



**INDUSTRIALIZATION OF AGRARIAN RURAL CULTURE:
A STUDY OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NOVEL
*NECTAR IN A SIEVE***

ASHOK SADASHIV PATIL

Ph. D. Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Shivaji University Kolhapur
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya's novel Nectar in a Sieve is a realistic documentary of a South Indian village where industry and modern technology played havoc. In the novel the novelist depicts the life of the rustic peasant couple Nathan and Rukmani, the protagonists, and through them the process of transforming life-style of the village at the advent of industrialization. The prime focus in the novel seems to be on the conflict arising out of the establishment of tannery in the rural community, the identity crisis resulting from a clash between western value system and Indian value system. Tannery, the juggernaut of development, with all its evils, pollution and corruption, represent the western value system of materialism and agro-industrialism, while the idyllic rural life stands for Indian value system.

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya, the best known fiction artist, stands vindicated, as one of the top-notch Indian English novelists of the Post-Independence period with her distinctive literary creations and her finest artistry. Though she had been in alien land, England, ever since her marriage with Mr. Taylor, she has not alienated herself from her native land emotionally and mentally, and had been sincerely conscious of the social issues in India, and of the problems and predicaments of the people there, and also of process of social and material transition going on there in the course of time, and her fictional creations, almost all of which are having Indian settings, themes, characters, bear well-witness to the fact. Markandaya has proved her versatility by handling varied themes in her narratives, and her debut novel,

ASHOK SADASHIV PATIL

1Page



Nectar in a Sieve (1954) is solely devoted to Indian village life, and the sub-title of the novel *A Novel of Rural India* itself reveals the fact. Besides treating various aspects of Indian village life in the novel, Markandaya has projected the tragedy of Indian peasant life enacted on the background of the process of industrialization of the rural India, and the adverse impact of this juggernaut of progress on the placid, serene, traditional agrarian culture seems to have been the matter of great concern for the novelist. The novel is mainly the authentic documentation of the tragic predicaments undergone by the protagonists, the poor agrarian couple, Rukmani and her husband Nathan, and also by number of minor figures, the humble rustic folks, with the advent of tannery, the industrial project, in the locality of their village.

For centuries the village India continued to remain stagnant spectrum of Indian civilization, and has preserved some of the civilizational values of the country on the face of many odds, and has aptly been looked upon as the soul of the nation in several ways. After attainment of independence, the focus of development shifted primarily to village India, and changeless yet changing feature of Indian village life has been the theme of some of the Anglo-Indian narratives of that period. Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, though entirely a different type of fictional creation has been the authentic pen-picture of village India in the process of transition, drawn with applaudable sincerity and artistry, and is genuinely a chronicle of Indian rural society at the advent of industrialization. While commenting on this process, as depicted in *Nectar in a Sieve*, the esteemed scholar C. K. Naik, in his article, "Rural India in Transition: A Study of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*", asserts:

*The onrush of industrialization brought with it an immense change to rural India that manifested itself in the slow transition from organic ambience to urban area. The change unnoticed, upset the traditional village life and ushered in new ideas and outlook, social and economic, which we call modern. This was the beginning of the conflict between tradition and modernity that forms the basis of *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel also explores how the march of progress, on one hand, commercialized village life, produced population of wage slaves and raised their standard of living, and on the other hand, how it uprooted the tenant farmers from their age-old attachment to land, left them dispossessed, and caused their eviction and displacement (Bhatnagar.P.16.).*

The establishment of tannery in the village brings in an epoch in the life of the rural society. The century-old traditional agrarian community is abruptly awakened up to a new reality. The variation, that advent of industrial culture ushers in, affects the modes, manners and values of an existing life-style that remained uninterrupted for ages. Though industrialization is advantageous and also essential for the upliftment of the poor rustics, it is always accompanied with its evils and adversities. The tannery gradually starts to defile the placid,

ASHOK SADASHIV PATIL

2 Page



serene and natural atmosphere of the village with its malodour, pollutes the traditional value system of rural life, and also begins to disintegrate the age-old social and economic authorities there. Advent of tannery brings comprehensive change in the traditional rural society which disturbs the very basis of age-old simple village life, and adversely affects the cultural, social, economic, moral and human values that have been existed there since the days of yore. Industrialization of the village gives birth to various kinds of crisis, and Markandaya has attempted to explore the same in the novel with great authenticity.

