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## A STUDY OF EXISTENTIALISM IN THE NOVEL 'NECTAR IN SIEVE' IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT

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### Abstract

*Nectar in Sieve* [1954] is deal with the life of farming couple's existence in the context of western industrialization and natural calamities despite of their landlessness in one of the unspecified village of the southern state of India. The couple is badly shattered by the changing surrounding of the fast growing economic aspects and seasonal change. Rukmani's family has undergo the mental anguish as well as the starvation which compels Ira to become a prostitute though she did not want but could not see the hungry child without food. The family is abandoned by two elder sons in order to get work of tea plantation in the Ceylon. The two sons are smashed by the hunger and suffering of the hopelessness into deaths. Murugan went to city hoping better life by doing work but abandoned his wife and small child to care for her that came in light when Rukmani visited for help. Drought and flood thoroughly destroys their harvest and added their suffering. Kenny and Old granny supported so much to Nathan family by various ways. Tannery absolutely changed the life of villagers. Arjun, Thambi, Ira and Murugan do their own choices to cope up with the situation neglecting the expectations of Nathan that added his suffering a lot. They could not give the revenue of the land that was sold to tannery people by owner and disowned it. They went to city to get help from the son but there sufferings increased a lot, in which they had to work in quarry that snatched the life of Nathan and Rukmani returned to her village with Puli but without her loving husband. Rukmani and Nathan confronts the formidable problems of hunger, starvation, anguish, abandonment and deaths that threatens their existences but they face all these still natural outcome in spite of suicide.

**Keywords:** Hunger, Suffering, Abandonment, Industrial Encroachment, deaths, Natural Calamities, Zamindari system, humanism and Free Choices etc.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Novel 'Nectar in Sieve' is in 1954 written by Kamala Markandaya. This novel set in

rural part of the south India that depicts the existential struggle for survival of the rural tenant farmer. Their joys and hardships. The story is told in the first person narration. The novel is old but very

important in the present context because still the people are sufferings from the exploitation systems and natural calamities in our country due to their ignorance about the help of democratic systems.

## **2. Essences of beauty and dowry in Marriage of Rukmani**

The novel is in flashback technique that opens with the reverie of Rukmani and she relates her own life experiences in the first person narration. Rukmani was the last daughter of the village headman who did the marriages of his three daughters [ Shanta, Padmini & Thangam] with wealthy manners. But four dowries was too much for man to bear and due to the appointment of collector, the headman was no longer of consequence in the village. The economic condition of her father is stated in her words;“What for you,’ my mother would say, taking my face in her hands, my last- born, my baby? Four dowries is too much for a man to bear.” [Chapter: 1, Page. No-4]

When Rukmani came to womanhood his father’s prestige was much diminished. They could not find a rich husband for Rukmani and married her at the age of twelve with a tenant farmer, Nathan who was poor in everything but rich in love and cares. All relatives murmured that the match was below her and her mother herself was not happy but what they could do without dowry and beauty for finding the good match for her. Rukmani happily accepted the decision of her father in case of her marriage without any resentment and began her conjugal life with Nathan. This is the reality of young woman in case of marriage even today.

## **3. Responsible Married life of Rukmani**

Rukmani was married at the school going age of 12 to Nathan who was a tenant farmer. They lived in a mud-hut of two rooms, one sort of storehouse for grain and the other for everything else. Nathan treats her with respect and kindness in their conjugal life as she requires so many things to learn to run the household and understand the totally new way of life. Rukmani had planted, in the flat patch of ground behind the hut, a few pumpkin seeds. The soil was rich, never having yielded before so produced a very large sized yellow and red

pumpkin. When Nathan saw it he was full of admiration, and made much of this fruit. Nathan praises Rukmani in the following words; “Not from our land’ said Nathan. ‘Therefore it is precious, and you, Ruku, are indeed a cleaver woman.” [Chapter-1, Page No-11]

In the year of after their marriage, they had beautiful daughter, Irawaddy, and good harvests of rice. Rukmani did not conceive any child for the next six year so she thought that she could not give son to the Nathan. Mother’s illness compelled her to visit maternal house to meet sick mother, here she meets a foreign Dr. Kenny, who treats her infertility. This treatment is given without informing the Nathan. Everything was going on very well still the arrival of tannery in the village and natural calamities. They both were cultivating the land of Zaminadar. Rukmani had developed a small garden of vegetables near the hut of them in order to meet the day to day expenditure of the family. Happy life in the words of Rukmani;“After that, Ten times more zealous, I planted beans and sweet potatoes, brinjals and chillies, and they all grew well under my hand, so that we ate even better than we had done before.” [Chapter-1, Page No-11]

## **4. Relationship of Rukmani with Nathan and Others**

Kali and Janki taught Rukmani how to milk the goat. How to plant seed, how to churn butter from milk and how to hull rice but Nathan showed great patience and praised her on little success. She maintains good relationship with Old Granny who was the vegetable seller and brought a good match for Ira in the novel. She patiently and skillfully moved her life towards the happiness despite of so many hardships. When her son was killed by tannery guard still she long-sufferingly bears that sorrow.

