



## RURAL REFLECTION IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

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### ABSTRACT

*Kamala Markandaya is one of the eminent Indo-Anglian novelists. Her works focus basically on the life and culture of the rural India. 'Nectar in a Sieve' and 'A Handful of Rice' present an authentic picture of the same. The main themes of the novel are hunger, poverty and exodus from the villages to town in search of employment with a dream to satiate hunger, wipe out poverty and carve out a distinct identity in the society. The tragic predicament of rural India has been depicted with moving realism. It envelopes lack of family planning, tradition, want for a son, crime, unemployment, class conflict, lethargic attitude as dominant factors of the Indian rural society. The novel presents Markandaya's tragic vision of life with the genuine concern for the miserable lot through the characters like Ravi, Nalini, Jayamma etc. The tradition of the joint family system with its merits and demerits is reflected through the family of Ravi. There is also a cultural clash between rural culture represented by Ravi, a poor and hungry boy and urban culture through the life of Damodar, a notorious criminal. The novel portrays how desire for a luxurious life also forces one to follow anti-social activities. Ravi is drawn towards Damodar, a criminal to comfort himself from economic strain. Despite Kamala Markandaya's rich experience of the west, rural Indian forms the basis of her creative urge. In this research paper a modest attempt has been made to analyze the rural society. Like a coin this society, too has two sides : positive as well as negative. Markandaya, most outstanding woman novelist of post-independent India, interpreted a colourful picture of rural society with its various drawbacks, positive aspects and its confrontation with urban society. The present research paper also highlights, the vision of rural life and portrays how the wind of industrialisation blows across rural India and causes the dislocation of tradition.*

**Keywords :** *Hunger, poverty, unemployment, industrialisation, dislocation, rural society, positive-negative effects.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya occupies a significant place among the eminent Indo-Anglian novelists. She was an expatriate. She married John Taylor, an Englishman, in 1948 and started living in England thereafter. She had the full experience of both the eastern and the western lives. Her works concentrate basically on the life and culture of the rural India. Almost all her novels reflect the picture of Indian villages. To have a real experience of the villages Markandaya spent some time even in the villages of South India.

India is a country of villages which constitute about seventy percent of the total population. But unfortunately rural India has remained a stagnant society, yet, the soul of India lives in its villages. They have, despite all odds, preserved India's civilizational values. In the depiction of Indian rural life, various Indo-Anglian novelists have tried their hands with varying degrees of success. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Khuswant Singh have given occasional sketches of rural life. While Raja Rao's *Kanthpura* is still the best novel on rural India, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A handful of Rice* present an authentic picture of the same. Markandaya fills her novels with a graphic and realistic picture of the rural India and its various problems. She has ten novels to her credit. The problems touched in the novels, whether on the economic, social or human level, reflect rural India in their true manifestations. Her works and characters of rural scenery prove her 'most outstanding' fiction writer of post independent India; who realistically portrayed the life, customs and various other facts of Indian rural society.

Kamala Markandaya's First Novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), is about the rural India. It portrays the story of Rukmini and Nathan, a simple peasant couple from South India. The novel deals with industrialization and its impact on rural human life. The problems of rural India, the tragic predicament of Indian peasants have been depicted with moving realism. It focuses on the theme of hunger. The social problems like poverty, lack of family planning, beggary, the element of crime, unemployment, prostitution, zamindari system, caste and class conflict, superstitious beliefs, dowry system, low status of woman, marriage system etc., are very beautifully portrayed by Kamala Markandaya in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

The novel presents the life of simple rural people of South Indian village. The village people who are worried about the minimum basic needs and are engaged in agricultural activities, Rukmini, the protagonist of the novel, who is also the narration 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 build a tannery in the village. The evil of industrialization like inflation, ugliness grows up. Ira who is married to a farmer is

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deserted by her husband as she is barren. The family on the verge of starvation has no option but to 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 as de to terrible drought the family starves. Raja dies and Kuti falls ill. The poor girl, Ira, seeing her family starve during the famine, turns into a woman of the street and gives birth to an illegitimate child. Starvation takes away old Granny and Kuti. Rukmini and Nathan leave the village in search of Murugan, who himself has left his wife and had gone away. With the help of Puli, a young orphan, they live on charity and petty jobs. Nathan dies, Rukmini returns to her village with Puli. Generally, rural people are not educated, but Rukmani is quite literate. Rukmani teaches her children at home because of their poor condition. She cannot afford to send them to school.

Agriculture is the main occupation in the village. Infact Kamala Markandaya did not depict the big landlords and agriculturists but the life of landless farmers who are also the neglected people. The landless farmers, in particular are held in the clutches of constant fear, as the land being snatched away, the failure or excesses 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 there must always come time of hardship, of fear and hunger.” A farmer has no hopes for the future, but yet he keeps hope, amidst fear of getting disappointment.

In a traditional Indian family, woman is always subordinate to the man. While the sons are considered as assets and the daughter are considered as a burden on a family. When the first born child was a daughter, Rukmini was very much disappointed “for what woman want a girl for her first born”. Nathan “wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pulling infant who would take with her dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind”. Rukmini thinks that it was a punishment for her past sins “I have no sons; only one child, a girl.....Why should it be?.....Am I not clean and healthy?”. In the village, much more than in city, a childless woman is considered an ill-fated one. The life of a woman who had no children at all, is more worse.