The establishment of the tannery has gravely afflicted the arboreal village environment, and the playground of the village children has been claimed by it and a bazaar has been established there. The birds in the area seem to have been disappeared from there due to ceaseless, loud noise and crowd of the tannery. The grievous reaction of Rukmani at this is worth-pondering as she says:

At one time there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingoes striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds come no more, for the tannery lay close – except crows and kites and such scavenging birds, eager for the town offal, or sometimes a pal-pita, skimming past with raucous cry but never stopping , perhaps dropping a blue-black feather in flight to delight the children (Markandaya. P. 69)

The advent of the tannery begins anew era in the age-old agrarian rural community, and has upheaved the long prevailing agrarian set-up there. In the process of expansion the tannery acquires more and more land of the village and even begins to claim agricultural lands. Day by day tannery has started to swallow up lands of many farmers where new buildings have been erected almost every month. The tenant farmers who have been working on the field for years are uprooted from the land as the landlords have sold these lands to the tannery for better prices. Worst of all, Nathan is brutally evicted from the land he has been cultivating for nearly thirty years as a tenant farmer as the land is sold by the landlord to the tannery. Thus, the tannery has taken away his land, and subsequently his ancestral profession. As over the years Rukmani and Nathan have sustained their family only with the income from the land, and as are not skilled in any other profession they become unemployed, and are usually led to poverty and starvation. Other villagers, who have been working as tenant farmers and are solely relied on agriculture for their livelihood, too have to undergo the similar kind of worst circumstances. Thus, tannery causes severe destruction to the agrarian rural society that has been existing there since the long past, and has compelled the humble agrarian rustic families to be deprived of their lands and parental occupations, their lonely livelihood sources.



By snatching away their means of livelihood, the tannery has directly afflicted the traditional cobblers in the village. Due to superiority of its product and vast scale of production, the tannery has faded away the humble cobblers in the rural area. Utter disappointment and humbleness of these meek traditional professionals can be well-sensed in the speech of Kannan, the chakkali, who while watching the construction work of the tannery building, referring to the overseer there, mutters, "As if he owned us." At this Rukmani thinks that already he foresees his livelihood being wrested from him, for he salts and tans his own skins making them into chaplis for those in the village who wear them (Markandaya. P.26-27). By taking away their traditional profession in which they have been engaged for generations, the tannery obliges these poor rural cobbler families to starve.

On the other hand, the establishment of the tannery brings opportunities of alternative employment for the rustics. Those, who have lost their ancestral professions such as agriculture or so on, begin to get financial stability by working in the tannery. But the people like Nathan and Rukmani who have been accustomed to work on field throughout their lives, don't like to be employed as tanners. But their sons Arjun and Thambi join the tannery as labourers against their parents' wishes, where their neighbour's, Kunti's, sons have already been employed. Thus, they earn some money as wages, and try to help their parents to fulfill the expenditure of the family that has been in the miserable plight. Kali's, their another neighbour, sons too have been employed in the tannery. Besides them many others, there have also started to work in the tannery in order to avoid starvation of their families. Thus, tannery proves to be a boon to the workless and uprooted families in the village.

The industrialization in the form of tannery has also brought so-called modernization in the rural community. Old, traditional values and perspectives, social and economic, have been replaced by the new, modern ones. Though industrialization is essential for the upliftment and betterment of the rustic folk, it is always accompanied by its evils. Social evils like intoxication, gambling and prostitution are generally the outcomes of industrialization which are usually accepted as the part of modernization. Those who are fond of such so-called modernization are quite happy at the advent of tannery, and usually welcome these consumerist practices, and are also eager to enjoy the same. The speech of Kunthi, one of such folk, illustrates the fact as she says to Rukmani:

Are you not glad that our village is no longer a clump of huts but a small town? So there will be shops and tea-stalls, and even a bioscope, such as I have been to before I was married. You will see (Markandaya. P. 29).

In the novel Markandaya skillfully represents the lives of two generations of the village folk who undergo the economic and psychological crisis in the period of transition, and also struggle to survive the same in their own ways. Along with many other consequences of it,

ASHOK SADASHIV PATIL

4Page



the establishment of tannery gives rise to the crisis between tradition and modernity. Traditional values are represented by the elderly people like Nathan and Rukmani whereas the youths like Arjun and Thambi stand for the modernity. The older generation believes that their survival depends solely on the land, and continues to feel attached to their ancestral profession of agriculture. Nathan can't even imagine his detachment from the land and agriculture profession, and feels extremely sorry when gets uprooted from the land and even wishes his sons to follow his profession and be farmers, and therefore, feels sorry when his sons show unwillingness to work on the field. On the contrary, Arjun and Thambi follow modern perspectives and ways of life. Being practical they do not see any benefit in working on the field as a tenant farmer, and prefer to join the tannery against the wishes of their parents. They lead a strike of tannery workers against the anti-labour policy of the employer. Revolutionary perspectives and rebellious zeal of the younger generation against injustice get distinctly reflected in the speech of Thambi when he tells his parents that the workers are fighting for what is their due, they have stopped their work, and they are not begging for charity, therefore, they will fight until their demands are met. Rukmani, being traditional in her views, disapproves tannery that disturbs the traditional, simple life of the village. She thinks the tannery as an invasion on the age-old natural and cultural atmosphere of the village.

