

## Post-Colonial Family in *Nectar in a Sieve*

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**Kamala Markandaya**



Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) was a distinguished woman novelist on the Indian scene. Her work is noted for her Feminist orientation. Her novels tell the world the obstacles women face and disadvantages they suffer in the conventional Hindu world. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya pictures a woman's struggle to find happiness in changing times in India.



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Kamala Markandaya derives the title *Nectar in a Sieve* from Coleridge, whose lines form an epigraph to the novel: Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, and hope without an object cannot live. (Qtd. in Iyengar, 438) Kamala Markandaya has used the couplet by Coleridge because these lines vividly state the theme of the novel. When work is done without any hope it becomes as useless as nectar in a sieve. If there is no objective in life, life becomes useless. M.K. Bhatnagar in his essay, “Kamala Markandaya: A Thematic Study” rightly observes that Markandaya’s first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* illustrates all her basic preoccupations: the protagonist narrator Rukmani caught in a hard peasant life; the vagaries of nature, the depredations of modern civilization (in the shape of tannery), the forced migration to city and so on, enlightening how work without hope draws nectar in a sieve. (Bhatnagar 3)

The Indian peasant works without hope and leaves all in the hands of God and bears all sufferings with a sense of fatalism. Kamala Markandaya has subtitled the novel as *A Novel of Rural India* to reveal the very characteristics of rural India through the life of innumerable Indian villagers living in dire poverty, hunger and exploitation. She has not named the fictional locale to make a village microcosm of rural India.

### **Rukmani, the Protagonist**

The novelist has made Rukmani, the protagonist, narrate the tale, in order to show the subtle intensities of the moving fabric. She has made a woman the central character because she knows that woman is at the centre of the socio-economic structure of the Indian peasant families. Rukmani is a symbol of an Indian rural woman.

Rukmani’s views are reflections of typical socio-cultural ethos which is designed to make an Indian woman accommodative, obedient, inoffensive and easily happy with her lot. The story takes place in one of the small south Indian villages of India. Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of a once wealthy village headman is married to a tenant farmer, Nathan, who is poor in all respects. By the time Rukmani is married, the heydays of her father had come to an end

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resulting in her marriage to a poor peasant. Rukmani becomes the victim of the dowry system as her father is unable to pay her dowry. The fourteen year old Rukmani comes to her new home, the sight of which sends a chill down her spine. “This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch was my home.” (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 14) She could not adjust herself to such a poor family condition and surroundings. But when she comes to know that the hut has been built by her husband with his own hands, her fear and humiliation turn into pride. The Indian dowry system throws her in poverty and the Indian value system makes her to accept it as her fate.

The first six years of married life are spent without much complexity. However with the birth of every child they are thrown into deeper levels of poverty. Rukmani says, “we no longer had milk in the house except for the youngest child; curds and butter were beyond our means apart from on rare occasions” (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 24). Till the birth of the sixth child their economic condition worsens to such an extent that they have to remain half fed, though not starving, till they started growing vegetables in their own field. The rise in prices of the essential commodities compels them to sell the cattle. When Irawaddy, her only daughter turns fourteen she is married to a landless labourer. The family spent all their savings on her marriage. Unfortunately the flood destroys their crops in the same year and they have no other way but to survive on roots, leaves and plantain till the next harvest. To make the matters worse, four years after her marriage, Ira returns to her parents as her husband abandons her for not giving him an heir.

Arjun and Thambi, Rukmani’s two sons, start working in a tannery and improve their economic condition. But soon they lose their jobs and go to Ceylon in search of daily bread. The rains fail that year. As a tenant, Nathan, husband of Rukmani, is compelled to pay the tenant rental in order to continue to keep the tenant-farming land. For this they sell their household materials and bullocks. Rukmani’s third son Raja dies of brutal beating by the tannery watchmen. The condition of the youngest child Kuti becomes more and more critical. Ira becomes a prostitute to save her brother; her sacrifice, however, fails to save Kuti. Old Granny, a well wisher of Rukmani’s family, also dies of hunger in the street.

## The Structure of the Novel

The novel appears circular in structure as the story ends where it begins. Bhagwat Goyal in his book *Culture and Commitment* rightly says that it indicates the endless cycle of misery and deficiency in which India's rural and urban poor are eternally trapped (Goyal 98).

All the members of Nathan and Rukmani's family contribute to the realistic depiction of the poor and suffering in India. So the novel, rightly described as 'a novel of rural India' is an authentic picture of the Indian rural society, in which most people lived in continuous poverty and hunger and often died of hunger. However, M. K. Naik in *A History of Indian English Literature* says that "Rukmani's village exists only in the expatriate's imagination of her creator" (Naik 263). This position is not valid. Those who have been part of the period depicted in the novel (and there are thousands of people of that period still alive), do remember the horrid conditions of landless tenant farmers. Their suffering is well-recorded in realistic fiction in various Indian languages. Modern Tamil fiction in the hands of progressive writers such as Jayakanthan depicts the miserable lives of the landless workers, coolies and others.

