

The Village Landscape in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*: A Mirror of Indian Village Life

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 10 January 2019

Keywords

Indian agrarian life, landed and landless peasants, the farmer's relationship with the land.

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya's novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* is the chronicle of Indian agrarian life that suffers hardships across time and space in the sub-continent. In the beginning of the modern era, Indian peasants suffered at the hands of the Colonizers and the local zamindars alike. The industrialization also had its brunt on the peasants. And the Independent India also could not protect its farming community with the wide spread of globalization, liberalization and privatization and the mushrooming of the multi-national corporate. The country shouted louder the slogans that said "Jai Jawan jai Kisan", but its Kisan was not taken care of. Both landed and landless peasants suffer alike across the agrarian regions of the country. *Nectar in a Sieve* tells the tale of a farmer family, the farmer's relationship with the land they toil and the predicament of the farmer and the land as analogous to pathetic end.

In India, villages are often the centre of all socio-cultural activities. India is often referred to as a nation with an agrarian culture and tradition. Therefore the lives of a major section of Indian population are tied to the land they live in. According to Rajendra Singh, land in sociological dimensions, is not merely a geographically or physical category. "Around 85 percent of the rural population in India, directly or indirectly, live on the land and its produce. Being the main source of subsistence, land is metamorphosed into a socio-economic reality" (12). Among agrarian societies the different distribution of land and the prevalent norms which lend legitimacy and accord sanction to such a distributive system, determine a specific mode of relationship among the various segments of people. The position of people in the village could be determined only by the acreage of land owned and controlled by them. This kind of analysis of the society in terms of the possession of land gives the society the shape of a pyramid. To put it differently, the society acquires a feudal set up. "The social hierarchy of the Indian country side generally reflected in the hierarchy of land" (Rajendra Singh 12).

Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* caricatures the village landscape of South India, according to critics like Madhusudan Prasad. She does not name her fictional locale in her works. Still the village in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* becomes the microcosm of rural India. However, Markandaya attempts to give a realistic portrayal of the Indian landscaped and life. An Indian American writer, Indira Ganesan writes: "There is so much packed into this novel that if you blink you miss something. In some ways it is a very hard read in fact that it is so realistic" (Francis C.Assia). The novel is the dramatization of the hard and down to earth life of poor Indian peasants. It is the saga of a 'land' at its 'transitional stage', mainly affected by modern innovations. And without idealising the hereditary existence of the peasant, Kamala Markandaya demonstrates that her sense of identity springs from a traditional intimacy with the earth, with nature's cycles of creation, destruction and preservation.

The very subtitle of the novel, "a novel of rural India" stresses its rural setting and character. In other words, the novel is a wonderful piece of geo-cultural study of a particular sect of people. Throughout the novel is the omnipresent geography tied up with lives of the people. The land in the novel is not; as A.K.Ramanujan says the land hacked by the ancient Tamil poets, always calm and serene but sometimes acting the role of a determiner of the fates of the people related to it. "Nature is a wild animal that you have trained to work for you... look away for an instant be needless or forgetful, and it has you by throat" (Markandaya 39). Critics like Shiv.K. Kumar have termed the novel a naturalistic novel in spite of its short comings in regard to the fictional techniques employed by naturalistic writers like Emily Zola, Norris, Crane Ariesser, Frarel. Naturalism as a technical term claims to give a more accurate depiction of life than realism. It was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a particular philosophical thesis. This, "... a product of post-Darwinian biology in the nineteenth century, held that a human being exists entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul nor any mode of participating in a religious or spiritual world beyond the natural world" (M.H.Abrams 261). According to naturalistic theory human character and behaviour is entirely determined by two kinds of forces, heredity and environment. *Nectar in a Sieve* no doubt embodies this idea. As such, the land is related to the individual's life. Shiv.K. Kumar says, "... it seeks to dramatise the crushing impact of the natural, social and economical forces on the helpless lives of the rural folk" (86).

