

**The portrayal of Social Evils in Kamala Markandaya's
Nectar in a Sieve and A Handful of Rice**

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Abstract

Life is very precious for everyone. Life needs proper care and nurture. Human life depends on society. Only in a good society we can find a good life. Life is simple, very little is needed to make it happy. But social evils insist on making it complicated. Social evils in society have become a serious concern in the present day world. It is gradually affecting roots of our culture and its blocking its rapid growth on the global chart. The aim of writing this research paper is to highlight Social Evils in rural and urban societies. This research paper will explore the meaning, reason, effect of social evils in the light of the analysis of two novels of Kamala Markandaya, an Indian English writer. The research paper entitled 'The portrayal of Social Evils in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve and A Handful of Rice.' In this paper, the effort is made to study Kamala Markandaya's Social Evils in Nectar in a Sieve and A Handful of Rice. We will find poverty, hunger, starvation, beggary, prostitution, crime, unemployment and many more social evils in both novels. Kamala Markandaya's A Handful of Rice and Nectar in a Sieve nothing but an account of the suffering of the rural and urban people, and how the cruelty of social evil resulting in suffering, death and misfortune is more explicit in both novels. Poverty is the everyday reality of the characters in the both novels. Poverty is not an abstract concept that one can really think about, it's like wolf at the door that must constantly be staved off. Both novels are a jolt to awaken the society against social evils.

Introduction

Life is very precious for everyone. Life needs proper care and nurture. Human life depends on society, without a good society human life just like a fish out of water. Etymologically the term “Society” came from the Latin word *societas* used to describe a bond or interaction between parties that are friendly or at least civil. “Essentially” society is the regularities customs and ground rules of antihuman behaviour. Society does not exist independently without individual. Society has become an essential condition for human life to arise and continue. The level of individual development is an indicator of the level of development. There is no denying the fact that the present society is facing a lot of cries. And one of them is ‘*social evil*’.

The research paper entitled ‘*The portrayal of Social Evils in Kamala Markandaya’s Nectar in a Sieve and A Handful of Rice.*’

India, is now beset with a number of social evils. Social is related with society and evil in general context is the absence or opposite of that which is described as being good. Life is simple, very little is need to make it happy. But social evils insist on making it complicated. Social evils spoils morality, values, ethics, virtue, happiness and peace of life. All these things are useful for life. Life and death are not equal. But with the absence of all basic things life becomes death. Death forgets all sufferings. But social evils are the reminder of suffering. Here men have to live with them. The negativity of social evils is so strong that not only human beings, but life also forgets that how to live.

Today we have many social evils within our society like, Poverty, Illiteracy, unemployment, beggary, Prostitution, Crime, Malnutrition, Hunger, Starvation, Urbanization, The bad-balding effect of industrialization, Problem of orphans, Early death and many more.

There are many mediums, which help us to know these all things in a realistic way .One of them is *Literature*. It is a well known fact that novel, as a form of literature is the most latest form comparing to the other forms. The English name for the form, on the other hand, is derived from the Italian *novella* (literally, “a little new thing”). And a novelist is an individual and a member of the society.

Society will inevitably play its part in his/her fiction. Indian English Literature is also represents all such aspects in its novels. Indian English Literature originated as a necessary outcome of the

introduction of English education in India and abroad. The credit of writing first novel in English goes to Bankim Chandra. His '*Raja Ram Mohan's Wife*' the first and only novel he wrote in English appeared as a serial in the *Indian Field* of 1864.

Now days a number of Indian writer in English have contributed substantially to the modern English literature. Credit goes to Raja Ram Mohan Roy who heralded the Indian Renaissance and Lord Macaulay who initiated English language education in India. Today it has won for itself international acclaim and distinction.

In Indian English novel, Kamala Markandaya's novels have a place of pride in their own right. In the history of Indo-Anglian fiction, Kamala Markandaya occupies a very high place. Kamala Purnaiya Markandaya was a twentieth century novelist from the south of India. In her early years she traveled widely in India and Europe. She was a journalist in India before migrating to London, England in 1948. She published her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, in 1954. Some of her other works include: *Some inner fury*, *The Coffer Dams*, *The Nowhere Man*, *Two virgins*, *A Handful of Rice*. Margaret Paton has found in her work a brilliance and depth outstanding even among India's current crop of highly talented novelists.

Social Evil has been a favourite theme with a number of prominent Indian English writers particularly Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Batacharya, R.K. Narayanan, Ruth Pawar Jhabwala These all writers were influenced by Gandhian philosophy, so their attitude was that of a reformist. But Kamala Markandya is different.