The establishment of tannery causes severe loss of moral and human values in the village community. Due to poverty induced by the tannery, Ira, Rukmani's daughter, is compelled to adopt prostitution to avoid the starvation of her family, and Raja, the son of Rukmani, is led to suspected theft of calfskin in the tannery, and to his subsequent death. Industrialization has gravely afflicted the traditional, affectionate bond among the rural folk. They are made selfish and narrow-minded. All kinds of relationships are measured in terms of money, and money is regarded as the most important thing by them.

While speaking of invasion of modern industry on the ancient rural culture, and of dispossession of the rustic beings due to industrialization, S. John Peter Joseph, in his critical article, "Alienation and Rootlessness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya", states:

Kamal Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve is an artistic and realistic depiction of the exodus caused by the infringement of modern industry on the traditional village community and the age-old rural way of life and consequent rootlessness. The monstrous growth of the tannery and the feudal set-up in the village in Nectar in a Sieve causes the eviction of Nathan and Rukmani. At the micro level the individuals suffer a lot due to the loss of identity when the migration takes place from a village to a city. At the macro level the sufferings are due to their migration from India to alien lands. Though Nathan and Rukmani are forced by circumstances to leave their native soil and familiar

ASHOK SADASHIV PATIL

5P a g e



surroundings for the city, the tannery is a main contributing factor in their complete dispossession (Sahu. P. 110).

The tannery pays its workers better wages, and so they are able to buy the goods at high rates. And thus, the market prices in the village go high, and this rise in the prices badly affects the financial position of the poor village folk. Being unable to buy even the basically essential goods at such high rates, they are made to suffer from malnutrition, even from starvation. Regarding this Rukmani says that no sugar, or dhal, or ghee has been tasted by them since the arrival of the tannery. Janaki's husband Perumal is unable to compete with the other bigger shopkeepers to whom easy money comes from the tannery workers. Finally, he closes his shop and goes away with his family. The other shopkeepers are glad that one of their competitors has left the place. Thus, the tannery has started such a deadly competition in which only cruel and cunning people withstand and prosper, while the simple, the honest, and the straight-forward find it difficult to survive.

Family, the basic institution of the society, and especially the joint family in the rural area, have been greatly harmed by the industrialization. The tannery makes the rural families to suffer from disintegration. Being uprooted from the ancestral profession, Nathan's sons leave the village to seek employment, Murugan goes to city, and Arjun and Thambi, being dismissed from the tannery, leave for Cylon. Eventually, Nathan and Rukmani also go to city leaving behind Selvam and Ira. Janaki, the neighbour of Rukmani, with her husband and children goes away from the village, leaving behind her eldest son who works in the tannery. Regarding the tannery there are different reactions among the people in the village. Some of them welcome it as they think it a way of salvation from the poverty and starvation. On the contrary, some others disapprove and hate it considering it an attack on their placid, natural life and ancestral native culture. Rukmani's reaction in this connection is quite appealing and worth-ruminating:

Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and cleaving its cool silences with clamour. Since then it had spread like weeds in an untended garden, strangling whatever life grew in its way. It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants in a myriad ways. Some, a few, had been raised up, many others cast down, lost in its clutches. And because it grew and flourished, it got the power that money brings, so that to attempt to withstand it was like trying to stop the onward rush of the great juggernaut. Well, I suppose there were some families who saw in it hope for their sons; indeed, many still depended on such earnings, and if my sons had still been there my thoughts might have been

ASHOK SADASHIV PATIL

6P a g e



different; but for us as we are now, and others like us, there could be only resignation and resentment. There had been a time when we, too, had benefited – those days seemed very remote now, almost belonging to another life – but we had lost more than we had gained or could ever regain (Markandaya. P. 133-134).

Thus, the village, which has remained unchanged for a too long time, is suddenly invaded by the industry in the form of the tannery which leads it to horrible consequences. Speaking of the influence of the industrialization on rustic human life Dr. A. V. Krishna Rao remarks: In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya dramatizes the tragedy of a traditional Indian village and a peasant family assaulted by industrialization (Agrawal. P. 150).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

1. Markandaya, Kamala. 1954. *Nectar in a Sieve*. London: Putnam & Co.

Secondary Sources:

1. Arawal, Malti. 2007. *New Perspectives on Indian English Writings*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
2. Bhagat, U. G. 1999. *English (Paper – III) For NET & SET Examinations*. Pune: VarshaPrakashan .
3. Bhatnagar, M. K. 2002. *Kamala Markandaya : A Critical Spectrum*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
4. Krishna Rao, A. V. 1972. *The Indo- Anglian Novel and the Changing Tradition*. Mysore: Rao and Raghavan.
5. Misra, Parvati. 2001. *Class Consciousness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
6. Sahu, Nandini. 2007. *The Post-Colonial Space – Writing the Self and the Nation*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.