

The Survival of Human Dignity in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract

One of the novels that have brought Kamla Markandaya to the forefront of English Writing in India is **Nectar in a Sieve**. The story moves round the lives of the peasant couple Nathan and Rukmani who have to suffer a lot due to the vagaries of Nature and failure of crops. Poverty, hunger and starvation gnaw at their very vitals. They have to face disintegration of their family as a result of industrialisation. Two of their sons Arjun and Thambi emigrate to Cylon after termination from the tannery. Their son Murugan becomes a domestic servant in the city and thus vanishes. Raja's dead body proved to be a great grief to their parents as he was killed by a lathi blow. Their daughter, Ira, after the failure of her marriage turns to prostitution to feed Kuti, her youngest brother. But Kuti could not live long as he died of hunger. Starvation comes in Nathan's family when nature goes against due to drought or excessive rain. They could not pay the landlord as the consequences of drought and they have to vacate their land and cottage. They were forced to go to the city to earn their livelihood. With a heavy heart Nathan and Rukmani had to leave their village. They became stone - breakers in quarry that was severe blow to Nathan who was already ill and it hastened his death. Rukmani returns to her village with the leper Puli she had adopted as her son.

Keywords: life,nature, rural, nectar, poverty.

The present paper throws light on Markandaya's delineation

of Rukmani with other characters that depicts the survival of human dignity despite the tyranny of the social forces. After bearing various trials and hardships throughout her life, Rukmani as well as her stoicism is awarded at the end where we find Rukmani living happily with her children Selvem, Ira and Puli. With an exceptional dexterity Kamla Markandaya pops up the heroic grandeur, nobility, endurance, spiritual calm and tranquillity of people like Nathan and Rukmani who struggle constantly and heroically against the impersonal forces which seems perpetual and irresistible, bent on defeating them.

Kamala Markandaya occupies a very prominent place in the history of Indian Writing in English. She has ten feathers in her cap in the form of novels. The novels that brought her to the forefront of Indo-C Anglian literature are the **Nectar in a Sieve** (1954), **Some Inner Fury** (1955), **A Silence of Desire** (1960), **Possession** (1963), **A Handful of Rice** (1966), **The Coffers Dams** (1969), **The Nowhere Man** (1972), **Two Virgins** (1973), **The Golden Honeycomb** (1977) and **Pleasure City** (1982). Her novels present a remarkable range of characters from Rukmani, a poor peasant woman in **Nectar in a Sieve**, through the urban poor of **A Handful of Rice**, to the upper class leading luxurious life in **The Golden Honeycomb** (1977). Kamala Markandaya's strength as a novelist lies in the depiction of human relationships and treatment of themes with realistic approach. The Russian critic Kalinnikova admits that she is "*undoubtedly an outstanding creative artist*". (Kalinnikova, 163)

Kamala Markandaya is recognised as a distinctive creative writer with the publication of her very first novel **Nectar in a Sieve** in 1954. The novel is a realistic presentation of rural India. It delineates the miserable condition of the peasant couple Nathan and Rukmani with their trials and tribulations like any other Indian peasant. Her first hand knowledge of the conditions of life in South Indian village provides her rare penetration and realism which has made it "A Novel of Rural India" as its subtitle suggests.

The story moves round the protagonist narrator Rukmani and her husband Nathan. The novel begins with Rukmani sitting in a reminiscent mood. As she recalls the threads of her life history, it reveals how she has to suffer throughout her life. Contrary to her

three elder sisters, she had to marry a poor tenant farmer due to the change of financial and social status of her brother and the tiresome journey of her life started. Her heart, which sank to see the mud hut of Nathan, gets solace to find Nathan having the heart of Gold. She finds relief in Nathan's assurance to provide her facilities after a few good harvests.

Rukmani and Nathan were blessed with six sons Arjun, Thambi, Raja, Murugan, Selvam and Kuti and the eldest daughter Irawaddy, but for these poor peasants such a large family was a heavy burden. It was hard for them to nourish them or save for the future. Although poverty stricken, they were not disheartened. Rather they were happy as they had compromised with the conditions they were put into by destiny. In the worst situations they hoped for the better time. But the unwelcome entry of industrialization not only invaded their village with clatter and din but it had also taken as Rukmani recalls, “*i-from us the maidan our children played and made the bazaar prices too high for us.*” (Markandaya,32)

Rising prices was a severe blow to the simple rural way of life. With the construction of tannery in the village misfortunes overtook Rukmani and Nathan swiftly in subsequence and they were totally ruined. Dr. A. V. Krishna Rao observes “*In Nectar in a Sieve, Markandaya dramatises the tragedy of traditional Indian Village and a peasant family assaulted by Industrialisation. Rukmani and Nathan, the peasant couple in South Indian Village are the victims of the two evils; Zamindari system and the industrial economy*”. (Rao, 56)

Rukmani and Nathan along with other villagers had to suffer a lot due to the vagaries of Nature and failure of crops. First there were heavy rains and flood and the entire paddy was totally destroyed. There was no hope of any rice till next harvest. Villagers had to face hunger and disappointment. Prices of food stuffs shot up. They had to live on salted Fish roots and leaves. They suffered in silence for days and months, somehow or the other, they managed to live on till the next crop. They had not given hope as the sowing season was near. They could wait for the better times.