Kamala allows her characters to follow their own minds and face life as a natural man should do. The realistic presentation of life in her novels impress one and all. This makes her output fairly substantial in comparison with other Indian women novelist like Nayantara Sahgal and Santa Ram Rau, who are her contemporaries.

Nectar in a Sieve is a novel of epical dimensions like the well-known of China, *The Good Earth*. It is a subtle study of the traditional social milieu under the disturbing impact of change and modernity. Kamala is concerned with man's struggle with hunger, poverty and many other social evils. It is quite true that poverty is the root cause of all social evils and suffering.

Shortage of common things like food, clothing, and shelter is called poverty. India has large scale of poverty. India's has a world's largest number of poor people living in a single country.

India dreams to develop into a superpower but a third of the world's poor still lives here. In this chapter poverty is like a giant lethal tree and others social evils are its branches. And the one who comes across this tree, he only gets polluted air called *suffering*. This novel is a fervent cry of protest against social evils. The novel is a powerful presentation of patience in the face of suffering.

Nectar means the drink of God (*Amrit*) it is sweet, rich in nutrition. But what happens when we put nectar in a sieve, it leaks through the sieve and it no longer has the power to give joy and vigour. In this novel Nectar symbolizes happiness of life, land is the real happiness of life in farmers life and Sieve is the symbol of poverty. The novel depicts how the Nectar (land) seeps through the sieve (poverty). This novel is about rural India. This novel is a sad story of a large poverty-stricken Hindu family in a remote rural village in southern India. This novel is purely a novel of rural masses. The novel is concerned with man's struggle with social evils. Despite valiant efforts, the family failed to extricate itself from abject poverty.

The most dominating character in this novel is Rukmani. She is the narrator of the story. She was the daughter of a village head man. Her three elder sisters were married long before she was married. They were given rich dowries. By the time Rukmani reached the marriageable age, her father lost his power and influence and became poor. Because of poverty she was married to a farmer who did not own any land. That was the initial stage of suffering created by poverty.

Kamala Markandaya relates in her novel how a girl is unwelcome in the family and explore the reason behind the social evil dowry system. Poor people can't give dowry. The novel also talks about the social evils regarding girl child, which is depicted very realistically by the novelist. The birth of a child in India is a joyous event, particularly when the child is male. In village, a male child is an asset to a family, growing up to work on the land.

A female child is a liability to a family not only because she will not work the land, but also because a dowry must be given at her marriage. Nathan and Rukmani both want a son. Nathan was poor, land was only his livelihood. If he was rich, then he did not care about the male or female child. Nathan wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pulling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind. We can

see same situation in *A Handful of Rice*, where Ravi likes to have a child preferably a son, rather than a daughter, a little boy, who would run after him and call him father.

The novelist suggestively speaks of a lack of education among the poor makes them indifferent to the idea of family planning. During the next six years, Rukmani does not conceive, troubled that she cannot produce a son for Nathan. She consulted Dr Kenny, a white man, and as result of the treatment given by him, she could conceive again. Rukmani bears five sons-Arjun, Thambi, Selvam, Murugan, Raja and Kutti. In fact, half a dozen sons were born to her in a row. The reason behind this was illiteracy. They were poor that's why they were illiterate.

Nathan financial condition went from bad towards after Ira's marriage because of dowry. It was also an excess to have so many children. A large family meant hunger and poverty. The birth of so many children was the beginning of their hardships. Because of the worst consequences of the drought they could not pay the landlord. Because of poverty they are suffering. If they were rich, they were happy with their land. The tannery swallowed up their land and so they were ordered to vacate the land and the cottage. Arjun and Thambi leave for Cylone for employment. The poverty forced them to leave their house. They were tired of poverty. Whole family degenerated by poverty. It also happens in *A Handful of Rice* where Ravi has to leave his village because his land cannot provide him bread, not to speak of a career.

The novel also throws light on the life of childless woman in the society. The society looks down on a childless woman even today. Now the story reaches on a point when Ira was stamped as a barren woman and returned after five years of her marriage. Also her husband announced later that he had taken another woman. In Indian society, barren women are considered to be cursed and inauspicious. They are not recognized and respected. Men have the social sanction to reject barren wives. Kamala's presentation of barren ladies and their rejection by society is depicted in the character of Ira.

Nectar in a Sieve also talks about the problem of malnutrition. Kutti the younger son of Rukmani died with malnutrition. Low quality foods may lead to malnutrition. Because of malnutrition Kuti was suffering. The novelist shows us that how poverty originated hunger, starvation and finally early death. Poverty forces Kuti's death. In *A Handful of Rice* same thing happens with

Raju. He was also a victim of malnutrition. He dies because of poverty and malnutrition .Old granny also died with starvation. Poverty was playing a cruel game.