The relationship between Rukmani and Nathan was very strong and inspiring to others. We find since the beginning of the novel Rukmani and Nathan were shown or characterized in such way as though they were made of for one another. Rukmani supports her husband in the farm as well as keep a small vegetable garden near the mud-hut to fulfill the expenditure of the household. They both amorously sold so many personal things in order to

pay the revenue of the land despite of the very bad harvest after the natural calamity. She never found quarreling with Nathan. She helps him everywhere even she begs food for him when they were at City. She was really half-life of husband as for Indian culture is concerned.

### **5. The Existential Struggle and Existences precedes essences**

Rukmani's marriage was done with a tenant farmer Nathan who was so much economically poor and lives in the mud-hut still the protagonist accepts it meekly without any resentment towards the parents. She did not know anything about the farmer's activity but she learns it with the help of her neighbors' like Janki, Kali and Kunthi. She was very much satisfied in her life until the first child birth and the establishment of tannery in the village, thereafter the change comes in her life that was very much drastic which intensely transformed her life into a one of the courageous suffering woman. Her son-in-law left the Ira to her father's home saying:

"You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you. She is a barren woman", "I have waited five years, he replied "she has not borne in her first blooming, who can say she will conceive later? I need sons." [Chapter: 9, Page. No-52]. This creates anxiety in Ira and Rukmani but Rukmani tries to soothe and convince the son-in-law by giving her own example but there was no use of it. They all meekly accepted the situation. They were suffering from the hunger due to the bad harvest so one day Arjun quarreled with the parent on the issue of going to work in the tannery and at last he got the permission for going to work into the tannery who was followed by his younger brother Thambi. But Nathan expected that his children should work beside him on the farm but they were only saying yes without action. But they became very soon jobless due to the their strike in tannery

Arjun and Thambi one day stayed for long time in the city and then they argue with parent in order to go to Ceylon for tea plantation, but Rukmani convince them to stay at home saying: "But how could I let them go, who were my own flesh and blood, without a fight" But Arjun and Thambi are determined to go and the emphasis the situation by

saying: "There is nothing for us here, for we have neither the means to buy land nor to rent it, would you have us wasting our youth chafing against things we cannot change" [Chapter: 12, Page. No-70] "You do everything you can, 'he [Arjun] said. It is not enough. I am tired of hunger and I am tired of seeing my brothers hungry. There is never enough, especially since Ira came to live with us." [Chapter: 09, Page. No-53]Rukmani had fear one's her sons had gone to Ceylon where from they would never return to the home because according to her, the journey costs hundreds rupees which would be never earned by them and they would stuck in that country forever. This disappoints Rukmani so much; "If you go you will never come back', I cried. 'The journey costs hundreds of rupees, you will never have so much.'" [Chapter: 12, Page. No-70]

Rukmani was coming home from market Biswas delivers the news that Kenny has returned. He tries his best to insinuate that Rukmani had an affair with Kenny, saying he has heard proof of it from Kunthi. Rukmani retorts that the words of prostitute are not very trustworthy. Rukmani does a veiled and subtle job of defending her daughter's decision. She implies Ira's prostitution was only for the purpose of feeding Kuti, furthermore, the girl was in experienced in sexual matter and got pregnant and does not know who the father of the child. "Kuti, lying in a corner of the hut, began to moan. Ira heard and opened her eyes, gesturing vaguely towards him. I went to her first. 'Lie still; the cut will open again.' She looked at me somberly: Feed him; he is hungry. Take the rupee you will find in my sari.' I knew then that it was she who had been responsible for the improvement in Kuti, not I, not my prayers." [Chapter: 16, Page. No-100] Kenny insists that Rukmani shame about what people will say is foolish. On the walk home, Rukmani ruminates on what Kenny says as it is fairly similar to what Nathan thinks 'A Baby is baby'.

When Kenny asked about her economic condition, she says; "Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons or the earth varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?" [Chapter-19, Page No-115]Rukmani is confused, as there is no compensation possible for the death of

Raja. The more timid of the two watchmen speaks up finally. He says very gently that Raja was not brutally treated; he was just tapped with a bamboo stick, and he fell, likely from hunger and weakness combined. He tries with quit desperation to show sympathy and sorrow for Rukmani. But it is true that Raja suffered too much by the hunger and malnutrition that cause also mental anguish and compelled him to steal something from the tannery but killed by the two watchmen.

