



## **RURAL LIFE ENMESHED IN TRADITIONAL SOCIALILLS: KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NOVEL *NECTAR IN A SIEVE***

**ASHOK SADASHIV PATIL**

Ph. D. Research Scholar  
Department of English,  
Shivaji University,  
Kolhapur [MS] INDIA

### **ABSTRACT**

*Among the Post-Independence Indian novelists in English Kamala Markandaya has emerged as a potential creative artist recreating the social milieu of the rural India at the onset of Indian Independence. 'Nectar in a Sieve', her debut novel that came out from her powerful pen has drawn appreciation from contemporary prolific scholars, and immense praise from the readers in India and abroad, and also from well-known literary artists, the most of whom have recommended the novel to all those who wish to understand India and its people. With an uncommon spirit of restraint and artistic control, Markandaya makes a faithful projection of the rural life, by recreating the spirit of age-old social ills that still rule the rural world. 'Nectar in a Sieve' comes before us as an authentic verbalization of the village life enmeshed in social ills such as superstitious beliefs, landlordism (feudalism), illiteracy, dowry system, money-lending, child marriage, etc.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kamala Markandaya is undoubtedly one of the most accomplished Anglo-Indian fiction artists, both in respect of her sensitive handling of a foreign medium and realistic depiction of the Indian social scenes. Being gifted with a fine faculty of artistic perception, authentic portrayal of life in almost all her novels impresses one and all, the Indians as well as foreigners. As she had wandered in the rural area of South India in the early years of her life, her artistic sense is enriched with the firsthand, knowledge of the life of poor rustics living at the mercy of nature whose lives are forever crunched under the burdens of social evils. Besides that Markandaya occupies the most vital position among the female novelists who



have made substantial contribution to Indian English fictional matrix after Indian Independence.

Though Markandaya had been in the alien land, England, for too long a period, ever since her marriage with Mr. Taylor, she has not alienated herself from her native land emotionally and mentally, and has been sincerely conscious of the social issues in India, and of the problems and predicaments of the people there, and her fictional creations, almost all of which are having Indian themes, settings and characters, bear well-witness to the fact. Due to her graphic documentation of socio-economic scenario in contemporary India, she has been regarded as one of the prominent novelists on the commonwealth scene. Though her narratives can be analyzed from various perspectives, it is her sincere and serious commitment to the ordinary Indian life and social issues there which provides her fictional creations with abiding interest. Markandaya has proved her versatility by handling varied themes in her fictional works with great authenticity, and her debut novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), is entirely devoted to Indian rural life, and the sub-title of the novel, *A Novel of Rural India*, itself well-reveals the fact. When most of the fiction artists in Indian English have indulged luxuriously handling distant and alien concepts and themes, Kamala Markandaya, with her extraordinary control over matters and medium, devotes herself to the native soil and to the faithful reflection of her region, the village area in the South India. The conducts and activities of the rustics, both men and women, at home and field, are vividly reflected, and their social life brought with the wealth of nature or blighted with economic misfortunes is put forward graphically.

One of the worst social practices that has been prevailing in the Indian village community since the long past, and has become the chief barrier in the social as well as economic advancement of the people, is the superstitious and religious beliefs. Generally Indian rural people, being orthodox in their perspectives, usually stuck themselves to the age-old customs and conventions without searching their authenticity. Most of these practices being useless and harmful, are a sheer waste of time and money. Obviously superstitious beliefs are those that cannot be proved on the scientific basis and are mostly based on the imaginary matters. As these beliefs have their roots in illiteracy and ignorance, the dominance of the same is more conspicuous in the rural society than that in the urban one. Being illiterate majority of the rustics are mostly ignorant of scientific knowledge, and are usually victimized to these beliefs, and besides that, being extremely orthodox, they have strong faith in god and religion. For them every act of their day today life, major or minor, has some direct or indirect connection with the divine power or religion.

The villagers being mostly relied on the profession of agriculture for their livelihood, and in turn the agriculture being tightly bound to the uncertainties of the nature, these humble peasants are destined to work hard, but without hope, and depend for everything on the

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divine power. For them their sufferings and sorrows are a punishment by god for their misdeeds or sins, and so they endure the same uncomplainingly, and also attempt to seek relief by following superstitious beliefs. Markandaya seems to disapprove these beliefs and practices strongly, and has usually attempted to focalize the same through several instances in the novel with great sincerity and authenticity. In the village community a cobra is supposed to be a sacred creature and is divine, therefore, should not be killed, and the rustic belief has its denotation in the speech of Kali, the neighbouring woman of the protagonist agrarian couple, Nathan and Rukmani, as a reaction to Nathan's act of killing the snake, as she says to Rukmani, " But it is a pity your husband killed the snake, since cobras are sacred ( Markandaya. P.15)."