We can also see Prostitution in *Nectar in a Sieve*. We all know that hunger is a result of poverty. The tragic picture of hunger is pointed out by Kamala Markandaya. Rukmini divides rice into 24 small parts to feed the entire family for as many days. Such starvation leads to human degradation. Ira daughter of Nathan and Rukmani, is also forced to join prostitution to save her brother dying from starvation, and it results in an albino child in her womb.

This, incidentally, reminds us of a passage in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel *He Who Rides a Tiger*. A famine has broken out in Bengal. To slake the thirst of their belly some ladies are selling their body. Kunti, a village woman also takes to prostitutions because of poverty. It is a question of demand and supply. Poverty leads to the suspected theft of a calf skin by Raja and his subsequent death. As P.P. Mehta rightly remarks:

The struggle between man and overpowering
hunger, because which honour, morality and
even God do not count.(Indo-Anglian Fiction p.255)

I totally agree with P.P. Mehta, but more shocking is the fact that these poor people undergo their suffering passively. Nathan and Rukmani are forced to leave their land on which they have worked and lived for thirty years. Ignored by the society, they go to Madras in search of their son, Murugan. On their way they lose all their possessions. They join the stone quarry and start saving money with the hope of returning to their village soon. But the final blow that Rukmani receives from the cruel hand of poverty is by means of Nathan's death. To her misfortunes never come single; they come in battalion.

We also see beggary in this novel. Puli, the street boy cannot be easily forgotten. He has to face poverty and take to begging because he was an orphan. Beggary is recognized to be forced upon people due to poverty. Poverty, along with other social evil, begets crime too. Puli indulges in petty crimes, when he fail to get alms. He helped Rukmani and Nathan. Rukmani alone reaches home, with Puli. The novel ends with a note of aspiration, when Selvam assuringly tells his withered mother, "Don't worry, we shall manage". The novel ends where it begins.

On the other hand *A Handful of Rice* (1966) is a strong jolt to awaken the society against social evils. Hunger ruins the life of Ravi, (protagonist) it compelled him to do crimes. The title of the novel suggests that it is about hunger and, therefore, a handful of rice is needed to quench the hunger of the protagonist who does not get square meals a day. A hungry man knows no law. Ravi debases himself by trying to face the world through questionable means. The novelist conveys a strong message that failure in life modifies the general behaviour of the common people. It also symbolizes the importance of a handful of rice, when there is no hope to earn it. And what role its absence plays lively depicted by the novelist.

Now first I will focus attention on the curses and misfortunes of hunger, the problem of unemployment and acute pain of hunger in urban life.

In this novel, we will see hunger not only killed, but also degraded and de-humanized human being. Hunger is very cruel thing. A hungry man knows no law. The situation is very painful, when a person is only able to see food, but can't eat it. He is helpless. '*Hunger is a condition in which a person for a sustained period is unable to eat sufficient food to meet basic nutritional needs*'. Throughout history, portions of the world population have often experienced sustained periods of hunger. We will have, first, a look at Ravi's story and then we will see how and why his attempts at living a reasonably good life fail. The novel begins and ends with Ravi's struggle with hunger. In *A Handful of Rice* the protagonist is a rootless man. He leaves his father at home in a village and joins the exodus to the city. He has little education for whom the village has no scope for employment. Thus he leaves for the city for a job. Ironically the city has also nothing to offer, especially when college-educated graduates in their thousands remain unemployed.

In fact, in city he is an outsider without cast, he is educated but his education is not enough to give him a job. In this exploitative society of modern times even the educated and the honest man does not get job. Ravi is likely one of us. Hunger and poverty brought all suffering to him. Ravi makes determined efforts to earn his livelihood through fair means. But his attempts fail and he blames the society for that. He is destroyed by a false society.

Commenting on Ravi's plight, Srinivas Iyengar observes:

Caught between the pull of the old tradition
all but strangles him and the pull of the new

immorality that attracts as well as frightens

him Ravi lurches now this side now the other

side and has the worst of both.(Indian writing in English p.66)

The novel also talks about injustice in society. It shows that rich are becoming rich, and poor are becoming poorer. Ravi was also a victim of social inequality in our society. Social inequality occurs when resources in given society are distributed unevenly. The social evils like injustice in society shows that rich are becoming rich, and poor are becoming poorer. Ravi is destroyed by a false society.

The aspect of social inequality is also reflected in Nathan's (*Nectar in a Sieve*) perception of the rich. The poor and the low born have been treated inhumanly since ages. Both Nathan and Ravi have been oppressed by the rich and the high born have never been considered them as equals. So they hold no expectations from them. Even today things haven't changed.

