

Tragic Waste and Despair in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*: A Thematic Study.

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Kamala Markandaya is undoubtedly a distinguished novelist on the contemporary common wealth literary scene and ranks with such eminent Indian English novelists as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Babhani Bhattacharya, Nayantara Sehgal etc. She occupies a prominent place among Indian English writers as the leading women writers in English. She portrays the world of Indian married women as they perceive it. Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, she has expressed her concern on the disturbing question of the existence of women. In an era of rapid social changes, she has played a vital role in defining female selfhood by focussing on predicaments and dilemmas faced by Indian women. The changing profile of women from stereotyped images to the emerging new face of the Indian women has been highlighted by her in her works. She presents a new picture of woman who is not ready to become the victim of violence, exploitation and discrimination. The image of woman portrayed by Kamala Markandaya is that of a strong individual who is no longer ready to undergo humiliation meekly and humbly. She is courageous enough to take cudgels against her male exploiters.

Kamala Markandaya is the chief figure and the most senior to the other Indian women novelists such as Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shobha De, Shashi Desh Pande etc. She as a novelist, has chosen for herself a different line. She is blessed with an extraordinary vision of life and possesses a practical feel of life in rural areas as well as in urban centres. In almost all her novels she is deeply occupied with the changing Indian social and political conditions. AV Krishna Rao and K Madhavi Menon observe:

Kamala Markandaya's novels, in comparison with those of her contemporary women writers, seem to be more fully reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India. Markandaya, in her fiction, projects the image of the changing Indian traditional society in terms of the growth of the individual consciousness. The variety and the complexity of the achieved content of her novels represent a major trend in the history of the Indo-English novel. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels: 1954-1982 2)

Kamala Markandaya is the only pragmatic woman novelist who personally stays in an Indian village and opts for the theme of rural life. The wide spectrum of her novels give us stories with socio-economic and, the socio-political themes. They also offer us a discussion on the socio-psychological issues, socio-religious issues. She particularly likes to write on the theme of tragic waste and despair as well as on the theme of unfulfilled love. AA Sinha opines:

Kamala Markandaya is now one of the prolific and widely accepted novelists who have projected in their fiction the image of India in its varied phases. The quintessence of Markandaya's novels lies in a fictive exploration of human self in the context of complex cultural values. (The Novels of Kamala Markandaya 3)

In an era of rapid social changes, Kamala Markandaya has played a vital role in defining female selfhood by focusing on predicaments and dilemmas faced by Indian women. The changing profile of women from stereotyped images to the emerging new face of the Indian women has been highlighted by her. As a novelist, Kamala Markandaya explores human psychology and shows particular interest in exposing the difficult ways in which the minds of her women protagonists work. She deeply delves into the complexity of people's motives and successfully exposes the dark side of human psychology. William Walsh remarks about Kamala Markandaya's strength of analyzing the relationships women protagonists:

Her particular strength lies in the delicate analysis of the relationships of persons, especially when these have a more developed consciousness of their problems and are attempting to grope towards some more independent existence. She has been most successful and at her best, an impressive best, in dealing with the problem of the educated and middle class, and she has gift for delineating the self-imposed laceration of the dissatisfied. (Commonwealth Literature 20)

Kamala Markandaya's vision in her novels is the tragic vision of an artist who has travelled to witness the adverse situations in which mostly people lead their lives. What she has written in her novels, has been observed by her own self in Indian society. When passes down the vale life, she finds the stern truth that people's life, especially that of women, revolves round the theme of tragic waste and despair. In her very first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), she narrates the poignant tragic story of the incessant struggle of an Indian farmer in the face of inundating rains and inevitable droughts which result in hunger and poverty due to changing economic conditions. AV Krishna Rao and K Madhavi Menon remark:

In the tradition of K.S. Venkataramani's *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) Markandaya develops the character of an Indian peasant in an atmosphere of changing economic situations. The world of *Nectar in a Sieve* bears the impact of economic progress on the peasant. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels: 1954-1982 15)

Ramesh K. Srivastava remarks on the theme of tragic waste and despair in the following words:

Nectar in a Sieve deals mainly with tragic issues of life – hunger, pain and separation – the tone throughout the novel is reflective and philosophical as if Rukmani were indirectly accusing the heavenly powers on her *karma* for ill-plight. (Kamala Markandaya's Style 74)

R.K. Srivastava further remarks:

