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Poverty and Hunger in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract

Standing as stalwart among other Diaspora writers, Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) holds a unique virtue of narrative techniques and substance. Born in a small Indian village, she engraved herself as the chief exponent of capturing the vibrant spirit and pathetic plights of the rural India through her excellent literary pieces. Having ten novels to her credit, Markandaya wrote many short stories and worked as journalist too. Among her ten novels, her first work *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) turns out to be the master piece and the best-selling novel bringing her \$100,000 as compliment.

The novel primly focuses on the demoralizations and deaths caused by poverty and hunger. The family of Nathan and Rukmani is a simple and a peaceful household representing the rural Indian peasant community. Smooth course of life is destroyed by natural calamities as well as by the industrial exploitations; the family has not only lost its land but also its members due to hunger. Knowing nothing to do, Nathan and Rukmani reach the city where they become beggars and at last the extreme tiredness kills Nathan bringing Rukmani

back to the village. Though the characters suffer unendingly, the novel ends with the hope of survival as the characters interpret death as relief but not as suffering.

Keywords

Poverty; Hunger; Kamala Markandaya; *Nectar in a Sieve*.

The multi-faceted Diaspora writer Kamala Markandaya ranks top among the Indo-Anglican writers. Stephen Hemingway rightly says that “Markandaya is definitely one of the most productive, popular, and skilled Indo-Anglican novelists and a prime representative of the growing number of Indian women writing serious literature in English” (52). Finishing her collegiate education as a history graduate, she has flown to London to pursue her dream of becoming a literary figure. All her novels enumerate the theme of post-colonial upheavals, the diverged relationships, poverty, hunger and industrial exploitations.

The essence of the title insinuates the vitality of hope in life without which it becomes futile as nectar in a sieve. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar remembers that Markandaya has borrowed the title *Nectar in a Sieve* from Coleridge’s poem *Work without Hope* (1825) and the lines run as follows:

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And hope without an object cannot live.

Undoubtedly, the happiness of the working class is short lived like nectar in a sieve. M.K. Bhatnagar in his essay, “Kamala Markandaya: The Insider-Outsider” rightly observes, 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 shape of tannery), the forced migration to city and so on, revealing how work without hope draws nectar in a sieve” (Bhatnagar 3). Subtitled as *A Novel of Rural India*, Markandaya unfolds the traditional characteristics of rural India by recapturing the countless lives of Indian villagers who die of poverty.

Markandaya's choice of diction lies in her impeccable and realistic presentation of the Indian villages pinpointing the vast dissimilarities between the fast growing urban and the slow dying village. One of the leading Indo-Anglican writers Nayantara Sahgal credits Markandaya as follows: "She (Mrs. Kamala Markandaya) develops her characters very well, more so than men writers. I am not saying that because I am woman, but her characters seem to be made flesh and blood" (13). The novel has the female protagonist Rukmani as its narrator binding the fabric of family emotions and intensities of a rural village. Like the Afro-American families, in Indian agricultural societies women anchor the families by being the embodiment of tolerance, patience and sublimity. Markandaya's study of fatalism reveals the passiveness of Indians in accepting the colonial powers.

Having the impressions of the post-colonial India, the novel opens in a small unnamed village of south India. Rukmani marries Nathan, the poor tenant farmer and her father fails to pay the dowry. Accepting her fate, the fourteen year old Rukmani enters into the world of unexpected adversities.

Though married at the age of fourteen Rukmani skillfully balances her family for the first six years having Irawaddy as her only daughter. The happiness of the family vanishes when Rukmani has delivered five boy children as the result of illiteracy and the superstitious belief of having a male heir. At last the largeness of the family devastate the joy by aggravating poverty. Rukmani herself laments "we no longer had milk in the house except for the youngest child; curds and butter were beyond our means except on rare occasions" (Nectar 24). Parvati Misra in her essay *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, negligence of female child, slavery, landlessness, casteism and illiteracy. (2)

The mounting price of the agricultural commodities too force them to sell their cattle. Unfortunately Irawaddy marries a poor, landless farmer due to the lack of money to spend on dowry.

The Indian farm-hands toil from dawn to dusk. “The fruit of the peasant’s labour goes either to the landlord or is destroyed by the ravages of nature” (Prabhakaran 79-80) declares Jain in his essay Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*.