Though superstitious and religious beliefs are the product of illiteracy, it seems that the literate too are not free from them due to divine fear and ignorance. Rukmani, though fairly literate, seeks the power of small stone *lingam* to remove her sterility, as after her first born child Iravadi, during a period of six years there is no sign of the next issue in Rukmani. As it is traditionally regarded there that if a woman suffering from sterility bears a stone *lingam*, her sterility can be removed. In addition to that she goes to a temple to pray the deity begging for help in this respect. Nathan and Rukmani, being utterly pious, and also are also entirely relied on the agriculture for their livelihood, when rains fail, Rukmani throws herself on the ground before the goddess, prays and offers Her a pumpkin and a few grains of rice. Again at the time of sowing, the couple takes the seed to their goddess and places it at her feet, and prays for Her blessings. An average Indian rustic generally begins and also ends every important work with the worship of the deity. Having strong faith in god, they regard Him responsible for the best and the worst in their lives. When there are favourable rains and good harvest, the couple produces enough grains, they usually go to the deity to make a prayer of thanks. Besides that, superstitious beliefs seem to be largely responsible for the poverty of the rural folk, as they think that a child is a gift by the god, and having many children, a divine blessing, liberally offered by Him, and so they wish to have more and more children that usually leads them to poverty. Rukmani's parents have six children, Rukmani herself is a mother of seven children and Janaki, the wife of village shopkeeper, has seven children. Speaking of the depiction of the superstitious beliefs in the novel, Uma Parmeswaran, the prolific scholar and literary artist, states that the spirit of acceptance born of simple faith, does not break down even when the deities in whom Rukmani and Nathan repose faith remain unmoved by their prayers..., like her unvarnished language, her faith too is unpolluted by doubts ( Parmeswaran, U.p.94).

The rural community being primarily agrarian, the agriculture is the chief source of rural livelihood. As the agriculture land is not equally distributed among the entire population, it is this unequal sharing of the land wherein lies the roots of landlordism (feudalism), and ownership of the land itself is the basis of the system. Major portion of the available land is

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owned by a very few people, the smaller one which has been left is owned by the some, and the largest portion of the population there goes without it. Those who own the major portion of the land are known as landlords, and due to their ownership of the land, they are socially and economically uplifted ones, and thus, form the 'upper-class'. The major portion of the rural population that is without land, either works as farm labourers on the wage basis for the landlords, or cultivates their land on the lease basis as tenant farmers. The laws regarding the tenancy of the land are mostly unjust to the tenant farmers. As it being one of the chief hindrances in the rural advancement and also cause of several miseries of the humble rustics, Markandaya has deliberately brought forth this aspect of rural community, ably and authentically, and here she does not depict the luxurious life of the rich landlords but prefers to represent the life of the poor landless peasants who are the weakest ones in all respects.

Like most others there Nathan, the humble, illiterate, landless peasant, is also a tenant farmer who cultivates the land of the landlord by accepting the harsh terms kept by the latter such as that if he fails to pay the contracted dues as the rent, the land will be taken away from him, and that he has to pay the revenue whether the harvest is the best or the worst, so Nathan has to live forever on the mercy of the landlord. Like one and all tenant farmers there he is obliged to undergo strenuous physical works in the field all the days of the year, even in burning heat, freezing cold, and in heavy rains, yet they are not sure of getting sufficient food to satisfy their hunger after day's hard work, and even after good harvest they have to starve, as major share of their yield is taken by the landlord as a land revenue, and are always compelled to lead their lives under the worry and fright of the land being taken away from them, or of the drought or the heavy rainfall. Thus, the tenant farmers are subject to all sufferings created by the man and the nature.

