well-known Indian Woman novelist in English, is a novelist of peasantry class. She won international fame and recognition with the publication of her maiden novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. Indian writing in English has been quite challenging right from the beginning. It refers to the body of work by writers of Indian origin who write in English language and whose mother tongue is usually one of the numerous languages of India. It has grown from a sapling to a strong rooted tree in full bloom in each of its genres – poetry, prose, fiction, novel and drama with a diversity of themes, forms and styles. Indian writing in English, especially fiction is gaining ground rapidly. Kamala Markandaya spotlights the despair of the farmers realistically in the novel. They are desperate because of the vagaries of natural calamities, the resultant constant hunger, ruthless machines and heartless men. The peasant community suffers both physically and mentally because of industrialization in the village. Nathan and Rukmani are representatives of millions of tenant farmers in India. Their life is an example of the havoc caused by industrialization. The whole novel thus reveals the story of an Indian village shaken to its roots by the onslaught of modernization.

**Key Words:** peasantry, rural, despair, havoc, modernization

*Nectar in a Sieve* is much more than the story of the life and suffering of Rukmani and Nathan, a faceless peasant couple, symbolic of rural dwellers all over the country. The tragedy of Rukmani and Nathan is universalized and vested with an epical significance.

*Nectar in a Sieve* is the first Indian novel in English in which a sincere attempt has been made to project a realistic picture of rural India in all its shades and details – famine, drought, excessive rain and struggle for survival, eviction, superstition, hunger and starvation. There is a realistic portrayal of a village which is symbolic of 'rural India' (Bhatnagar 45). The novel depicts with vivid clarity and keen observation the socio-economic conditions of rural India. Particularly, the terrible degradation that human life brings is depicted with unflinching

realism. Rukmani the protagonist and narrator in the novel is a simple peasant woman whose persistent battle has been against poverty. The younger daughter of a village- headman, she marries Nathan, a landless tenant farmer, at the age of twelve. The dwindling financial position of Rukmani's father forces him to marry her to a tenant. Her sisters Shanta, Padmini and Thangam were married in a befitting manner, but as luck would have it the headman is no longer rich and is of no consequence; hence Rukmani with neither beauty, nor dowry is given away to Nathan a tenant farmer. Everybody pities her. Poverty and starvation stalk the threshold of the couple from the beginning of their married life. When Rukmani comes to live with Nathan, his house images her withered future, "Across the doorway a garland of mango leaves,

symbol of happiness and good fortune, dry now and rattling in the breeze”(Markandaya 4). Rukmani accepts her adversity calmly and reveals her stoic acceptance of the inevitable. In her relationship with her husband she learns the values of mutual love, understanding, respect, acceptance, and adjustment. Both Rukmani and her husband lead a simple and contented life with the barest necessities such as food, clothes and shelter. Nathan was a poor peasant in every sense of the word. He possessed a very small hut: Two rooms, one a sort of storehouse for grain the other for everything else. A third had been begun but was unfinished; the mud walls were not more than half a foot high (ibid 4).

Nathan had his own problems but he made it a point to see that he was always good to his wife. He had great patience to put up with her, especially during those early days of their married life: “Not one crossword or impatient look and praise for whatever small success I achieved” (ibid 8). He showed great concern for his wife when she was pregnant. Rukmani begets her first child and sheds, “tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?”(ibid 14) She knows that irrational conventions and anachronistic traditions decry a female offspring. As a typical village farmer, Nathan also believes in the notion of the superiority of a male child. After the birth of Ira he was not happy as he should be, since Ira was a girl. In quick succession, Rukmani bears five sons – Arjun, Thambi, Selvam, Murugan, Raja and Kuti. With each birth, however, the family has a little less to eat. Rukmani and Nathan find it difficult to manage things and are forced to lead a life of poverty.

On the contrary, heavy rain creates untold miseries to the people of the village and run short of grains. Nathan goes to Hanuman, the rice dealer and told him that the gruel he and his family have been taking was almost plain water for the past few days. But he gets disappointment and is directed to Biswas another merchant where he repents his fate once again. The choice now left before him is to break the dam. He is accompanied by his wife and children who were sunken-eyed and noisy at the thought of the feast, carrying nets and baskets. The next year again the rains fail and each day the level

of the water drops and heads of the paddy hang lower. There is nothing to reap when the harvesting time comes. Sivaji who comes to collect his master’s dues is told that there was nothing that year. But he is not ready to pay heed to Nathan’s words:

You have had the land ... for which you have contracted to pay so much money so much rice. These are just dues, I must have them. Would you have me return empty handed? (ibid 72)

Nathan makes a miserable plea to give him till the next crop. He has no option other than selling the vessels, trunk, shirts, etc.

... rather these should go...than that the land should be taken from us, we can do without these, but if the land is gone our livelihood is gone, and we must thenceforth wander like jackals. (ibid 74)

Nathan has nightmarish dreams and the theme of the dream continues to be the paddy turning to straw and the grain getting lost. His voice remains stark and bereft of the power of dissembling which his full consciousness brought. On such occasions only his wife could give him some courage.