The love and affections tied fast the family bondage in one but we find that is shattered in case of Nathan. Arjun and Thambi left for Cyclone in order to get busy in tea plantation work. Murugan went to city in search of work, married and settled for some duration and abandoned his wife with small child to care. The three strong pillars of home left it one by one because of hunger and suffering and mental anguish, shouldering the responsibility to Rukmani and Nathan. Rukmani expresses their existences in the following way:

“Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear; fear of dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger; fear of the blackness of death.” [Chapter: 14, Page. No-81]. That year the rain failed, it was harvest time but they had nothing to reap. The paddy had taken all their labour and left those empty handed. The nature in the words of Rukmani:

“Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you.so long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, he heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat.” [Chapter: 7, Page. No-41]. It will not be wrong to say that the hunger of need disintegrated the family. The only members of family who could not bid farewell were Rukmani and Nathan. The warmth of domestic felicity received jolt after jolt due to the hostility of nature in the form of flood and draught and the development of tannery due to which they

lost their land as it was sold by the Zamindar to the tannery officials. Nathan expressed his helplessness and fear about the future in the following words; “Yet the effort must be made, said Nathan, for we cannot live except by the land, for I have no other knowledge or skills; and as you say I am getting on and for me it would be impossible to find another landlord.” [Chapter: 23, Page. No-138]

The family came under debt left with no option Rukmani and Nathan decided to go to their son Murugan who works in the city. After facing difficulties they finally reached the residence of their son only to know that Murugan had left the town two years ago leaving his wife and children to starve. Trivial pursuits and unaccountable happenings may unsettle the foundation of the rich, but the poor bear whatever ills and evils face them. Without money and left with no option Nathan and Rukmani , weak and aged though they were, had to work as labourer on a quarry in order to earn money so that they could return back to their village. Hard work and poor trifle made them what had been. Rain and cold continued for some days but Nathan and Rukmani did not stop working. Nathan owing to physical weakness fall ill and like a huge monster the town sucks away the life of Nathan: “It is slipping away fast, he said. ‘Rest with me a little’. And so I laid my face on his face and for a while his breath fell soft and light as rose petal on my cheek, then he sighed as if in weariness and turned his face to me , and so his gentle spirit withdrew and the light went out in his eyes.”[Chapter: 29, Page. No-191]

Nathan dies and Rukmani left alone to bear the hardships of life. This fall proved fatal. None except Puli was there to extend help and sympathy not even her own children were there to support her in hour of her need, on the contrary it was Puli who helped Rukmani to reach her village. The novel presents the theme of Existential Struggle and Existences precedes essences in the characters of Rukmani and Nathan.

#### **6. The well-wishers of the Rukmani**

Kenny treats the infertility of Rukmani when she was unable to give son to the Nathan after gap of six years from the Ira’s birth. He was also ready to give treatment to Ira but they were too late

for it. When he came to about the hunger of them he tried to appeal the Rukmani to do something there is nothing in the country how will you manage with hunger. Kenny was bringing either a cow's milk or something else in order to give the hungry child Kutu, while coming to the house of Nathan. Kenny reprimand in the following words; "Acquiescent imbeciles, he said scornfully, do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering? What thoughts have you when your belly is empty or your body is sick? Tell me they are noble ones and I will call you a liar." [Chapter: 19, Page. No-116]

Kenny was building a hospital in the village in order to help the people of it. He had collected charity from England and India for the construction expenditure. He invited Selvam to be his assistant. Selvam took to the little education he got from Rukmani, and surpassed her learning through his effort and enthusiasm. He reasons he will be a good assistant and anything he doesn't know, Kenny will teach him.

Old Granny was the vegetable seller in the market whom Rukmani gives her vegetables and had a good relationship with her. Old Granny brings a good match of boy for Ira in minimum dowry of hundred rupees. This she did when Rukmani was not selling much vegetables of garden to the old Granny who was not jealous but very cooperative and kind to Rukmani. They found her body on the path that led to the well, an empty mud pot beside her and the gunny sacking tied around her waist. She had died of starvation. Rukmani ruminates on the death in the following, "Death after all is final. I could not avoid the thought ...as rose water and sandalwood paste were sprinkled on her corpse. So it had been with my sons, so it was now with Old Granny, one day it might be the same for me, for all of us." [Chapter: 21, Page. No-125]

## 7. Conclusion

In nectar in sieve 1954, Markandaya depicts the tragedy of a traditional Indian village and a tenant peasant family assaulted by industrialization.,Zamindari system and the natural calamity based traditional economy. The tannery, symbolic of mechanical power, destroys the traditional village. Inflation, vices and diseases

quickly disturbs the peaceful flow of life in the village. Labour problems and the drought condition further upsets the peasant's life. Misfortune are heaped on the head of Rukmani : one of her sons is killed at the tannery, the crops fail, another son dies of starvation, and her own daughter Ira, 'prostitute' in order to live; but the final blow is from the Zamindar who orders them to evacuate the land. Rukmani and Nathan go to town to seek the help of their son. Unable to find him there, they turn back when Rukmani's husband dies of adversity and disease. Buffeted both by man and nature, Rukmani comes back with Puli to her village to live with her son Selvam, and her Daughter, Ira

The significance of the novel lies in the existential struggle of Rukmani against such formidable enemies to her family. Individual must live a life despite of whatever difficulties may be and develop the endurance cum struggling power.

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