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Indian Ethos in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* – A Study

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is one of the prominent Indian woman novelist. She won the international fame and recognition with the publication of her very first novel *Nectar in A Sieve* in 1954. Indeed her novels seem to be uniquely reflective of the national consciousness in its multiple forms with the characteristic sensibility of modern, educated Indian woman. In her novels she shows her contempt for the Indian social order. The present paper studies the depiction of Indian ethos in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Keywords

Indian Ethos; Kamala Markandaya; *Nectar in a Sieve*.

The Indo-Anglian Novel has gone far ahead of poetry both in quantity and quality. Novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan have established themselves as great Indian novelists in English. It was only after World War II, that the women novelists of quality have begun enriching Indian

fiction in English. Of these writers, Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala are unquestionably the most outstanding. “Women are natural story tellers even when they don’t write or publish” (Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 435).

Kamala Markandaya is one of the prominent Indian woman novelist. She won the international fame and recognition with the publication of her very first novel *Nectar in A Sieve* in 1954. Indeed her novels seem to be uniquely reflective of the national consciousness in its multiple forms with the characteristic sensibility of modern, educated Indian woman. In her novels she shows her contempt for the Indian social order. As Uma Parameswaran rightly observes;

It is very easy to using tears of pity for the plight of the peasant, underfed, uneducated, exploited and easier still to rouse anger and contempt for the superstitious and slow-moving masses. The stand vulnerable and open to every attack, be it indifference, contempt or emasculating charity. But to evoke admiration, even envy, for the simple faith and unanswering tenacity it needs sympathy and skill. Kamala Markandaya has both. (92)

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, and negligence of female child, slavery, landlessness, homelessness, casteism and illiteracy. This novel contains all the ideas such as suffering, clinging to fate without complaining, matrimonial relationship etc. It can be said without hesitation that Markandaya had vividly portrayed the Indian Cultural values, customs, and religious founts, matrimonial relationship etc. in her writings.

In *Nectar in the Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya has portrayed the positive woman characters as ideal sufferers and nurturers.

The cause of her suffering springs mainly from poverty and natural calamity. The women are from the rural sections of society. They are the daughters of the soil and have inherited age-old traditions which

they do not question. Their courage lies in meek or at times cheerful way [sic] of facing poverty or calamity. (Meena Shirdwadkar, *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel* 49)

Rukmani, the main character, and her daughter Ira are depicted as the sufferers throughout the novel. Rukmani works hard and is devoted to her gentle husband. She endures blow after blow in her life: poverty, famine, annulment of her daughter's marriage, the death of her sons, Ira's prostitution, and finally Nathan, her husband's death. When she finds the emotional center of her life, her relationship with her husband, threatened by the discovery that he fathered another woman's sons, she neither strikes out at him nor crumbles. She keeps digesting all the happenings and moves on in life. In addition, when her son Raja is murdered, even her thoughts do not express rebellion. She moves from numbness to grief, thinking, "For this I have given you birth, my son that you should lie at the end at my feet with ashes in your face and coldness in your limbs and yourself departed without trace" (193).

Then she begins to wash the corpse and prepare it for burial. After three days of her son's death, when two officials from the tannery, where Raja was killed, came to her house trying to bully her by saying they have no responsibility, she responded them quietly. No pain or injustice can cause her to rebel or seek revenge. She never rejects or revolts. She does not simply concede the harsh truth of the tannery but also of her daughter Ira's troublesome marriage and her defiant social approach to sex-affair. She is at a loss to Kunti's manipulation and at the disclosure of illegitimate affair with her husband Nathan. Kunti, the victim of industrialization and the vagaries of nature compels Rukmani to give her some grains. Later on, he confesses his affair with Kunti before Rukmani and discloses the fact that he has fathered Kunti's son.