Nectar in a Sieve refers to the illusory happiness of man in his Sisyphean struggle for survival. (Kamala Markandaya's Styles 83)

By making the protagonist Rukmani narrate a deeply moving tale of tragedy in which hunger and poverty make her life miserable, Kamala Markandaya, in *Nectar in a Sieve* highlights the tragic waste and despair as a theme of the novel. Rukmani's family consists of her husband Nathan – a poor tenant farmer and seven children – Ira, Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam and Kuti. Despite the fact that they are poor, they are all content with whatever they get. But the rapid change and intrusion of industrialization as well as the vagaries of Nature, spoil the contentment and sweet harmony of life of family members; their joy and placid rhythm are all destroyed all of a sudden. Kamala Markandaya portrays the miserable plight of poor peasants. Dr. Kenny, an English social worker, has got a great love for the people of India, feels sorry on the follies, hunger and miserable plight comments in the following words:

Times are better, times are better. Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools. Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand, cry out for help – do something? There is nothing in this country, oh God, there is nothing. (*Nectar in a Sieve* 43-44)

Kamala Markandaya portrays the peasants' life full of tragic events, fear and hunger. All the peasants living in Indian villages lead a life of fear for their future that appears to be dark. They face the acute sharpness of hunger ultimately destined to die an ignoble death. Almost all the characters die after leading a very miserable life. In this regard, S. Wali rightly observes that the novel is –

...the story of the landless peasants of India who face oppression, starvation, break up of family and home and death. They yet retain their love, compassion, the strength to face life and take delight in the little pleasure of daily existence. (Kamala Markandaya – *Nectar in Sieve: A Stylistic Study* 12)

Industrialization hampers the peaceful progress of the life of these peasants in the way a tannery is built by a group of townsmen on the field near the village. This encroachment of industry also destroys natural beauty on one hand while on the other hand, it creates havoc in the village economy. The establishment of tannery which is the symbol of modernity, is bitterly opposed by Rukmani because she considers it as a serpent in her Garden of Eden. According to Margaret P. Joseph, in *Nectar in a Sieve* –

Certain nouns are used in connection with the tannery to indicate the destructive role it is going to play in the life of Rukmani: its clatter and clamour and din, its stench of skins, its brews and liquors, its kites and crows, replace the “clear soft greens that had once coloured our village...Cleaving its cool silences with clamour.” (Kamala Markandaya 115)

Ultimately this tannery proves a disaster to the family as they lose their land which they had been tilling for generations. Rukmani remarks:

It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. (Nectar in a Sieve 47)

As a result of it, they also lose their son. The family gets disintegrated as two of their sons leave for Ceylon so that they may find some employment over there. Their daughter Ira is obliged to sell her body as prostitute so that she may save her youngest brother who, however also dies of starvation. C.K. Naik rightly observes:

The ruthless and destructive impact of the tannery has afflicted not alone Rukmani's family, there are others in the village also like Janaki and her family, the hapless Kannan and others who have been scathed by its touch. (Rural India in Transition 21)

Rukmani and Nathan go to the town to search their third son Murugan who had left his wife and gone away. During their search, Nathan falls ill and dies. Rukmani is obliged to return to the village so that she may live with her son who is working in Kenny's hospital. Then we see the lamentation of Rukmani over the departure of Arjun and Thambi.

Nectar in a Sieve deals mainly with tragic issues of life – hunger, pain and separation. Rukmani accuses the heavenly powers on her fate for her ill plight; her comments on the world and its people, on fate and nature and man, and her blame and praise of gods for her daughter's predicament have the ring of reality. Old Granny dies of starvation; she has no relation to own her:

She had no relatives left – no person on whom she had any claim – certainly there was none to enquire whether she made a living or how much longer she could continue to do. Better to avoid such question, better to pass quickly by with a cheerful word, than to stop and ask, for who would lightly take on the burden of feeding another mouth? And so one day quietly disappeared. They found her body on the path that led to the well, an empty mud-spot beside her and the gunny-sacking tied around her waist. She had died of starvation... (Nectar in a Sieve 122-23)

Rukmani comments on the last rites of old Granny's cremation highlighting the tragedy that a poor woman is paid respect, only after her death:

Once a human being is dead there are people enough to provide the last decencies; perhaps it is so because only then can there be no question of further or recurring assistance being sought. Death after all is final. I could not avoid the thought, which came from my own uneasy conscience, harsh and bitter, as I watched them lift her up, light as dust, on to the bier; as mourner came with flowers, as oil and camphor were laid unstinted on the pyre, as rose-water and sandalwood paste were sprinkled on her corpse...A man might drift to his death before his time unnoticed, but when he was dead and beyond any care then at last he was sure of attention... (123)

According to AV Krishna Rao and K Madhavi Menon:

In a *Nectar in a Sieve*...Markandaya dramatizes the tragedy of a traditional Indian village and a peasant family assaulted by industrialisation. Rukhman and Nathan, the peasant couple in a South Indian village, are the victims of the two evils: the Zamindari system and the industrial economy. The happy arcadian atmosphere, and the hearty contentment that Rukmani feels and enjoys will soon disappear after the construction of the tannery. All seems to have happened in the 'twinkling of an eye'. The tannery, symbolic of mechanical power, destroys the traditional village. Inflation, vice and disease quickly disturb the peaceful flow of life in the village. ((Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels: 1954-1982 4-5)

As their agricultural work is destroyed by the establishment of the tannery, Nathan hopelessly sees his sons trying to get job in the tannery. This miserable situation of theirs get further miserable due to labour problems and the condition of drought; this further upsets the peasants' life. AV Krishna Rao and K Madhavi Menon remark:

Misfortunes are heaped on the head of Rukmani: one of her sons is killed at the tannery, the crops fail, another son dies of starvation, and her own daughter Ira, 'prostitutes' in order to live; but the final blow is from the Zamindar who orders them to evacuate because they cannot pay the revenue. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels: 1954-1982 5)

Kamala Markandaya very poignantly portrays human miseries and agonies brought about by rapid social, economic and industrial changes in the lives of the peasants. In fact, the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* refers to the illusory happiness of man in his struggle for survival. Ramesh K. Srivastava remarks on the portrayal of miserable plight of peasants in *Nectar in a Sieve* in the following words:

Markandaya has done well. Her work touches our soul, moves us to pity and fear, holds us breathlessly in suspense and brings us to a realisation of a sense of hopelessness of human beings before the divine forces. It is in these respects that she has succeeded in making the novel a good tragedy. (Six Indian Novelists in English 143)

On the factors which caused the tragic waste and despair in *Nectar in a Sieve*, AV Krishna Rao and K Madhavi Menon opine:

This novel is...centred on the slow havoc wrought upon the once self-sufficient peasant by the industrial monster; the industrialisation of the country has to be accompanied by wise economic measures to stem the process of corruption and fraud; and at the same time, drawing the peasant's energy and fortitude into the industrial sector. Waylaying the peasant and snatching all his little joys and minor frugal comforts, and abandoning him to his own measures is inhuman and cruel. In the process of unethical commercialisation of the traditional sources and resources, the peasant is deprived of the freedom for life and action; he finds himself facing a vast enigmatic and awesome TOMORROW that he cannot handle with his puny and impoverished stature. By subjecting the individuals in a community to such a tyranny of social economic restructurisation, the political authority creates external hindrances to the individual freedom. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels: 1954-1982 26)

An assessment of Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* reveals that the novelist has written with immense concern for the miseries and pains of the peasants living in Indian villages. The hidden and suppressed world of Indian peasants comes to light in this novel. This novel becomes a trustworthy chronicle of the struggles and efforts of peasants at such a crucial time as a number of social, economic and political changes are taking place. Through the characters of Rukmani and Nathan, Kamala Markandaya highlights the tragic waste and despair despite the fact that the peasants are committed to their work. Here the novelist shows her deep attachment to the cause of peasants like Rukmani and Nathan who are the representatives of the uprooted peasants. It is with certain that in *Nectar in a Sieve*, she has portrayed the life of peasants objectively and judged it from various angles with remarkable ingenuity.

Another aspect of Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of women characters comes to light in this novel. She traces the Indian woman from the point of view of her personality which is unfolded historically. In fact, Kamala Markandaya studies and analyses woman who has a traditional background. Indian woman is supposed to be superstitious and orthodox and so she becomes helpless even after putting up struggle, she finds herself chained by circumstances that are difficult to break. She wants to be liberated but remains confined to the traditions. Through the character, Kamala Markandaya delves deep into the psyche of women characters and comes to the conclusion that they face the pangs of restlessness and turbulence due to leading a miserable traditional life. Hence they desire to be liberated from this conventional life and tragic waste and despair.

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