As compared to city, in village, it is quite difficult to accept a woman without child or a woman with a daughter but without a son. In rural society the life of a woman, who has no children at all is worse. The husband in the rural area has the social sanction to discard his barren wife. So Ira’s husband discarded her by saying her a barren.

While Socio-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. Prostitution is a major social problem today in both urban and rural areas. Ira

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wants to save her ailing brother. She is fed up of poverty and hunger. Kunthi, a village woman also takes to prostitution. Nathan calls Ira a ‘harlot’ and never touches even food that is bought out of Ira’s earnings. Markandaya portrays the fate of the prostitutes very realistically “Bt the man who finds a woman in the street, raises his eyebrow and snaps his fingers so that she follows him, throws few coins that he may possess her, holds her unresisting whatever he has paid for. What cares such a man for the woman who is his for a brief moment? He has gained her relief, she her payment”.

In this novel most of the characters are rural, just like, Rukmani, Nathan, Ira, Kali, Kunthi, old Granny, Janaki and many more nameless characters have an unmistakable rural bearing. Their attitude, vision of life, manners and language belong to the countryside. That’s why Hari Mohan Prasad calls Nathan and Rukmani “Symbols of teeming millions, archetypal figures like Adam and Eve”.

Superstitions and beliefs are just fruit of illiteracy. The villagers have many beliefs. It is believed that Cobra are sacred, and hence they should not be killed. Nathan, though, illiterate, does not believe that. The rural people take pride in having more children, considering it not only a concrete testimony of divine blessing but also a fortune in having more hands to work on the farm. When Rukmini fails to get any child after Ira, her mother takes her to temple, then they pray together, before the deity for the son. She also gives Rukmini “a small stone lingam”, a symbol of fertility. The belief paves way for customs. Rukmini is faithfully devoted to her husband, does not call him by his name but address him only as husband. A garland of mango leaves is to be tied up across the doorway, as it is “a symbol of happiness and good future”.

The standard of living of rural people is almost primitive. Nathan’s house is a small thatched mud hut near a paddy field in the vicinity of a couple of similar huts. A garland of mango leaves is a symbol of happiness and good fortune. So they always hang this kind of garland across the doorway. The hut has two rooms, one is used as a storehouse for grain and another is for everything else. The popular means of transport is the bullock cart, moving in the midst of sights and sounds from nature, which makes the journey enjoyable to both animals and passengers.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, says A.V. Krishna Rao, “Markandaya dramatizes the tragedy of a traditional Indian village and a peasant family assaulted by industrialisation : Rukmani and Nathan, the peasant couple in a South Indian village, are the victims of the two evils : zamindari system and the industrial economy”.

Nathan, a landless farmer, has to live on the mercy of the zamindar. He has suffered under the zamindari system. Nathan works for thirty years under the illusion of owning up the land and



of his sons working on it with him, though they are cruelly depressed of it in the eve of their life. Whether the harvest is good or not he has to pay the Revenue of the land. He sells the utensils, two brass vessels of the tin trunk, two shirts of their eldest son whatever gains that were left, and even bullocks and seeds, so as to retain the land, to clear the dues with a hope that today or tomorrow he will own the land but when the tannery owners pay good price the zamindar sells all his land and Nathan and many more likes him have to go landless. As A.V. Krishana Rao remarks : “Rukmini and Nathan, the peasant couple in South Indian village are victims of two evils, zamindari systems and the industrial economy.”

The tragic picture of hunger is pointed out by Markandaya, when Rukmini divides food into 24 small parts to feed the entire family for an equal number of days. Such starvation leads to human degradation. Ira seeing her family starve during the famine turns into a woman of the street and gives birth to an illegitimate *albino child*. Hunger makes Ira a prostitute; hunger leads to suspected theft of a calfskin by Raja and his subsequent death. Starvation forces Kunthi’s death.

The problem of poverty has been realistically depicted by Markandaya the adverse physical condition like drought make Nathan unable to pay his land revenue. Puli has to face poverty and go on begging because he has one to support and care for. Puli engages himself in petty crimes when he fails to get any alms. Murugan engages himself in gambling. Superstitions and beliefs are a result of illiteracy. The villagers have many blind beliefs. But Nathan, though not educated, does not believe that. The rural people feel proud in having more children, considering it not only a concrete testimony of divine blessing but also a fortune in that there will be more hands to work on the farm.

In this novel, Kamala Markandaya disapprove the superstitious practices of the rural people. When rain was not enough for the field work, Rukmani throws herself on the ground, prays, offers a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to the goddess, but no rains come.

## CONCLUSION

In this way, Kamala Markandaya portrays a realistic picture of the rural Indian and its problems through this novel. Since *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays rural India with pitiless realism and shows the winds of change blow across it with new social forces. 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 Indian rural life in all its manifestations. After analyzing the novel, it is easy to say that Kamala Markandaya has successfully recorded all aspects of post-colonial Indian rural society. She exposes all possible aspects whether it is the weak structure of society, domestic violence towards women especially to widows, impact of modernity and its conflict with that of urban high style and bright mannered society, with its culture,

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traditionalism and its negative-positive effects on human-beings. In this sense she is a true humanist; whose novels are a realistic picture of traditional society. She has enjoyed the glittering world of the West which has enriched her stock of themes, yet the rural India forms the basis of her creative urge and rural India finds an unforgettable room in her vision.

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