## The Themes

The novel deals with a number of themes such as beggary, prostitution, lack of family planning, zamindari system, dowry system, superstitions, low status of women and evils of marriage system. Parvati Misra in her *Class Consciousness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya* observes: *Nectar in a Sieve* is a vivid record of the hungry rural peasantry whose life is afflicted by the existing social institutions and rituals such as child marriage, widowhood, and negligence of female child, slavery, landlessness, casteism and illiteracy." (Misra 2)

An old woman, Rukmani, who had lost her husband and five of her six sons, who live in her mud thatched hut, narrates her tremendously tender life's story which fills us with deep sorrow. Being a daughter of this soil, she knows what it means to be poor. She considers it as the

'sixth great sin'. Poverty breeds hunger. Anil Kumar Bhatnagar in his *Kamala Markandaya: A*

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*Thematic Study* says, “she makes her readers understand the true meaning of hunger and starvation. True one cannot judge the impact of hunger and starvation without passing through the terrible ordeal of being hungry. Markandaya lived in South-Indian villages and shared the sufferings of villagers as independent observer.” (Bhatnagar 21) She shows her minute observation of the effects of hunger on the human body and the human mind. Rukmani says, for hunger is an inquisitive thing: at first it is with you all the time, walking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently and there is a gnawing and a pain as if your very vitals were being devour, and you must stop it at any cost, and you buy a moment’s respite even while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this, you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you. Then that too is gone, all pain all desire only a great emptiness is left, like the sky, like a well in draught and it is now that the strength drains from your limbs and you try to rise and find you cannot, or to swallow water and your throat is powerless and both the swallow and the effort of retaining the liquid, tax you to the uttermost (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 87-88).

Markandaya gives a thorough account of the efforts of farmers and landless labour to make their two ends meet till the next harvest.

The youngest Kuti could not digest the things brought by the elders to eat. Being a weak child he suffers. Rukmani says, at first he asked for rice-water and cried because there was none. But later he gave up asking and merely cried. Even in his sleep he whimpered, twisting and turning endlessly, permitting no one to rest (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 88) All of them become so weak that on the death of Raja, her son, Rukmani does not cry and does not allow her daughter to cry. She says, “What are you crying for? ... you have little enough strength, without dissolving it in tears” (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 89).

### **Morals and Immorals**

It is hunger which provokes Kunthi to blackmail Rukmani. But through some characters like Irawaddy, Markandaya wants to project that not all choose the immoral path to overcome

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their poverty. Ira's choice of prostitution is not due to her hunger but to save her brother's life. Even in the direst poverty, Rukmani does not lose her morality. She shows her willingness to share her meals with her neighbour Kunthi. She even adopts a poor orphan child. Markandaya tries to show that lack of family planning is one of the reasons of poverty in rural India. When Rukmani gets married, they have enough to eat and store. But with the growing number of children poverty also grows.

### **Feudal Exploitation**

Markandaya also succeeds to portray the feudal exploitation, an important characteristic of rural India. Nathan is compelled to pay the land taxes of the Zamindar, even after the failure of the harvest. After nature's wrath, human assault comes as a wild shock. The landlord orders Nathan to vacate the land within two weeks. The tenant who has been tilling the land for more than thirty years is asked to vacate it within two weeks, without any compensation or any provision for his future. The land is sold to the tannery owner without the consent of the tenant. Nathan mutely succumbs to the exploitation.

### **Nathan as a Symbol**

Nathan symbolizes the plight of the Indian peasants when Rukmani says, "to those who live by the land there must always come time of hardship of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty. This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know: that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve. We live by our labours from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children and if bad times are prolonged we know we must see the weak surrender their lives and this fact, too, is within our experience. In our life there is no margin for misfortune" (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 134-135).

### **Tannery: Sign of Industry Overriding Farming**

Rukmani's son, the representative of the younger generation, expresses his anger over the exploitation but keeps mum when Nathan expresses his helplessness for not having any law against it. He says, "We may grieve, but there is no redress" (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 136). Rukmani blames the tannery for their exploitation. The tannery becomes the symbol of economic or industrial exploitation. Shiv K. Kumar in his essay "Tradition and Change in novels of Kamala Markandaya" compares it with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. He says, Rukmani, "the devoted wife of a tenant farmer, living in the soul of quietude of her little village, suddenly finds within this garden of Eden a serpent in the form of a tannery that begins to rear its ugly head, devouring green open spaces, pollute the clean, wholesome atmosphere and tempting simple gullible peasants into greed, ambitions and immorality" (Kumar 205).

### **Effects of Industrialization**

Through the character of Nathan, Markandaya shows the picture of Indian peasant at the advent of Industrialization. Industrialization makes peasants landless. Peasants know no other skills but for tilling the land. Industrialization makes them rush to the towns and cities. But due to their illiteracy and lack of any other skill they either turn beggars or die. When Nathan becomes landless he goes to the town. He loves his land more than anything else. Knowing no other skills, he becomes helpless when he is compelled to live in the town. He dies on the very day they plan to return. His fight against poverty and hunger comes to an end only with his unfortunate death. Markandaya thus succeeds in proving through this novel that it is the socio-economic state that is answerable for various kinds of social evils.

### **Saga of Womanhood**

The author's closeness to the central character makes *Nectar in a Sieve* 'a veritable saga of successful womanhood.' Most women in fiction and in real life have to struggle with conflicting situations. The Indian woman is caught in the flux of tradition and modernity - the burden of the past and the aspirations of the future. The novel shows that the Indian woman - passive or aggressive, traditional or modern - serves to reflect the author's quest for

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psychological insight and awareness. The figure of the Indian woman represented by Rukmani, with her inner power and honesty, paving her own resolute way through an exploiting, biased world, serves as an inspiring light of hope. Kamala Markandaya has a message for the new generation. Woman is not an island; she is the main land, the heart land of the human race.

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