


Sufferings and Starvation in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2021-09033992

Volume: 9

Issue: 3

Month: June

Year: 2021

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 08.04.2021

Accepted: 16.05.2021

Published: 01.06.2021

Citation:

Malathi, VP. "Sufferings and Starvation in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2021, pp. 70-73.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v9i3.3992>



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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is one of the best known contemporary Indian novelists. Her novels are remarkable for their range of experience. Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is set in a village and it examines the hard agricultural life of the south Indian village where industry and modern technology played havoc. Kamala Markandaya occupies a very important position among the women novelist who have made substantial contribution to Indian fiction after the Second World War. Markandaya had not always lived abroad. She was born as Kamala Purnaiya in 1924 in Mysore and she was also a journalist. At some point, she decided to spend 18 months in a village "out of curiosity". This inspired the setting of her first novel, centred on Rukmani and her husband Nathan. *Nectar in a Sieve* is remarkable for its portrayal of rustics who live in fear, hunger and despair. It is of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger; fear of blackness of death. Almost all the characters in this novel lead miserable life and most of them fail to survive. There are at least a couple of them who were not successfully struggle and have the concept of survival. This novel tells the story of landless peasants of India who face starvation, oppression, breakup of family, home and death. Yet they retain their compassion, love, the strength to face their life and take delight in the little pleasures of the daily existence.

Keywords: Rustics, Hunger and despair, Blackness of death, Survival

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya was a pseudonym used by Kamala Purnaiya Taylor, an Indian novelist and journalist. A native of Mysore, India, Markandaya was a graduate of Madras University, and afterwards published several short stories in Indian newspapers. After India declared its independence, Markandaya moved to Britain, though she still labelled herself an Indian expatriate long afterwards. Known for writing about culture clash between Indian urban and rural societies, Markandaya's first published novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, was a bestseller and cited as an American Library Association Notable Book in 1955. Her other novels include *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), and *Pleasure City* (1982/1983).

Sufferings and Starvation in *Nectar in a Sieve*

Rukmani dreamt of a grand wedding which when materialised was anything other than grand. She was married to poor tenant farmer, Nathan who did not even own the land he titled. Rukmani's marriage is very vividly described by the novelist. The contrast become sharper when his condition is compared to that of her father who owned his own land but the situation was not all bad:

"We owned our own ploughing bullocks; we kept a goat, from each harvest we saved, and had gunny-sacks full of the husked rice stored away in our small stone-lined granary. There was food in plate for two people and we ate well; rice for morning and evening meals; dhal; sometimes coconut grated fine and cooked in milk and sugar; sometimes a wheat cake fried in butter and melting in the mouth".

The force of tradition is very effective in the way the birth of a girl is viewed in the family. The birth of a girl is looked upon the resignation, if not with sorrow. It is the male child that keeps up the father's line and saves the family. A barren woman is a cursed one. A barren wife is heartlessly ill-treated in the tradition bound Indian society and this is a universal phenomenon. Mother of a male child is welcome and mother of female child is not. Rukmani suffers the shame of both for some time. To her great disappointment, her first born child was a girl child. She was sad that the first born was a daughter. After a long wait she began to give birth many sons almost every year. In fact, half a dozen sons were born to her in a row. Naturally she had to lead a life of poverty. The reports of pulling down houses to build a tannery reached her. It changed the very life of the villages and Rukmani was never an exception to this.

"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 titling to barter, and board our silver since we cannot spend it".

Rain came to add to Rukmani's misery. It destroyed everything and she ran without food and grains. So, starvation stares in the face of her family. It is again the woman's burden to find the where withal to feed the family. Then she starts pretty trading. She sells vegetables in the market to eke out a living to feed her children. Soon the tannery intrudes and disrupts the family. Though, she was opposed to the coming of tannery in the village. She had to reconcile herself to it when her children Arjun and Thambi began working there against the will of their mother. Then they leave for Ceylon to work in a tea plantation there and never return. From this the novelist also presents the theme of technological invasion on the rural India. With the advent of tannery, the placid life of Rukmani is disturbed. It is primarily responsible for the decay of natural beauty in the rural area. It pollutes the atmosphere of the

whole village. The villagers become practically as hands in the factory, thereby making life mechanical.

Rukmani's struggles found no ends and soon a time came when she had to sell her vessels and everything else in her possession to pay the landlord. The drought which followed the heavy rain brought further problems for them and there was not enough drinking water available. To keep life going, water in limited quantity had to be brought from distance. Joseph does not find Rukmani a tragic character.

