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KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S "NECTAR IN A SIEVE": A REALISTIC RURAL EPIC NOVEL

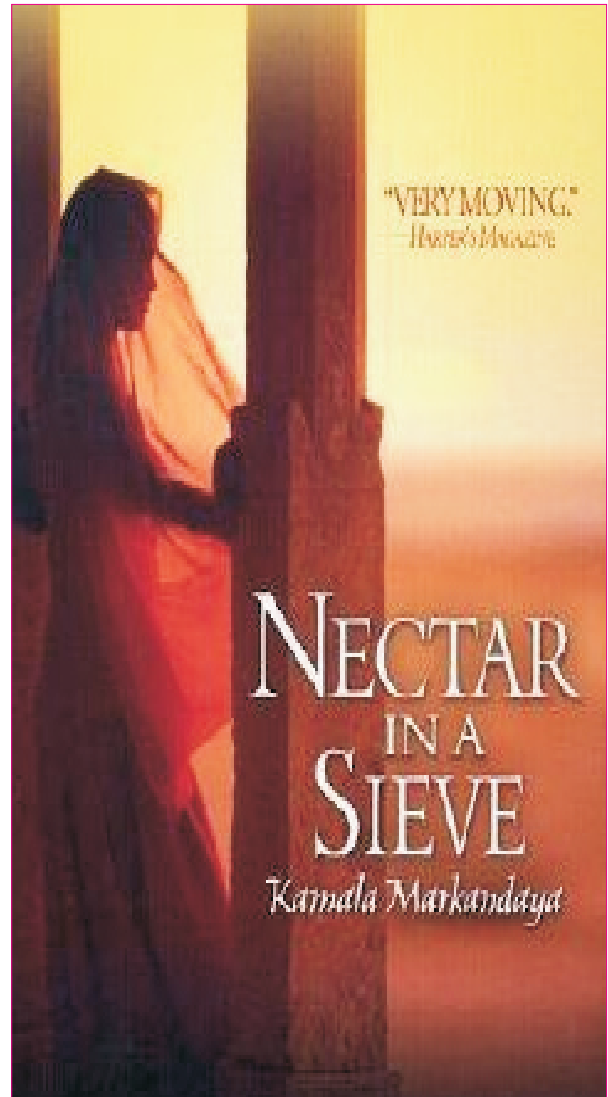
R. Rekha Rani¹ and Dr. V. B.Chitra²

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of English, JNTUA, Anantapuramu, A.P., India.

²Associate. Professor, Dept. of English, JNTUA, Anantapuramu, A.P., India .

ABSTRACT

This paper throws light on the Rural India struggling for survival. It mainly portrays the miserable plight of the landless farmer Nathan and his wife Rukmani with their trials and tribulations culminating in their tragedy. Kamala Markandaya mainly projects the theme of starvation, poverty, degradation, prostitution, unemployment, evils of early Marriage found in the life of Villagers. Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve examines the suffering of rural people. It is a story of simple villagers whose source of income is the land. The villagers' view of life is fatalistic. This fatalism is clearly seen in Nectar in a Sieve. Nathan and Rukmani silently endures their sufferings, they do not complain though their life appears to be all pessimistic on surface but conceals within the linguistic optimism, which says that we are all in God's hands and he is merciful. Nectar in a Sieve is a typical plight of rural family indicating the typical tendencies of the people in terms of change.



R. Rekha Rani

KEYWORDS: Plight, Evince, Realism, optimism, pessimistic, prostitution.

INTRODUCTION :

In the depiction of Indian rural life various Indo-Anglian novelists have tried their hand with varying degrees of success. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya and Khuswant Singh have given occasional snatches of rural life. Raja Rao's "Kanthapura" was the best Indian novel in English in its faithful portrayal of rural India.

Kamala Markandaya occupies a very important place in the history of Indo-Anglican fiction. She is one of the greatest women novelists. She is an august explorer of human consciousness and of the

convulsion of intimate interpersonal relationships, caught in the whirl pool of disparate and divergent cultures.

Her fiction evinces a much broader range and offers a greater variety of settings, characters & effect, despite the fact that quintessentially her themes boil down to intercultural encounters and capturing of women in diverse life –roles. Some of the prominent thematic concerns of her works revolve round the east-west encounter, confrontation between tradition and Modernity and the clash of value.

All Markandaya's novels reveal her deep preoccupation with the changing Indian society and political scene. They reflect her careful craftsmanship and her skilful use of the English language for creative purpose.

NECTAR IN A SIEVE AS A RURAL EPIC:

Nectar in a Sieve is about Rural India. It depicts the story of a simple peasant couple from south India. The problem of Rural India and the tragic condition of Indian Peasants have been depicted with moving realism. It effectively focuses on the theme of hunger; social problems such as poverty, lack of family planning, unemployment, prostitution are very realistically portrayed by Kamala Markandaya.

In a sense Nectar in a Sieve is a representative fiction of South Indian Village, Rukmani the Central character and also the narrator of the fiction is a traditional woman, with no control over her situations. It is her capacity to compromise that sustains her throughout. She is not materialistic but gives importance to human values. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar is of the view that Rukmani "gets her inner strength from her love for her husband and children and her faith in human dignity. The suffering she faces leaves her stronger. She is not weakling to accept defeat". Rukmani is married to a poor tenant farmer Nathan and adjusts in poverty with him. Their poverty however endowed their life with peace and contentment. Her revelation displays profound satisfaction. She puts:

"My heart sang and my feet were light as I went about my work, getting up at sunrise & going to sleep content" (NIS. p.9)

Kamala Markandaya presents a beautiful picture of Indian culture. We get the glimpse of Indian Culture in the very beginning when Rukmani the narrator of the novel describes about her marriage with a poor person because of lack of dowry, she says:

"My three sisters were married long before I was, Shanta first, a big wedding which lasted for many days, plenty of gifts and feasts, diamond earrings, a gold necklace, as befitted the daughter of the village headman. Padmini next, and she too made a good match and was, married fittingly taking jewels and dowry with her; but when it came to Thangam only relations from our own village came to the wedding and not from the surrounding districts as they had done before, and only jewel she had was diamond nose-screw." (NIS.p.1)

At the time of Rukmani's marriage the Socio political circumstances were declined. This decline in social status of her father made her to marry a poor farmer. Rukmani ruminates:

"By the time I came to Womanhood, even I have to acknowledge his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband, and married me to a poor tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care for me, his wife, whom he took at the age of twelve." (NIS.p.4)

Though Nathan is poor, he is very affectionate husband. Rukmini gave lot of respect to him, she adored him just like a God. Through Rukmani Kamala Markandaya depicts the Indian culture. When Rukmani says:

"It was my husband who woke me, whom I will call here Nathan, for that was his name, although in all the years of our marriage I never called him that, for it is not meet for a woman to address her husband except as 'husband'." (NIS.p.6)

The woman in a traditional Indian family is always subordinate to the man, they believe that sons are assets and the daughters are considered as a burden on the family. When her first born child is a daughter, Rukmani is very disappointed.

"For what woman want a girl for her first-born," (NIS. p.16)

Rukmani thinks it as a punishment for her past sins. After the first baby Rukmani fails to bear a child for many years. In the village, a childless woman even with one daughter without a son is considered as an ill fated one and the life of woman who has no children is worse. Ira's husband deserts her because she is barren. Hence the husbands in rural areas discard their barren wives. It is natural that Rukmani easily reconciles herself to Ira's ill

fate and consoles her:

"You must not blame him, he has taken another woman." (NIS. p.65)

The rural people take pride in having more number of children. When Rukmani fails to conceive her mother takes her to a temple and together they pray before the deity for a son. She also gives Rukmani a small stone lingam to wear so that she will be able to bear more sons. Most of the characters in the novel are typically rural. Rukmani, Nathan, Janaki, Kali, Kuti, Ira, Old Granny have an unmistakable rural bearing. Their life style and speech belong to the country side. The villagers have many blind beliefs. It is believed the cobras are sacred and hence they should not be killed. When seven years pass Rukmani becomes quite worried, and for having a son she visits Dr. Kennington for treatment and soon a son is born to her and the birth makes Nathan Happy. They name the child Arjun and in quite succession, she gives birth to Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam & Kuti.

Rukmani Stand by Nathan in times of both happiness and suffering, during good harvest and draught. During their abject penury Nathan feels grateful to her and declares: "You are a good wife and i would not have any other" (NIS.p.82)

The advent of tannery in the village proves to be a fatal one to the family. Rukmani smells a danger out of it but to Nathan and Kuti, the tannery is good, as it will provide more opportunities. The Tannery attracts farmers who are ready to become labourers as they have no other choice. Kunthi lures men and sells her body. Her two sons join the tannery and later Rukmani's son Arjun and Thambi follow suit. Arjun, Thambi and Kali's sons are dismissed as they go on strike against the employer's policies. The draught destroys the crop and makes their sufferings deeper. Rukmani considers this urbanisation as a tragedy. She regards tannery as the key to all her troubles:

"None but these would have laid hands on her (Ira). My sons had left because it frowned on them. One of them had been destroyed by its ruthlessness." (NIS.p.136)

Nathan and Rukmani have to sell their house hold things to pay the landlord. Ira becomes a prostitute to feed her family. Rukmani who saved 10 pounds of rice for difficult time is blackmailed by Kunthi.

"I will have the rice now or your husband shall hear that his wife in not a virtuous as he believes or she pretends". (NIS.p.85)

Rukmani was shocked to hear such a threat from kunthi. Things became cleared when Nathan told her that the grains had been stolen for Kuti. *"Kunthi took it all, I swear it. She forced me, I did not want you to know"* (NIS.p.88). He even admitted to Rukmani that he was the father of Kunthi sons. What she could do was just remember kali, 'her neighbours' words:

"She has fire in her body, men burn before and after my husband was of those men he had known her not once but twice, he had gone back to give her a second son... while her husband in his impotence & I in my innocence did nothing". (NIS.p.88)

The couple now old and weak leave the village looking for their son Murugan in the city they get robbed of their meagre belongings and ends up as stone breakers in a quarry. They feel out of place among the hard-hearted people of the city. They find it difficult to reconcile to the city life as Nathan says: *"This is not my home, I can never live here"* (NIS.p.181). Nathans health Detroit and he dies in the quarry Rukmani has to face the worst of all tragedies in her life when her husband dies, After Nathan's death Rukmani feels shattered: *"Nathan no longer beside me Ashes & dust scattered to the winds"* (NIS.p.189) but this is only for a short period and she soon revives her indomitable spirit:

"I Picked up the fragments of my life and put them together..." (NIS.p.192)

Significantly at the end Rukmani's return from the town to her village along with her adopted son Puli, symbolises her ultimate triumph.

Apart from being a profound love story on the endurance of family ties, it is a fine sociological document that draws attention to the impact of the monsoon on India's agrarian economy, the traits and tribulations of arranged marriage and dowry in India, and the urgent need for rural development and social reform.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, Kamala Markandaya has given a vivid picture of Rural India and its problems .The Novel in all its

aspects i.e., social, religious, economical, purely belongs to Indian Rural life. On the whole this novel of Kamala Markandaya stands as the realistic rural epic novel.

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Dr. V. B. Chitra

Associate. Professsor, Dept. of English, JNTUA, Anantapuramu, A.P., India .

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