Extremity of the miseries of the tenant farmer gets well-reflected in the instance in the novel when Nathan's already bad financial condition deteriorates due to severe drought, and he becomes unable to pay the dues of the landlord. Though, Shivaji, the kind, gentle-natured agent of the landlord gives him the concession of paying half of the dues then and the half the next year, to pay that half revenue too he has to sell almost all of his possessions such as mud pots, brass vessels, the tin trunk, two shirts of his eldest son, two pounds of dhal, a handful of chillies, the bullocks with the plough, and even Rukmani's bridal sari and his dhoti, and even the seed of the next sowing. This tragic predicament of the tenant farmer gets unveiled in the lamenting of Nathan over his own plight, as grieves:

Now the landlord can wring from us his moneys and care not for the misery he evokes, for indeed it would be difficult for any man to see another starve and his wife and children as well; or to enjoy the profits born of such travail ( p.7).



Commenting on the plight of the tenant farmers victimized by the landlordism, Pradipsinh Rathod, in his critical article, *The Theme of Hunger in Kamala Markandaya's 'Nectar in a Sieve'*, states:

*Still a sigh of solace is possible and practical as well if the disaster is caused by nature only, but tenant farmers like Nathan must not rest as they have to settle the lifelong unsettled accounts with their landlord ( Dhawan, R. K. p.62).*

Pathetic educational scene is one more striking characteristic of the rural India. Almost all rural people, except those who are socially and economically uplifted, are illiterate and quite strangers to the alphabets. Illiteracy, obviously being a result of many factors such as their social and economic backwardness, their prejudices and disinterestedness to education, and in turn it being the root cause of many evils such as superstitiousness and religiosity, exploitation, neglect of healthcare, lack of family planning, and after all, their social and economic backwardness, no literary artist can let illiteracy be unheeded, while dealing with the rural theme. Being highly concerned with the rural life in India, usually Markandaya has also deliberately highlighted the same with earnest fervour, in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Almost all rural characters in the novel are illiterate, with only exception of Rukmani, her brothers and sisters, and her own children, who are educated, though at a rudimentary level. Kali, Janaki, Kunthi and the other characters in the narrative are completely uneducated, and usually when Rukmani writes, they don't understand the meanings of these strange symbols. Rukmani's husband Nathan too is illiterate, and can't even sign his name. Rukmani's own mother is also illiterate. Social as well as economic exploitation of the rural people is mainly an outcome of their illiteracy, and only because of their analphabetism and ignorance they are inhumanly exploited by the socially and economically mighty ones there such as landlords, moneylenders, shopkeepers, etc. and thus, illiteracy is the root cause of their poverty and suffering. Besides that, due to their illiteracy they are entirely ignorant of scientific knowledge, and are usually victimized by varied useless and harmful superstitious and religious practices. Traditional rural society being completely against women's education, the literacy rate of female is seriously low there. The orthodox view regarding the girls' education and unwillingness of elderly generation there to the same gets unwrapped in the speech of Rukmani's mother, as she enunciates:

*What use... that a girl should be learned! Much good will it do her when she has lusty sons and a husband to look after. Look at me, am I any worse that I cannot spell my name, so long as I know it ( p. 11)?*





Nathan is also against women's education as he is of the opinion that educating the girl child is a sheer waste.

Dowry system, the worst of the social evils, the constant companion of the Indian society since the long past, has been considered a curse to the society. Dowry is a wealth given in the form of money, jewellery or other valuables. at the time of marriage, either by the side of the bride to the bridegroom, or by the side of the groom to the bride. In most of the Indian communities it is given by the bride to the groom, and it forms the basis of the match. The rural as well as urban communities in India are not free from this evil, but the considerable dominance of it can be felt in the rural one. The rural folk, especially the parents of the girls, and the girls themselves, have to suffer much from this brutal practice as it causes great economic loss to the parents, and also creates horrific problems in the lives of innocent daughters. The future of the rural girl is determined by the economic capability of her parents to afford dowry, and their inability for offering it, makes the future of their daughter dark and full of miseries. Markandaya, being socially sensitive, and highly conscious of women's problems, especially of rural ones, cannot help herself from unveiling this most sensational issue of the Indian village community, while handling the rural theme in the novel. When in the beginning, the father of Rukmani has been a man of social and economic power, a village headman, the first two elder sisters of Rukmani, Santha and Padmini, get suitable matches, as rich dowries such as diamond rings, a gold necklaces, and plenty of gifts have been given in their marriages by their father, after that due to debilitating financial condition of him, her third sister, Thangam has been given only a diamond nose screw as a dowry, and later by the time of Rukmani's marriage, her father has lost his power and is not in the position of offering any dowry, as a result she is given in marriage to a poor tenant farmer who owns no land of his own, and thus, is married below her family status. Rukmani's daughter Ira, though being exceptionally beautiful and virtuous, a dowry of one hundred rupees is given to the groom in her marriage, though it is far beyond the financial capabilities of her parents, and even after that, she has been abandoned, being stamped as a barren, by her husband, and cannot get remarried due to inability of her parents to offer any dowry. Here, it gets illustrated that the innocent, good-natured rural girls are compelled to suffer much mentally and physically, throughout their lives, only because their parents are unable to offer enough dowry.