In fact, Markandaya subverts Rukmani's only violent reaction: when she finally physically attacks a shadowy figure in her home, thinking it a woman who has previously robbed her family of precious rice during a famine, the woman turns out to be her daughter Ira. Yet although Rukmani's general

submissiveness may appear a weakness to Western readers, from another point of view she has incredible strength. These two views, which represent conflicting Western and Eastern values, explicitly appear in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Rukmani confronts the Western doctor, Kenny, who urges, “you must cry out if you want help. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will succor the drowning man if he does not clamor for his life?” In response, Rukmani thinks, “Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons or the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?” But Kenny, the Westerner, believes that, “there is no grandeur in want - or endurance.” In contrast, Rukmani, the Indian woman, sees suffering as good for the spirit and endurance as a necessity, because she cannot change her situation. Looking at Rukmani only from the Western point of view leads one to misunderstand her character and the values that sustain her.

Ira's sacrifice for others makes her prostitution therefore compatible with the virtuous ideal. As a result of her motivations, she remains a sympathetic character although she violates traditional mores. That Markandaya means for our sympathy to hinge on her self-sacrifice becomes even more obvious when one compares her and Kunti. Initially, this beautiful, fiery woman has a bad reputation for sleeping with other men besides her husband

There is a clash or conflict between scientific spirit and the basic human values in, *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel is overcharged with references of the conventional customs, beliefs and superstitions. Nathan is a tenant farmer who wakes with the sun rising and keeps himself busy during the time of sowing and harvesting. Nathan's gradual impoverishment reminds one of Hori Ram, an illiterate tenant farmer in Prem Chand's *Godan*, Hori Ram Mahto is a symbol of simplicity and usefulness. In the pattern of typical Indian peasant, he too is fatalist believing in age-old customs and superstitions. Hori Ram, a man of older traditional morality fails to comprehend the changing circumstances. Nathan's aspirations are shunned and shattered like Hori Ram and Dhaniala in Prem Chand's *Godan*, Rukmani and Nathan were not defeated in their crusade against

the changing socio-economic force. They seem to be the embodiments of the ignorance, endurance, and the unflinching devotion to their age old traditions to which they are tied with inextricable bondage and they live for it and die for it.

Nectar in a Sieve is a study of Indian rural life, and this is seen in various ways. First, there is the grim picture of hunger, poverty and starvation, both in the city and the village. Agriculture in India is entirely dependent on the vagaries of nature and the Indian farmer suffers, as do Nathan and Rukmani, at the hands of nature. Various sections of rural society and various village occupations are presented through the characters. Various social customs like the customary celebrations to mark a marriage, a birth or a funeral are important parts of Indian social life and they find due representation in the novel. The rural folk are illiterate and ignorant, and hence also superstitious. It is considered inauspicious to kill a snake, and the village woman tell Rukmani that her husband should not have killed the cobra in her vegetable garden. Indians attach great importance to male heir and so Nathan longs for a son, and Ira's husband deserts her for she is barren and cannot give him a son. Indians are mystical by temperament, and believe in magic and miracles.

Indian are fatalists. They believe that everything is predetermined, and nothing can be altered or changed, as a result of human effort. It is useless to grumble or complain, for it can be of no avail. It is the typical Indian response to the human predicament and it is also the response of the various characters in the novel. Passive acceptance, calm resignation are again and again advocated so that one may bend and not break. Nathan and Rukmani suffer terribly, but their calm and resigned acceptance enables them to survive even the most severe of ordeals. As old Granny, one of the most pathetic characters in the novel puts it, one gets used to it, even to loneliness, poverty, hunger and starvation. Even death is faced with a stoic calm.

Thus *Nectar in a Sieve* is a powerful novel of rural India. It shows how the wind of industrialization blows through rural India. The plot is smooth and the novelist with a moving realism depicted the rural India and its problems. It

depicts the tragic predicament of Indian peasants. It vividly records the rural Indian society and its culture under the impact of modernity. She writes with the crusading spirit for the welfare of mankind and calls her literature a “Literature of Concern”.

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