The natural calamities too snatch the fortune of Nathan’s family by destroying the crops consecutively for four years and forces Nathan to sell the cattle for paying the revenue. Rukmani boldly assures, “to those who live by the land there must come times of hardships... Sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve” (Nectar 136) and again asserts, “never fear all will be well” (Nectar 84). Nathan’s sons Arjun and Thumbi work in a tannery to improvise the family economy which unfortunately end in vein. They leave to Ceylon for battling out their lives. The third son Raja is the victim of brutal capitalism who is beaten to death by the tannery watchman for the crime of stealing. By the sway of capitalism, the death of an innocent boy Raja goes unanswered and unseen like a passing cloud. Adding fuel to the fire, Nathan’s daughter Irawaddy returns home as her husband castigated her for infidelity. Anil Kumar Bhatnagar in his *Kamala Markandaya: A Thematic study* says, “She makes her readers realize 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” (Bhatnagar 21) and the author also details the pains of poverty which plagued the family of Nathan on many occasions. While talking about hunger Rukmani utters, “There flesh melted away and their skin sag and sink between their jutting bones, saw their eyes retreat into their skulls, saw their ribs curve out from under the skin” (Nectar 88). Unable to eat the food gathered by the family members the young boy Kuti becomes weak and suffers extremely. 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 88). In saving her brother Ira sells her body and she boldly condemns the anger of her father by replying, “Tonight and tomorrow and every night. So long as there is need, I will not hunger anymore” (Nectar 99). Fatefully her sacrifice did not save Kuti. Old Granny, a well-wisher of Rukmani’s family too dies of hunger. “Food- is a primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanizes man. That is why hunger is the theme of a large number of Indo-Anglican novels (13)” avers C. Paul Varghese in *Indian English and Man in Indo-Anglican Fiction*. Paradoxically death appears to be bliss for the suffering family as they did not mourn for the death of the boys Kuti and Raja.

Rukmani painfully says, “What are you crying for?... you have little enough strength, without dissolving it in tears”(Nectar 89). At the death of Kuti, Rukmani feels relieved as she says, “I grieved, it was not for my son: for in my heart and could not have wished it otherwise. The strife had lasted too long and had been too painful for me to call him back to continue it” (Nectar 102). Rukmani sustains herself by saying that her son escapes from the cruel clutches of hunger and also she has no strength to battle against it. Thus Markandaya pronounces that her characters are voluntarily accepting death as a permanent relief from the suffering of hunger and poverty.

Industrialization forces the landowners to sell their lands for higher prices which crush the roots of thousands of peasant families. The landlord issues notice to Nathan asking him to vacate the land within a week. Leaving Selvam and Ira, the poor couple migrated to city seeking their son Murugan for survival. Failing to locate their son Murugan, Rukmani and Nathan settle in a temple where they meet Puli, an orphan boy. They plan to earn money to travel home but Nathan’s health gets worse and depreciates day by day. Nathan’s struggle with poverty ends with his death. The brave soul Rukmani carries Nathan’s body back to the village with their adopted son Puli. Selvam and Ira have not made any emotional cries on seeing the dead body of their father as their deep heart

pray for the peaceful relief of their father from the troubling and toiling world. Rukmani regains her tranquility.

Markandaya's novels have a complex and multi-layered themes with dynamic and charming character transformations. All the characters in the novel face the ultimate point of despair and misery which test their power of survival. Nathan and Rukmani symbolizing the agricultural community of India lead a self-contented and self-satisfied life. Nathan and Rukmani strived hard to earn the basic essentials and the family enjoy the bliss of domestic household. Rukmani pleasingly utters, "My heart sang and my feet were light as I went about my work, getting up at sunrise and going to sleep content. Peace and quiet were ours (Nectar 2-3). Margaret Joseph aptly comments that, "in the impossibility of bridging the gap between desire and honest fulfillment lies the essence of the tragic" (62) and the tragedy of Nathan's family is such an inevitable one coexists while attempting to acquire the minimum material needs.

Destroying the livelihood of the village, the tannery owners assaulted the socio-economic structure of the farming society by evacuating the farm tenants from their lands. Exploitation by the capitalists endangers the farm-hands. Industrialization ceases the lands from the farmers leaving them helpless and hopeless as the result the poor people largely migrate to the cities for survival knowing nothing about the colours of the destination.

Markandaya succeeds in portraying the socio-economic condition that is responsible for various kinds of social evils. Uma Parameswaran aptly says that, "Kamala Markandaya is one of the major novelists on the Common Wealth Scene" (89) as she has brilliantly handles the themes like poverty, hunger and exploitation which pave the way for social evils like prostitution, disintegration of family, and a mad rush towards city. So long as poverty exists various social evils and malpractices will continue to thrive. Madhusudan Prasad praises that, "Markandaya offers through her novels positive message that cannot be sneezed at in the context of global chaos, turbulence and violence threatening large-scale

destruction”(xvii) and the strengthening and betterment of hope echoes in the surviving morality of the spirited and focused human beings.

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