The village landscape is the scaffold for the peasants, their activities, problems and anxieties, hopes and expectations, and joys and sorrows. And there is a clear emphasis upon rural ethos and rural value system. In this value system great importance is given to the productivity of the land, fecundity of men, fertility of women, or the fruitlessness of the plants. The predicament of the character is intimately linked to the fertility or sterility of the land and of the people. There is an amalgamation of the opposing principles of life and death and of the forces which sustain the one or bring about the other.

The comfort of Rukmani and her family is dependent on a good harvest which is in turn dependent on timely and adequate rains. Her husband is a "seasoned farmer" and "skilled tiller", but he turns helpless when the elements are not favourable. In farming ill fortune haunts them from the year when Ira was married, "the monsoon broke early with an evil intensity such as no one could remember before" (Markandaya 39). The seasoned farmer Nathan moans, "It is a bad season. The rains have destroyed much of our work" (39). When the situation is reverse, the land without rain is equally disastrous. "Each day the level of the water dropped and the heads of the paddy hung lower. The river had shrunk to a trickle; the well was dry as a bone. Before long the shoot of the paddy were tripped with brown, even as we watched the stain spread like some terrible disease, choking out the green that meant life to us" (72). As ocean is to the fishermen community, land is to the peasant community. For the Aran People Ocean is the harbinger life as well as death. The ocean is for them their mother goddess. Likewise, land for the peasants is mother's lap. The typical Indian expression for land is 'bhoomidevi'- the mother goddess who cherishes and destroys life on earth. The *Atharva Veda* by Rishi Atharvan hails earth as mother. It integrates much of the thought concerning earth, expressed in *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Sama Veda*. The hymns of *Atharva Veda* illustrate the relationship between a mother and her children which denotes the bond between the earth and human beings. The twelfth hymn hails land as:

Yatte Madhyam Prithvi
Yachcha Nabhyam
Yasta Oorjastanwah
Samba Shuwah
Tasu No Dhehyabh Nah
Pawasya Mata Bhumi
Putro Aham Prithvi Vyaha
Parijanayah Pita Sa Uvih
Pipartu.

(May the earth who is to us in the nature of a mother, hold us, her sons, close to her life- endowing self, protect us, and may Parjanya (the rain-bearing clouds), in the nature of a father, tend our upbringing.)

Such is a farmer's relation to the land he dwells on.

The village depicted in *Nectar in a Sieve* has two facets: one, the village with its serene beauty before the introduction of the tannery and the village after the establishment of the tanner. Cultivation is the main stay of the village. Fertility of the land determines the fate of the peasant folk. The possession of the land adds to their comforts in life. In contrast to the landed zamindars the landless farmers are the most neglected people. Rukhmani has come from a family, who own the land they till. But her husband does not own the land that he toils in. The landless farmer is forever under the grip of the fear of the land being snatched away, the vagaries of nature etc. "The calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain water and weather, immensities not to be tempered by man or his creations. To those who live by the land there must always come a time of hardship, of fear and of hunger" (Markandaya

181). A landless farmer has 'no right' to keep hope for future. Yet he maintains amidst the fear of getting disappointed.

The villagers of India have lived in their organic community with their amalgamation of experience. They know each other and the environment they live in. They know each other's needs, the nature of their land, and the seasons, and they have an indomitable adaptation to land and nature. Their inherited wisdom and time-honoured ways of living fitted them well to the local conditions of life and death. In the fields, they often over work and are underpaid, they nonetheless enjoy life. Innocent of all those they lived as integral parts of one another and of the land. However, the older generation thinks that their survival depends squarely on the land and continues to feel attached to it. Meanwhile the younger generation, in contrast, breaks the traditional ties and becomes individualistic. This is because of the transformation of means of economic dependency. Land is no more the source of livelihood: it is the giant machines in the factories. Naik observes:

Arjuna and Thambi, the two eldest sons, are forced to join the tannery as a tanner which has never been their traditional profession. Murugan, the third son is sent away to city as domestic help. The two younger sons Raja and Selvam stay behind in the village, but do not take up the traditional occupation of farming. (19)

The rapid expansion of the tannery in the village increases the annexation of lands to it. It swallows up the lands of the farmers leaves them doomed forever. Nathan and Rukhmani deprived of their land go in search of life in city. Besides this the tannery has taken toll on the village environment. The sweet fragrance, serene and quiet ambience of the village has all been replaced by the 'noise and smell of the tannery'. The tannery has deprived the children of their playground where a bazaar has emerged. The other inhabitants of the land too are affected. The birds seem to have forgotten to sing. Rukhmani ruefully remembers what her land was once: "One time there had been kingfishers here; flashing blow, the young shoots for fish, and paddy birds, and sometimes, in the shallow reaches of the river, flamingos striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth" (69). But now the very face of her land has been changed beyond recognition. Each and every farmer has to part with the land he was attached to. In his old age Nathan is cruelly evicted from the land he has been cultivating for thirty years and he dies in the streets of the city. Apart from this, the vagaries of nature too add to the plight of the farmers. For their survival they have to part with their land, "the nectar of their lives" (Naik 21). Whether it is flood or drought it equally affects the life of the peasants. Sometimes the sun is too cruel:

Day after day the pitiless sun blazed down scorching whatever still struggled to grow and baking the earth hard until at last it split and great irregular fissures gaped in the land. Plants died and the grasses rotted, cattle and sheep to the river that was no more and perished there for lack of water, lizards and squirrels lay prone and grasping in the blistering sunlight. (Markandaya 77-78)

Nathan and Rukhmani till the land water the plants and manure the crops in a joint venture for a rich harvest. As a tenant farmer Nathan has to work for long hours every day, even then his meagre income is uncertain. Whether in drought or flood, Nathan becomes a tragic victim of the vagaries of nature. If the harvest is rich their family feasts, if not starves. Indian agriculture is a gamble of the monsoons that are unpredictable.

However, the village landscape for a farmer like Nathan and his villagers is the soul of their lives. His long lasting expectation is that with a series of favourable seasons he will be affluent enough to buy for himself the land he tills on lease. The monsoon plays ducks and drakes but Nathan is not affected by the change of seasons. "While there was land there was hope" (136) for Nathan. Those who live at the mercy of the land always experience tragedy in their lives. "The fruit of the peasant's labour goes either to the landlord or is destroyed by the ravages of nature" (Jain.N.K. 79). Land is the nectar of their life. All their hopes and aspirations are attached to it. No farmer in the village can contemplate a life away from his land. The urban lands cannot fill in the gap created by the loss of the land in the villages. "Nathan takes a quick decision to go to urban lands in search of pastures new. He is hoping to find better opportunities there. Soon he finds that they are misfits in the

city" (Devi 71). Besides this the poor couple are robbed of their meagre belongings and reduced to near beggary. Those who ate and drank to their satisfaction living upon their land are made to receive the food in banana leaves given in alms in the city temple. With all hopes and desires unfulfilled and separated from his motherland Nathan dies in the street heartbroken. Rukhmani's broken spirit is elevated only at the familiar sight of the village land which she has cherished for so many years. Kamala Markandaya describes her intense feelings as Rukhmani sees her land: "I looked about me at the land and it was life to my starving spirit. I felt the earth beneath my feet and wept for happiness" (Markandaya 188).

Thus the landscape descriptions, while concrete and realistic, are imbued with symbolic significance and play a part in the moral and narrative structure. Markandaya has made an imaginative emblematic use of physical environment. The novel and the saga of the land and the farmer are still significant in the sense that the farmers of India have the same destiny even today. If Mulk Raj Anand has portrayed in his novels the poor Indians suffer at the hands of caste discrimination and colonialists, Kamala Markandaya narrates in *Nectar in a Sieve* the predicament of the farming community and their struggle to survive.

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