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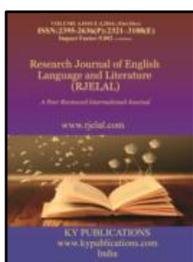
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THE CONFLICT BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN LIFE IN MARKANDAYA'S NECTAR IN A SIEVE

G . AMBIKA¹, J. RAGUVARAN²

¹ Research Advisor & Asst . Prof. Department of English, PRIST University , Thanjavur

²Research Scholar , Department of English , PRIST University, Thanjavur



ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya is one of the well-known Indian Women novelists writing in English. She won international fame and recognition with the publication of her maiden novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. In *Nectar in a Sieve* Kamala Markandaya Spotlights the despair of the farmers realistically. They are desperate because of the vagaries of natural calamities, the resultant constant hunger, ruthless machines and heartless men. When an Indian village is on the threshold of industrialization, the peasant community suffers both physically and mentally. Nathan and Rukmani are representatives of millions of tenant farmers in India and their life is an example of the havoc caused by industrialization. The whole novel thus reveals the story of an Indian village shaken to its roots by the onslaught of modernization. *Nectar in a Sieve* is much more than the story of the life and suffering of Rukmani and Nathan, a faceless peasant couple, symbolic of rural dwellers all over the country. The tragedy of Rukmani and Nathaan is universalized and vested with an epic significance. Markandaya's novel vividly records the poverty-stricken, heart-breaking existence of the people in rural areas. Their struggle has been given an epic grandeur and dignity. The village where they lived has not been given any name and its locals had been kept vague and indistinct. This was so because it symbolizes rural India and Nathan and Rukmani symbolize the Indian farmer and the tragedy of rural India. *Nectar in a Sieve* captures the effects of social upheavals on its characters. Markandaya's themes depict her tragic vision of life.

Kamala Markandaya (1924 – 16 May 2004) was a pseudonym used by Kamala Purnaiya Taylor, an Indian novelist and journalist. A native of Mysore. Kamala Markandaya had great hopes for India. Her most famous novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, told the story of a woman who faced incredible hardships yet never ceased to dream of a better life. *Nectar*, which takes its title from a poem by Samuel Coleridge, is typical of Markandaya's forward-thinking perspective. It became an instant classic and a staple of college literature coursework. Drawing comparisons to Thomas Hardy's novels, *Nectar in a Sieve* is anchored by a strong female character. The

protagonist's optimism serves dual purposes. It allows Markandaya the writer to imagine a better future both for the characters and the country, yet it also renders the realities and disappointments all the more real in light of such blind faith.

A sensitive writer like Kamala Markandaya knows well that despite the inherent and inescapable hurdles embedded in the life of a peasant he can survive with the inner strength of which he draws from the soil. But with the advent of the tannery, a new intimidating force, he is confused and therefore he suffers a lot when tragic incidents take place.

Many critics of the novel see it as a presentation of the conflict between traditional life and modern industrialisation. They consider that Rukmani, devoted wife of Nathan, a tenant farmer, living a simple and harmonious life in her little village. Shiva K. Kumar states that: "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, polluting the clear, wholesome atmosphere, and tempting simple gullible peasants into greed, ambition, and immortality" (86). However, to see this novel as a system of such simple and obvious opposition is to oversimplify it. This would mean ignoring the goodness offered by modernity in the form of Dr. Kenington, a missionary doctor in the novel.

The novel is told as a flashback - an elderly Ruku recalls the many events of her life. She begins with her wedding at 12 to a man she'd never met. Fortunately, her husband Nathan is a kind and gentle man who wants to make a good life for his wife and family. Ruku and Nathan have a daughter, Ira, and then after several years of infertility, 5 sons. Nathan hopes to some day own his land and provide a better life for his family, but as the years go by that dream slips farther away. Life is hard but there is enough to eat and the family is happy.

Ruku's quiet village is disrupted by the arrival of a tannery. She is unhappy about the changes, but Nathan wisely advises her to learn to adapt so that she will not be broken. Ruku must soon face other changes as well; Ira must be married and moves far away from her family.

The family's crop of rice depends heavily on the rain; however, too much rain brings floods and destroys the rice crop. For the first time, Ruku's family faces severe hunger. Many turn to the tannery for work including Ruku's oldest sons, Arjun and Thambi.

Several years after her marriage, Ira returns to her family's home. Her husband has rejected her as she has yet to produce a child. Desperate to help her daughter and remembering her own infertility, Ruku turns to the English doctor Kenny. Sadly, it is too late for Ira; her former husband has remarried leaving her without prospects for a future.