Against the wishes of Nathan, his two sons Arjun and Thambi joined the tannery. Unlike Nathan, they did not want to work on lands. However, starved family including Nathan heaved a sigh of relief as they got good salary. They also celebrated Deepawali enthusiastically. But their happiness could not stay longer. Due to a strike in tannery, Arjun and Thambi lost their jobs and left for Ceylon with the prospects of job there. Nathan and Rukmani were broken-hearted. Their son Murugan also became a domestic servant in the city with the efforts of Dr. Kennington and so he, too, left them. Thus the family was disintegrated. Their son Raja who was employed in tannery was killed by a lathi blow while he was stealing a large piece of skin from there. Raja's dead body proved to be a great grief to his parents. As they were helpless, they accepted their lot passively. Kamla Markandaya has thus, presented a realistic picture of the impact of industrialisation of rural India.

Nature, once again, betrayed them when harvesting time came as the rains failed. There was no sign of rains and there was nothing to reap. They could not pay the landlord as the consequences of drought and they have to vacate their land and cottage. In the meanwhile their daughter Ira, after the failure of her marriage turns to prostitution to feed Kuti, her youngest brother. As a result she conceived and gave birth to the albino child who was named 'Sacrabani'. But Kuti could not live long as he died of hunger. Rukmani's son Selvam worked with Mr. Kenny in the construction of a building for hospital for poor. But the construction of the hospital was delayed so Selvam could earn no longer. Rukmani presents their worst state of starvation: *"Thereafter we fed on whatever we could find bamboo shoots, a stick of sugarcane left in some deserted field or piece of coconut picked From the gutter "It was not enough, sometimes from sheer rebellion we ate grass although it has always resulted in stomach cramps and violent retching."*(Markandaya,91) The youngest Kuti could not digest such things which compelled Ira to take to prostitution. All of them became so weak that on the death of Raja Rukmani neither cried and nor allowed anyone to cry. She says stoically, *"What are you crying for? "You have little enough strength, without dissolving it in tears."* (Markandaya,92)

Markandaya brings out the fact that poverty and hunger leads to degradation but characters like Rukmani represents the survival of human dignity, Kunthi, Rukmani's neighbour, degrades herself due to hunger. She takes to prostitution and also blackmails Rukmani to grab her stored Rice. But Rukmani does not lose her morality in the direst poverty. She remains a symbol of Indian peasant, who believes in simplicity and minimum desires and always hopes for the time to be better even when there is *"fear of dark future : fear of sharpness of hunger ; fear of blackness of death"*.(Markandaya, 83)

Nathan and Rukmani were forced to leave their village. They left for city to live with their son Murugan. They experienced great difficulty in finding out their son's address. It was possible with the help of Puli, a boy of nine years. They reached Murugan's house only to get another shock as Murugan deserted his wife Ammu and children. Ammu herself was poor and starving, so they took shelter in the temple and lived on the charity like beggars.

Desire of returning to their village encouraged them to work; Puli again helped them by introducing job in stone quarry. They worked as stone "C breakers there. They were hopeful of soon having enough money to pay the return fare to the village. But their miseries did not come to an end. Rukmani got a great blow from destiny when one day Nathan was drenched due to heavy rains and died with high fever during the night. Rukmani was now all alone in the dark and wide world. Her grief was immeasurable. However Puli stood by her and she was consoled by him. Gathering her strength, Rukmani returns to the village with the leper Puli, her adopted son. Selvam and Ira welcome them with open arms. Selvam assured her to take care of them. Puli was duly treated and cured in the hospital for the poor. Nevertheless she was glad to be with her family and on the land that was once again hers. Rukmani regains her spiritual calm and tranquillity, 'the nectar' that always remained in the sieve. And then she surveys her past and narrates her life story in reminiscent mood.

Markandaya depicts the survival of human dignity despite the tyranny of the social forces through the characters of Rukmani and Nathan. After bearing various trials and hardships throughout

her life, Rukmani as well as her stoicism are awarded at the end where Rukmani living happily with her children Selvam, Ira and Puli. Kamala Markandaya pops up the heroic grandeur, nobility, endurance, spiritual calm and tranquillity of people like Nathan and Rukmani who struggle constantly against the impersonal forces which seems perpetual and irresistible, bent on defeating them. *“But the heart that is tempered in the flames of love and faith of suffering and sacrifice will not easily accept defeat.”* (Iyengar, 438)

As Iyengar remarks and calls Rukmani a ‘Mother of Sorrows’ who receives shock after shock with immeasurable patience. She considers misfortunes and sorrows as an essential part of life and accepts poverty and hunger stoically. She finds grandeur in endurance and describes forbearance of hunger philosophically, *“Our priests fast and inflict themselves severe punishments and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence, and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed.”* (Markandaya, 114)

Thus Rukmani, who had lost her husband and five of her six sons, narrates her heart rending life story. Being a daughter of the rural India, she knows what it means to be poor. A woman of great fortitude, she bears through the suffering without losing the virtues of motherhood and love. Despite innumerable sorrows and pains she adopts the leper Puli who gets treatment in the village hospital. She shows an indefatigable spirit. At the end of the novel she is at the peace with herself and her life. As Iyengar observes, *“Calm after storm, spring after winter” C such is the unending cycle. One must hope, and one must preserve even if one is engaged only in trying to discover “nectar in the sieve”.* (Iyengar, 439)

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