We can see that Ravi drowns his morality and his misery in drinks. He beater his conscience and tryst with a band of die hard criminals and in course of time becomes a members of underworld smugglers and bootlegger, and ally of Damodar. Ira, in *Nectar in a Sieve* is also forced to join prostitute to save her brother dying from starvation Ravi in *A Handful of Rice* where he had options either to lead a poor life by sticking to the values or to follow Damodar's immoral way and become rich. This situation shows that how social evils crushes and takes control over the individual

Damodar initiated him into to the evils of urban existence. Ravi witness life in all its raw hunger, penury and exploitation. Life in the city is grim struggle for existence for survival. There are prostitutions in the city, they are doing this just for survival. Ravi joins Damodar's gang, but the course of his life takes a turn when he enters into Apu's (tailor) house breaking iron bars because he was hungry. He subsequently becomes a member of Apu's family.

Ravi falls in love with Nalini who is Apu's daughter. He wants to shun the bad company. Ravi weds Nalini. But Apu's sudden death, the theft of savings by his son-in-law Puttana, entire burden of family falls on Ravi. The misunderstanding between the husband and the wife ends in trouble. His cruel behavior towards his wife shows his violent nature.

We have seen in *Nectar in a Sieve* that in spite of all sorts of poverty and misery, the family relationship is maintained till the end. Rukmani and Nathan have a perfect understanding of each other and so life goes on easily without any quarrel even when the couple comes across thorns in life under the shackles of penury. But there occurs a breach in the family of Ravi.

It is poverty that snatches Ravi's dear son, Raju, Nalini requests Ravi to call the doctor. Ravi in an agony of helplessness, cries out that you are not a memsahib, will you pay the bill? This does not mean that Ravi does not love his son. His poverty and starvation come in the way. His son's death shatters him, so much that he decided to go to Damodar. But Damodar rejected him.

Ultimately Ravi joins a crowd of young people in looting grains, but here he finds himself helpless and weak. After his son's death he feels completely broken physically, emotionally and spiritually. But the fact remains that he cannot now afford to indulge in anti- social activities, since he has a family to look after. Thus hunger and starvation drives him to wretched life where he finds himself incapable of doing anything worthwhile. But still there is a hope in Ravi's eyes for better tomorrow.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I can say that if we look at both novels we find that *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Handful of Rice* represent the rural and urban influences. Both novels present poverty, hunger, degradation, beggary, etc. Both Rukmani and Ravi belong to the peasant family. Both suffer but Rukmani presents herself as an ideal woman while Ravi is engaged in petty crime. Both novels show the Indian tradition of the male child. Both novels present the financial condition of a family that is very critical and ultimately even a handful of rice is a rarity to them. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the village converts into a small town and in *A Handful of Rice* Ravi escapes from the rural village and comes into the city. Poverty is so dire in these novels that characters don't have the luxury to ruminate on it.

Nectar in a Sieve and *A Handful of Rice* is a realistic articulation of Rukmani, Nathan and Ravi, and their fight for the 'survival of the fittest' for their family. The characters of Kamala's show great powers of heart and soul even in moments of crisis and calamities. The protagonists in her novels do not run away from the hard realities of life by choosing death as the final solution.

Both novels seem to show that if one's roots are injured or absent one dies. Nathan's roots are scarred when he is evicted from his land; he dies. But Rukmani's and Ravi's roots are in their family and therefore they live. In the first novel Kamala Markandaya deals with the landless peasantry class who are suffering with harsh poverty.

The lack of family planning in rural India also forces the rural families into poverty as in the case of Nathan's and Apu's family. If they were not poor, then they were educated and then they were happy. The suggestion implicit in both novels is that poverty should be removed from this earth. People like Ravi, Nathan and Rukmani are the victims of poverty. In both novels they suffer a lot. In spite of their hardship, they hope that their situation would improve, but this hope never becomes a reality because of social evils. I strongly believe that one who is born in poverty must not die a poor man, and the one who works without food must not go to sleep hungry and thirsty. In both novels we find that, Food is a primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanizes man. Money, or lack of it, is very important to the family. If we removed poverty and put money in both novels then the story will be different. Both novels show us a bitter reality, that life is moribund, if you are poor. Characters are helpless like flies to be caught in the spider's web of social evils.

We see in both novels that how poverty changes and degrades the life of poor people. But Kamala Markandaya poses a question to readers, if immorality is due to poverty and hunger, what shall we call it. Novelist makes her readers realize the true meaning of poverty. True one can't judge the impact of hunger and starvation without passing through the terrible ordeal of being hungry. Markandaya lived in south-Indian villages and shared the suffering of villagers as an independent observer. This peculiar experience enables her to portray authentically the real picture of hunger. The message in Kamala's novels are focused on the welfare of humanity.

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