With Ira's return the family's resources are stretched even thinner. A sixth son, Kuti, is soon born. Ruku worries Ira will resent the child, but her fears are soon dispelled as Ira acts as a second mother to the boy. Soon after Kuti's birth, Ruku loses her first two sons - angry at the harsh working conditions and low pay at the tannery they help organize a strike, which costs them their jobs. With no work in the village, they are forced to travel to the far away island of Ceylon to work on tea plantations.

Nature turns on Ruku's family again, this time in the form of drought. The dry conditions lead to widespread hunger. At the height of the drought, Ruku has an unpleasant encounter with her neighbor Kunthi. Kunthi threatens to expose Ruku's greatest secret - her trip to Kenny's clinic for help with her infertility early in her marriage. To silence Kunthi, Ruku must turn over a portion of her precious horde of rice.

Days later when Ruku goes to check her rice supply, she discovers much is missing. She flies into a rage only to learn Nathan was the thief. He, too, was being blackmailed by Kunthi - in his youth, he had fathered her sons. Their secrets revealed, Ruku and Nathan forgive one another; however, starvation now seems a certainty.

Ruku loses her son Raja to the tannery as well. His dead body is delivered to her home along with the story that he had been caught stealing and collapsed when the guards hit him. Although they doubt the truth of the story, Ruku and Nathan are powerless to fight against the tannery.

The lack of food most affects Kuti, Ruku's youngest child. Desperate to save her brother, Ira uses her good looks to attract business as a prostitute among the tannery workers. The family wonders at Kuti's improvement; they do not realize Ira has secretly been feeding him. When Ruku attacks Ira in the night (thinking she is an intruder) she learns the truth about what her daughter is doing. Once again, Ruku is left to accept an unpleasant reality. Kuti's improvement is short lived and Ruku soon faces the death of her second son.

Ira gives birth to a son, Scarabani, a child fathered by one of her clients. Despite his dubious parentage, Ira loves the boy and dotes on him. The

village is slow to accept the child; not only is he the son of a prostitute, he is born an albino and unable to play in the sun like the other children.

Ruku's son Selvam shows promise but lacks an occupation. He does not want to depend on the land and enjoys practicing reading and writing. Ruku, who has kept up a friendship with Kenny over the years, asks Kenny to help her son. Kenny plans to train Selvam in medical care and enlists his help building a clinic for the village.

Time and lack of money finally catch up with the family. Years behind in the land dues, Nathan is informed they have only days to leave the only life they've ever known - it is being sold to the tannery owners. It is decided that Nathan and Ruku will travel to live with their son Murugan who has a job as a servant in the city. Selvam offers to care for his sister and her child as Ira is unwilling to take her son to a new place.

Ruku and Nathan arrive in the city, overwhelmed by its size and bustle. They find shelter and food at a temple but learn the hard way that the temple is not entirely safe - most of their money and possessions are stolen. After an unsuccessful attempt to find Murugan, they learn he has abandoned his wife and child and run away to another city. Disheartened, Ruku and Nathan decide to return to the village.

Ruku enlists the help of a street orphan named Puli to earn the money to get them back to the village. Although he has lost his fingers to leprosy, Puli proves to have a hopeful spirit to match Ruku's own. He adopts Ruku and Nathan and stays with them as they work in a rock quarry to earn money.

One day, during the monsoon, Nathan collapses in a rain-drenched ditch. He is carried back to the temple where he dies in Ruku's arms. Before he passes, he reminds Ruku he will live on through their children.

At the novel's end, Ruku returns with Puli to the village. She reunites with her son and daughter and still looks to the future with hope.

In the end, we can say that Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a sieve* deals with the life of poverty, hunger and starvations, lived by the poor tenant-farmers in countless Indian villages. Kamala's

Indianness is also seen in her language. She used a large number of words from the Indian languages. In every novel, she deals with the realities of society. Some critics have opined that she has fictionalised the sociology of Indian society, but the fact is that her approach is absolutely realistic. Since she avoids naming location of her novels.

Conclusion

To say that Kamala Markandaya is in favour of obsolete rigidities and the orthodoxical nature of traditional life will be only to take a lopsided view of her novel. As a writer she understands the complexities of present life, she is fully aware of the inescapable demands of modernization. She, as a woman with historical consciousness, feels that change is quite inevitable. Since the entire world is rapidly changing in response to various requirements and necessities arising out of modern science and technology every society ought to wake up from its slumbering state and try to fit into the stream of meaningful modern life.

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