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CONFLICT AND CRISIS IN KAMALA MARKANDYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

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Abstract:

The eminent woman novelist, Kamala Markandaya, spotlights the despair state of rural Indian people in agriculture. Her novel mainly focuses on the depth and realism in her treatment of Indian rural life. In the novel Nectar in a Sieve, the conflict and crisis appear in the form of natural calamities, hunger, poverty, industrialization, ruthless men and societal issues. The novelist clearly shows the painful life of peasants and also depicts their internal and external sufferings and it ultimately moves them from rural areas to urban areas in order to get a better life. The novel Nectar in a Sieve unfolds the pathetic story of the protagonist Rukmani and her husband Nathan, a tenant farmer and they represent all Indians who live in a village. This paper aims to explore the causes of the crisis, issues faced by tenant farmers, loss of tradition, struggles of women bearing social norms that are experienced by many people for many reasons. At the end how these people try to solve their conflict and overcome these crisis for the betterment of good living.

Keywords: Poverty, Natural Calamities, Machines, Desperate life of farmers, etc.

Looking at the progress of Indian English fiction, it has witnessed three vital phases of its development. In 1930's the prominent writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao, the true beginning of Indian English novel. Then in the middle 1930's – 1960, novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, Arundhati Roy, Nayantara Sahgal done important contribution that shifted the perception of Indian English novel. The most welcoming feature of Indian English novel is the arrival of women novelists who took Indian English novel in new dimension. Women writing have got an importance after independence. Kamala Markandaya is one of the most important and popular women novelist in Indian English fiction. She was born in the town of Mysore, Southern India in 1924. As a novelist she wrote eight novels.

Nectar in a Sieve, is a first novel of Markandaya which tells not only a story of the two characters and a particular village. That is why the village has not got any specific name and it is remained unnamed throughout the entire novel. It is not merely the story of Rukmani or Nathan. They are the representatives of poverty stricken peasantry of India. Of course, occasionally they do enjoy the nectar of life but their happiness in the lives of Indian peasants through ages but it has proved to be a futile struggle.

Rukmani, the heroine come narrator of the story looks at her own life in a flash back. She recites several and different experiences about the hardships faced by the Indian rural people. The protagonist, Rukmani was the fourth daughter of the headman of a south Indian village. Her elder sisters were married off with great dowry. Giving and receiving dowry is an usual part of tradition in any Indian marriage. When Rukmani's turn comes unfortunately her father had lost his power and influence and he could not afford a good dowry. So she was married to a poor tenant farmer called Nathan who does not own a small bit of land on his own. This is how Rukmani has entered into marital life with Nathan.



At the beginning Rukmani is uneasy and felt discomfort to live with a peasant husband in a small mud hut with insufficient domestic articles. It is great disappointment to her. Though Rukmani's husband, a landless farmer lacks money and property but he is plenty in showing great amount of love and affection towards his wife. This makes Rukmani started liking him. As their expression of love and affection Rukmani is blessed with a beautiful girl child called Irawaddy who is named after Asian river. Nathan is not so happy about the birth of Ira who is being the first child of his family. In the patriarchal world, the condition of women is not upto the mark. When it comes to childbirth every woman in the society must beget male child in order to continue family line. Rukmani is not exceptional to this. She is once threatened by her husband even though they have a child. She seeks help from Dr. Kenny who is responsible to save the life of Rukmani's mother when she had been ill. Once again the relaxed life of Rukmani with her husband is renewed by the birth of Arjun, the first son of them. Soon after the treatment given by the doctor Rukmani and Nathan have four sons: Thambi, Murugan, Raja and Selvam which have brought many sorrows and sufferings in their life.

Markandaya portrays the undesired effects of industrialization upon rural people. The harmonious life of villagers is marred by the birth of tannery and the whole village has fallen a victim to it. Initially the tannery is a positive place of business. It offers paying jobs to many in a village. There are many ruthless and huge machines are imported in the land. Gradually houses in the maidan are vacated and sold to construct buildings. At the advent of tannery, many people came to homeless and they have no choice to live there. Many outside labourers work in tannery so that the shopkeepers in the village are able to increase their day-to-day income. Many people like Kannan, a cobbler would fear of fail in his own leather business.

Initially there are certain people like Kali and Kunthi are happy about the arrival of tannery so that the village has been transformed like a town and also their sons would get jobs there. But people like Rukmani is resistant of the idea of tannery because of the changes that brings to the community such as the rise of selling price in markets becomes higher and higher and it drives away the interest of men in cultivation. Due to the miserable condition of narrator's family Arjun and Thambi express their wish to work in tannery for survival. On hearing this, Rukmani and her husband are unhappy. Being sons of farmers, they would like to work under Englishmen in tannery rather than work in fields with their father. Rukmani tries to convince the mind of Arjun by saying, "You are not of the caste of tanners." Arjun is very determined and unmoved with his right decision so unwillingly Rukmani and Nathan sent them to work there.

