

Representation of Rural India in Kamala Markandaya's 'Nectar in a Sieve'

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1. Introduction

South Indian origin, Kamala Markandaya is an Indian born British novelist. Born in 1924, and had her education at the University of Madras. She worked as a novelist and journalist. She married an Englishman John Taylor in 1948 and immigrated to England and has lived there ever since. She is a sensitive chronicler of the intricacies of relationships and the plight of the victims of development. Her famous novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is a bleak account of a peasant family dislocated by industrialization. In *A Handful of Rice* (1966) urban poverty overwhelms individual efforts. The *Coffer Dams* (1969) describes the tensions surrounding an attempt to build a dam in South India. The *Nowhere Man* (1972) is a moving novel about the alienation of an Indian widower in London which anticipates the later diasporic novels of exile. Her other novels include *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) and *Pleasure City* (1982).

Kamala Markandaya is the earliest pioneer in the field of Indian fiction by women. Although she married a white man and settled down in England as early as 1948 she did not stop writing about India. What is still more striking is that she has mainly written about Indian agricultural scenario. The unique features of her fiction are that she has attempted to write about women, as in the case of Rukmini, the heroine of *Nectar in a Sieve*. She has written about agricultural life which not many great writers even to this day have attempted. She has focused her better attention on proletariat classes of people. Of course, her writings focus upon transition of life, the conflict between tradition and modernity, the British rule, and east west encounter as though diasporic.

Kamala Markandaya's finest novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is about village life. It is about agricultural life. It is about working class people. It is about a woman and her problems. It is about the passing away of old and village values. What else it is about human suffering as we see in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The title of the novel is taken from S.T. Coleridge's poem:

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve
And hope without an object cannot live.

The *Nectar in a Sieve* also subtitled as 'Rural Life' suggests the fleeting moments of bliss in Rukmini's life. She is a daughter of a well to do village headman. She had her own dreams. Yet her dreams cannot come true. Yet she is not unhappy, for she is an Indian believing in cross-casualty. Rukmini simply marries a village tenant farmer Nathan. Nathan lives in a small village of Tamil Nadu. He has a small hut for shelter and he works as a tenant. Well she comes to his house happily. The following is her joy about a farmer's life:

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? My heart sang and my feet were light as I went about my work, getting up at sunrise and going to sleep content. Peace and quiet were ours. How well I recall it, how grateful I am that not all the clamor which invaded our lives later could subdue the memory or still the longing for it. Rather, it has strengthened it: had there not been what has been, I might never have known how blessed we were.¹ (p.17)

Such a happy villager Rukmini gets a girl child Ira. Then five years pass. She wants a male child as her husband desires. She consults Dr Kenny, a white doctor. Afterwards she bears four sons, in fact. They are Arjun, Thumbby, Kutti and Raja. She marries her daughter with much dowry. The father sells his extra corn of the years and they marry her off. Unfortunately the next year there is not proper rain and the family suffers badly. It is said:

It rained so hard, so long and so incessantly that he thought of a period of no rain provoked a mild wonder. The water pitilessly found every hole in the thatched roof to come in, dripping on the already damped floor. The water rose and rose and the tender green of the paddy field sank under and was lost. (p. 39)

When there was a scarcity of corn as we see in Bhabhani Bhattachary's classic novel *So Many Hungers!* as an apt comparison, the money lenders and corn hoarders harass people. Such one Mr. Biswas harasses people. Another such threat was the master who demanded his dues though there was not good harvesting:

Sivaji came to collect his master's dues:

"There is nothing this year," Nathan said to him.

"You have had the land," Sivaji said, "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?." (pp. 72-73)

So finally Nathan pays him from his valuables. The family just lives on sheer hopes:

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 be relaxed. Despair, ready to

engulf him should be faltered; fear of the dark future, fear of the sharpness of hunger, fear of the blackness of death. (p.79)

Cultivation is a way of life for the couple and others in the novel. They are all farmers though of uncertain rewards. So they love their land and tilling. But the modern times bring their own results. One such thing is the process of industrialization. A white man brings a tannery factory to the village. He has many workers -- some of them Muslims. Accordingly they start their factory and people overcrowd there for work and pay. In fact, many of the locals join the factory. Though her two sons Arjun and Thumbby join the factory as workers, Rukmini feels the factory invades their privacy and it exploits them. She opposes it:

'Never, never,' I cried. They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were, that we have done these things. (p. 28)