Soon Rukmani's grains had been stolen and her son Kuti had very serious health problems. To her complete shock she had to discover that all her sons had left their land. Also, she was made to be a witness to her daughter Irrawaddy giving birth to a fatherless child. To add to the misery her husband fell ill and she was not in a position to provide him with proper medicine and food. Towards the end of the novel we find Nathan and Rukmani trying to seek shelter in their son Murugan's house. But there again disappointment awaited them and they comes to know that Murugan had left Ammu, her daughter-in-law and his little child. So they both had no other option than returning to their native place. In short, Rukmani the heroine is made to struggle the most. Something unique about her is that even when she is beaten by misfortunes which come one after the other she makes an all out effort to survive somehow. Mostly she faces the problems almost with a bold face. It is an irony of fate that Rukmani outlives her husband Nathan who also had to struggle very hard in his life.

The novel deals with the peasants, their activities, problems and anxieties, hopes and expectations, joys and sorrows. One who fits very well within this framework is Nathan who was a poor peasant in every sense. He possessed a very small hut:

"Two rooms, one a short of storehouse of grain the other for everything else. A third had been begun but was unfinished; the mud walls were not more than half a foot high".

The novelist writes that the villagers are consequently plagued by tear, hunger and despair. There is no sign of "Nectar" which can be churned out of the dirty ocean of poverty and misery. There seems to be no for the enveloping burden of overpopulations and hopeless lamentation of the

poor. The protagonist Rukmani is a strong woman due to her unshakable faith and love; she maintains her calm in the face of sufferings and sacrifice. This novel presents the inevitable changes in the social and economic aspects in the wake of industrialization. Rukmani being a part of the peasant's society, her tale of grief is as well the tragedy of the poor peasants. In this case, therefore, the subject novel is almost invariably the relation of the individual to society. The novelist here portrays life in a society which is in the process of a change. She does not explore the psyche of the characters but attempts to uphold human values and principles like spiritual and moral strength. Also she is opposed to any type of exploitation- political, economic, culture or racial.

She receives shock one after the other like her husband's betrayal and later his death, her daughter's turning to prostitution to save the family from the starvation, death of Kuti, removal from the land, painful experience as stone breaker nothing breaks her spirit. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a realistic picture of a peaceful village attacked by the terrible pains of industrialization in the form of tannery. This setting up of a tannery ushers in a big change in the name of modernity and this industrialization spoils the beauty of the nature, village economy and the life of tenant farmers as well. Self- actualization theory is used to analyze this work. It was brought by Abraham Maslow. It refers to the desire for self fulfilment of an individual. It is a concept derived from Humanistic Psychological theory. It is based on the study of healthy and mature people. People are motivated to search for goals which make their lives meaningful. It is the basic level of needs to be met before self- actualization can be achieved. It also represents growth of an individual towards fulfilment of the highest needs. Thus Rukmani is found as the forerunner of the modern woman to liberate herself from the traditions and this shows that how she sacrificed herself for the fulfilment of her family in all the possible ways to survive till the very end.

Though the novel primarily talks about the sufferings of Rukmani and her family, it also reflects the novelists concern with the evil effects of industrialization on the Indian society and the consequent social and economic upheavals. Rukmani's story is a rebellion against change,

against industrialization, against the disappearance of the old landscape.

Conclusion

Nectar in a Sieve is relatively a short novel that introduces western students to life in rural India and the change that occurred during that country's British colonization. The novel is lyrical and moving and can be read on a variety of levels. It is the story of an arranged but loving marriage and rural peasant life and it is a tale of indomitable human spirit that overcomes poverty and unending misfortune. It is a novel about the conflicts between a traditional agricultural culture and a flourishing industrial capitalistic society. The novel touches on several important social phenomena: the important of traditional culture practices, people's reluctance to change, and the impact of economic change. Meena Shiradewadkar has suggested that the value of suffering is an important component of Markandaya's novels because she portrays her positive women characters as ideal suffer and nurtures.

Nectar in a Sieve was Kamala Markandaya's first novel to be published, although it is actually the third novel she wrote. The novel, published less than a decade after Indian won its independence from British, is clearly influence by this event, portraying some of the problems encountered by the Indian people as they dealt with the changing times. Marakandaya never mentions a specific time or place, however, which gives the story universality. Some of the struggles that main character, Rukmani, faces are the result of the changing times, but they are the kinds of struggles that are experienced by many people for many reasons. Far beyond its political context, the novel is appealing for its sensitive and moving portrayal of the strength of a woman struggling forces beyond her control.

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