Very soon Arjun and Thambi started earning in tannery. Now and then Arjun and Thambi used to work in fields with Nathan and it gives a great delight to him. He thinks to drive his sons in ploughing the fields and farming the land and make them full time farmers but it remains unfulfilled because both the sons have no interest in agriculture. The financial condition of Rukmani's family getting better and better but it does not long last because of a strike conducted in the tannery. Problems come in every single day to Rukmani's family. The workers protest to resume their work in order to increase their wages. Due to this, the workers are forced to work continuously more and more without any break. The merciless officials of the tannery announce the workers against to the management would be thrown out and replaced by the new labourers shortly if they do not join the duties within a week. As Arjun and Thambi are on the side of protestation, it would lead them to terminate and throw out from the tannery. The tannery has also degraded the land fertility and reduced the crop yield. Thus, the village is polluted in the name of progress by the construction of a tannery and its busy business pierces the peaceful side of the village.

Adverse times continuously knocking Rukmani's door one after another. Nature is like a merciless monster and shows its extreme cruelty in the form of floods and drought to the peasants in rural India. Farmers always confront hardships of fear and severe hunger. Sometimes flood and



sometimes drought make them mendicants even though they have fields, become helpless. In the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya clearly depicts the pathetic state of rural Indian farmers in search of food to feed their kids, in search of haven to take refuge. A terrible monsoon come where the entire village is covered with water and also Kali's hut is fully damaged. Many mud huts of the villagers have been washed away. All the paddy crops and other harvest are completely drowned but the tannery is safe by the construction of cement, bricks and stones. Many people become homeless and seek safer place to live. They are led to the verge of starvation. When the couple runs here and there in the market to buy a meager amount of rice from Hanuman and Biswas, the dealers of rice in the village, selling provisions to higher rate which Rukmani and her husband not affordable so they back to house with heart breaks. When Rukmani and her husband go to see their fields, there is nothing with water. As the crops are destroyed, Rukmani's family has to survive on salted fish, roots and leaves.

As the villagers are very much affected by the continuous heavy rain, there is no income for the villagers and it drives them to join in the tannery. Similarly drought sometimes afflicts the farmers to the core. The rains are delayed to shower this time so the water content in the paddy crops are gradually reduced in the fields. The scorching heat of sun has almost dried up the crops. At that time ruthless Sivaji, the agent of Zamindar visits the narrator's family to collect the land revenue in which Nathan is cultivating and farming. Being a tenant farmer, Nathan tries to tell their bad situation and pleads Sivaji to pay fully after the harvest is done but he is forced to pay half of the revenue immediately.

Though Nathan pleads the hardhearted Sivaji never melts and threatens him the tenureship would be taken back and give to someone. This makes Rukmani and Nathan fearful because her husband is efficient solely in agriculture than anything so they decide to sell things whatever they have in order to withhold the land. By doing this still they could not gain to pay partial revenue to Zamindar. Finally the agent of Zamindar has been convinced to pay rest of the amount within a year. The drought resumes till the farmers lost everything. The life of the villagers becomes more and more difficult. At last the rains have come and it is no use because the crops are already dried. Once again the village is badly afflicted with poverty and hunger. It is Janaki, the close neighbouring friend of Rukmani leaves the village with her family and searches employment in urban area. As Unemployment problem is existed there another friend of Rukmani named Kunthi also sent her two sons working in tannery.

Social evils are caused by cruel customs. Ira, Rukmani's daughter now in her early fourteen. She is married to a man with a small dowry and she moves to the home of her husband. As she is barren, she is rejected and abandoned by her husband. Ira's return to her parental home is a public shame for her family. Ira's mother Rukmani arranges for Kenny, the English doctor to give infertility treatment for Ira, but Ira's better half has already married to another girl. Rukmani has to take care of Ira's life also. When Rukmani's child, Kuti is born, Ira looks after him as if her own son. The narrator's family cannot afford the necessities of everyday life because of hunger, starvation, disintegration of family members, loss of her son. The theme of hunger is clearly depicted in the life of the villagers. Ira is forced to involve in prostitution to feed her little brother Kuti. Though her parents try to convince against her sinful doings of earning money she is very stubborn in her decision for she must save her dying brother and hungry parents. It is hunger that makes Raja to steal a piece of calf-skin in the tannery which cost him beaten to death.

Poverty and misery depictions are many in the novel. Nathan and Rukmani suffer a lot in the village and later forced to leave the village in order to search their son Murugan. Their search goes to vain and they both come to the stage of beggars in the city. They take shelter in nearby temple where Puli and his young friends are surviving marginally in the society by stealing and begging people and



helping Rukmani and Nathan for a gain. They work as stonebreakers in a stone-quarry which is new work to them. Nathan is completely collapsed both physically and mentally. He tells Rukmani, “Better to starve, where we were bred than live here” (Markandaya, 167). Nathan dies due to uncontrollable starvation and sufferings.

Thus, Kamala Markandaya spotlights the painful life of farming community in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* suffer because of industrialization, natural crisis, hunger and poverty. All the characters in the novel undergo troubles and turmoil. They try to rise above their desperation with their endurance and hope.

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