Money-lending, one more social evil, too has been largely responsible for much of the miseries in the simple, innocent lives of the poor rural people, since the long past. The villagers being solely dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, and agriculture, in turn, being entirely relied on the whims of monsoon, these meek beings are mere puppets in the hands of destiny, and also nature. Natural disasters have direct and adverse effect on the rural economy, and besides these natural enemies, some of the factors like social evils as dowry, superstitious beliefs, etc., and also their exploitation, as themselves being illiterate,

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uneducated and ignorant, by the cunning and the mighty ones in the society, compel these humble villagers to undergo severe financial crisis, and when the crisis reaches to its extremities, and becomes unbearable, having no other way to avoid it, eventually these poor souls helplessly and unwillingly surrender themselves to the evil, illegal practice of money-lending. Generally the money-lenders are cunning, crafty, and wise enough to take undue advantage of the miserable plight of the helpless rustics. As the money-lenders hold a significant position in the rural economy, and as the poverty-stricken, ignorant villagers have to live on the mercy of the money-lenders, as having no other way before them to satisfy their financial needs, subsequently, the practice being one of the major typical features of the rural India, Markandaya seems to have deliberately paid much attention towards verbalizing the same in an elaborate manner. In Rukmani's village also there is a money-lender named Biswas, having almost all evil traits of the typical money-lender, cunning, crafty, wicked, hypocrite, and thus, the worst of the species. Like most other needy villagers there, Rukmani and Nathan, the poverty-stricken agrarian couple too is brutishly exploited by him by taking undue advantage of their helpless plight. In the narrative Markandaya seems to have ably projected Biswas as the very incarnation of greed, brutality and exploitation, and usually as a representative of money-lending class in the rural society.

One of the most barbarous practices in the rural community is child marriage system which has been long prevailing there, and is also omnipresent in almost all rural localities in India. Due to several factors such as orthodox views and social restrictions regarding the female folk, grinding poverty and also because of social evils like dowry, rural parents generally tend to marry their children at premature, tender ages of them which certainly compels these delicate, innocent buds to be crushed under the tremendous burden of physical works, and social and moral restrictions and commitments. Primarily, due to dowry system these humble villagers wish relieve themselves from the burden by giving their daughters in marriage earlier. The practice of child marriage being one of the cruelest hostiles of rural female folk, and also one of the chief barriers in the female empowerment, and in turn in the rural development, Markandaya has purposefully brought forth this harsh reality of Indian rural culture in the novel with appreciable sincerity and authenticity. Like almost all female there, Rukmani gets married at the tender age of twelve, and is consequently obliged to undergo manifold hardships, throughout her entire life. Ira, the daughter of Rukmani and Nathan, has to get married at her delicate age of fourteen, and is also usually forced by the circumstances to undergo several untold miseries and ordeals. While commenting on the representation of the child marriage custom in the rural India and its adverse effects on the rustic female in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Uma Parmeswaran states:

A bride at 12, Rukmani is a mother at 13, mother of six children at 24. Put bluntly in this manner the ages shock one; but Kamala Markandaya weaves the facts so evenly into the story

that one sympathetically realizes that tropical flowers in their natural state blossom early, wither soon, and yet retain a clinging fragrance ( Parmeswaran. p. 93).

After going through the narrative, and perusing several instances in it, it seems that the rural life, though bestowed upon by the nature with arboreal, serene, hygienic natural atmosphere, is truly reeling under the dominance of several social evils which have been the root causes of almost all miseries of the innocent, meek rural beings, the male as well as the female, and also of social and economic backwardness of the village community, and Markandaya has authentically verbalized the same with minutest details, by employing her the first-hand knowledge and uncommon artistic skill.

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