Once more Nathan is to bear the whole burden of the household. His son, Raja, found dead working in tannery. His struggle fails to bring the good living the family could have known. Even his other sons’ earning could not bring sooth. The reserves of grain Rukmani had put by begin to dwindle despite her utmost care. The Nathans’ miseries do not end here. Their daughter, Ira, was stamped as a barren woman and divorced after five years of marriage. In the patriarchal society, barren women are considered to be cursed and inauspicious. They are not recognized and respected. Men have the social sanction to reject barren wives. Nathan understands the situation and says, “I do not blame him. He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient”. Nathan tries to console himself and Rukmani with the hope of a bright future:

You brood too much and think only of your trials, not of the joys that are still with us. Look at our land is it not beautiful? The fields are green and the grain is ripening.

It will be a good harvest year, there will be plenty. (ibid 69)

Nathan dreams of a happy future and of possible rich crops. But all his dreams end in nothing because the rains fail. As a result there is no rice to eat. Rukmani manages to get a handful of rice. She feels satisfied at this small quantity of rice. Rukmani and Nathan recall how once the heavy rains ruined their paddy crops. Nathan and Rukmani undergo nightmarish and traumatic experience, when the entire family finds itself in the grip of devastating hunger and agonizing fear. Rukmani understands that hunger and fear have become part and parcel of peasants' lives. The villagers cannot easily overcome these malignant factors, as they are always the outcome of the unpredictable prospects of nature.

Another blow confronts Nathan when he hears from Sivaji that the landlord was going to sell his land. He is told that the landlord has completed the deal and papers have been signed. They were given two weeks' time to leave. He is fully aware that it is not just and also not right. But it is a cruel reality: "There is no law against it... we may grieve, but there is no redress" (ibid 136), he tells Selvam, his son. At the same time he knows that he cannot live except by working the land for he has no other knowledge or skill.

The novelist has given a vivid and graphic account of poverty and hunger in the city and Rukmani describes the grim struggle for survival in the city. Even in the city they come across 'poverty, hunger, disease and wickedness, in its most naked, stark and horrible form' (Arora 55). The whereabouts of Murugan are not known and they are compelled to resort to begging, live with thieves and beggars in a temple and work as stone-breakers. Their possessions reduced to the few bundles they carry, Nathan and Rukmani try to find Murugan in the city. They rest one night at a temple, where thieves steal their bundles and all their money. A leprous street urchin named Puli helps them find the home of Kenny's doctor friend. They reach the doctor's house where Murugan was supposed to work. To their disappointment, they came to know that their son had already left. Then they go to the collector's house as they came to know that

Murugan was working there. Again, disappointment awaits Nathan and his wife as Murugan has already left his wife. Nathan and Rukmani meet their daughter-in-law, Ammu, Murugan's wife, who is also leading a life of poverty. Ammu, was the one who makes every effort to make both ends meet. She is a thin girl with untidy hair. When Rukmani and Nathan reach her house what they see there is abject poverty. This poverty brings untimely death of Nathan. The heart-rending mental agony, anguish, pain and suffering can be understood from Rukmani's words: "If I grieve I said, it is not for you, but for me, beloved, for how shall I endure to live without you, who are my love and life" (ibid 188).

*Nectar in a Sieve* is remarkable for its portrayal of rustics who live in fear, hunger and despair. It is "fear of the dark future, fear of the sharpness of death" (Reddy 79). Almost all the characters in the novel lead a miserable life and most of them fail to survive. It not only deals with the major theme of hunger, but also the concomitant theme of human degradation and debasement that hunger brings. Hunger forces Raja, one of Rukmani's sons, to the compound of the tannery, perhaps to steal the costly hides. Ira, who cannot see Kuti starve, takes to prostitution and sells her body to workers belonging to the tannery and feeds him with the money thus earned. The tannery is responsible for only a little disturbance and turmoil in the life of Rukmani. The real tragedy of their lives arises from the vagaries of nature and the things ensuing from them. There is no plantation, so naturally the Old Granny has nothing to sell in her shop. She also dies of starvation.

In spite of social evils which are present in the world, Kamala Markandaya has an assertive vision of life. Nathan and Rukmani believe that there is an affirmation of life in the midst of colossal human suffering. The characters show great powers of heart and soul even in moments of crisis and calamities. The novel does not end on a note of despair. All the characters in the novel experience troubles and turmoil in life. But they rise above their desperation triumphantly because of their endurance and hope. Thus the sharp edges of life are blunted. Kamala Markandaya establishes the fact that poverty, hunger and starvation followed by

innumerable sufferings, can lead families to terrible degradation.

Markandaya's novel vividly records the poverty-stricken, heart-breaking existence of the people in rural areas. Their struggle has been given an epical grandeur and dignity. The village where they lived has not been given any name and its locals had been kept vague and indistinct. This was so because it symbolizes rural India and Nathan and Rukmani symbolize the Indian farmer and the tragedy of rural India. *Nectar in a Sieve* captures the effects of social upheavals on its characters. Markandaya's themes depict her tragic vision of life.

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