Yet Rukmini's neighbors Kunthi, Kali, and Janaki accept the idea of factory. The author gives a fine picture of the growth of factory of course, surely invading people's privacy and exploiting them ruthlessly:

It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Night and day threatening went on. A never ending line of carts brought the raw material in. The officials of the Tannery had increased as well. Apart from the white man we had first seen -- who owned the Tannery and lived by himself -- there were some nine or ten Muslims under him. They formed a little colony of their own. They were a queer lot and their way of life was quite different from ours. (p. 47)

Rukmini's life is one of misfortunes we may say. Because her unstable family begins to shake. Her daughter Ira's marriage is broken up. Her two sons -- Arjun and Thumbby -- quarrel with Tannery's owner for more wages and they are dismissed. Now they go to Ceylon for work. Their young son Kutti begins starving. One day another son Raja is killed by the Tannery watch guard when he is stealing a calf's skin. The factory people come to her just to console and not to give her any compensation which she learns \was there for such cases:

'Compensation,' I thought what compensation is there for death? I felt confused; I did not understand what he was getting at. 'The point is,' the other said, and he thumped on the floor to emphasis his point, 'which no fault attaches to us. Absolutely none. It is your loss, but not our responsibility.'" (Pp. 91-92)

R.K. Srivastava observes:

Here the Tannery represents a world of immortality, greed and corruption invading which is moral, happy and pure.²

Shortly the factory expands rapidly. So the Nathans had to vacate the lands and migrate losing their identity. Rukmini says:

I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of brick 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 intended garden, strengthening whatever life grew in its way. (Pp. 33-34)

Misfortunes come in chain for the victims. Rukmini's daughter has become a prostitute for pulling a part of Nathan's family. Now she gives birth to an illegitimate child Sukrabani. What more, the Nathans are vacating their all belongings. Rukmini, the narrator too, says:

This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonged to another. And the land itself by which we lived. (p. 135)

The theme of dislocation is very well depicted here. The husband and wife manage to settle Ira's problem. Ira and their son Kutti (Selvam) stay together. The couple walk of many miles and reach the town where their one son Murugan was staying. Even after a long walk for days they cannot find him, for he has absconded. His former wife tells them he has married some one else. So the couple rest for some days in a temple. There they befriend an orphan boy -- Pully. Then they do the work of stone-cutting. One day, they decide to return to their village. On the way Nathan succumbs to fever and dies. The woman and the boy return safely. They are, however happy to see the village. The end of the novel is crafted brilliantly: So good to be home at last, at last. The cart jolted to a standstill, 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. The time of in-between, already a memory, coiled away like a snake within its hole. From the unfinished scaffold building a figure emerged, came running. Selvam, my son. 'That you,' he said, 'Are you all right?' and he held me. My daughter joined us..."Do not worry,' Selvam said, 'we shall manage.' (p. 189)

Markandaya depicts the trials of Rukmini's life and her great love for life. She depicts her trials like her daughter's divorce, son's death, and daughter's illegitimate child. Two sons going off and husband's death are there too. What more? The loss of old life, Tannery's exploitation, the loss of land, famine, hunger and the like are there haunting. The novel sustains our interest throughout. For example, she does not tell us about Rukmini's relation with Dr Kenny. He helped her greatly when he got Murugan a job and he offered a job for Selvam. This is common in a work of fiction.

Sharada Iyer observes: "Nectar in a Sieve is a realistic document of a village assaulted by industrialization."³ While Shiv K. Kumar says:

The story of the teeming millions of this country, who are to face periodic outbursts of hunger and famine, encounter all evil consequences flowing from such calamities, moral lapses, traffic in illicit relationships

and all the ghastly scenes that accompany famine in India are shown here.⁴

Finally it is said: "Nectar in a Sieve remains Kamala Markandaya's masterpiece...It is an engaging narrative."⁵

References

1. Markandaya, Kamala, 'Nectar in a Sieve', John Day Company (US), 1954.
2. Srivastava, R.K., Six Indian Novelists in English Fiction, Amristar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1987, p. 116.
3. Sharada Iyer, "Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve," Studies in Women Writers in English, ed by Mohit Ray, New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers, 2000, p. 143.
4. Kumar, Shiv K., Some Indian Writers of English Fiction, Modern Indian Languages, ed. by Golak, New Delhi: Publication Division, 1957, p. 283.
5. Iyer, Sharada, Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve, Studies in Women Writers in English, p. 146.