

**KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE* AN
EPITOME OF AFFLICTION'S AND ENDURANCE**

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Abstract

Literature reflects society and society gave an insight into its culture. It presents those aspects of life which remained unheard. Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* represents good and evil sides of social life artistically, for the two sides make up the complete background. The novel tells the story of Rukmani who faced incredible hardships yet never ceased to dream of a better life for her family. Based on the author's knowledge of Indian village life, *Nectar in a Sieve* is a tale of sufferings and survival of a peasant's family. Rukmani wife of a poor tenant farmer Nathan has been the helpless witness to the destruction of the pristine beauty of her village. With faith and capacity for both love and suffering, Rukmani survived the calamities of nature and industrial development as well as the personal sorrow of losing her sons and husband.

Keywords: Tannery, Hunger Suffering, Hope, Drought, Flood.

Introduction

Literature often provides social evidence and those who look for these social evidences are the people whose training has been exclusively sociological. The study of society through novel deals with a deep understanding of the socio-economic life of the people living in a particular milieu. The picture of social life that Kamala Markandaya has drawn in her novel is indicative of society, its framework and organization, its customs and laws, its aims and

interests, its values and sanctions. In the novel all characters work hard throughout their life with all hope but only to get despair and frustration. But Rukmani the narrator and the leading character suffer the most her suffering began with her marriage. After the marriage of her three sisters when it comes to Rukmani's marriage her father's prestige was much diminished. He did not have much to give in dowry that is why she was married to a poor tenant farmer who was not having a land of his own. Her hope further shattered when she saw her husband's house built of mud, but Nathan tries to comfort her:

It will be better when it is finished," he said. I nodded; I wanted to cry. This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch, was my home. My knees gave, first the cramped one, then the other, and I sank down. Nathan's face filled with concern as he came to hold me. (4)

But the early days of their life, in spite of poverty were untouched by worries and crowned with love and affection. Nathan worked in the fields and Rukmani being a helping wife to her husband looked after domestic duties and maintained a vegetable garden in the backyard of the house to help her husband by selling vegetables. From each harvest they saved small amount of produce in their small stone-lined granary. There was food in plenty for two people and they ate well. Nevertheless, their life was destined to face the misery and sufferings of time. Ignorant of the consequences of increase in the number of mouths to feed, Nathan and Rukmani came to have seven children Irawaddy, Arjun, Thambi, Murugun, Raja, Selvam and kuti (was the youngest among all dies during drought). Children grew in age and structure, and their family's financial condition went from bad to worst. Nathan and Rukmani were worried about their deteriorating condition, but still they manage their household affair by focusing on those things without which they could not do "We no longer had milk in the house, except for the youngest child; curd and butter was beyond our means except on rare occasions" (24). Despite their poverty Rukmani's courage, determination and resourcefulness helped her manage things.

But the industrial development in the form of tannery was another jolt for the family which increased the price of basic commodities. At the outset, it generated hope in the villagers as the wages they got were higher than those in the field. But for Rukmani is was the most depressing thing. That is why Rukmani replied to Kunti about the tannery:

Indeed no,” said I, “for it is even as I said, and our money buys less and less. As for living in a town-if town this is-why, there is something I would fly from sooner if I could go back to the sweet quiet of village life. Now it is all noise and crowds everywhere, and rude young and dirty bazaars and uncouth behavior, and man thinks of another but schemes only for his money. (46)

Despite these changes in the natural beauty of their village which other villagers considered being good for them but Rukmani and Nathan finds it difficult to manage their affairs, yet they pinned their hopes on the possibility of getting job in the tannery.

Irawaddy’s marriage was a further blow to the family condition. The year Ira was married the monsoon broke early with an evil intensity to destroy everything. There was water everywhere in the fields, houses etc. Consequently they ran short of food items for several days. Another shock was when Ira came to her parent’s house with her husband one day. It was not a normal visit Ira was send back because for five years she has not been able to produce a child: mother- in- law said Rukmani’s son-in-law, “I intend no discourtesy, but this is no ordinary visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought back to you. She is a barren woman”(49-50). When Rukmani requested Ira’s husband to take her back with him as there was nothing wrong with her and she would bear her as many sons as he want but he refused to take Ira with him by saying that he had taken another woman and there is no place for Ira in his house. This was something which Rukmani find it difficult to bear but still somehow she reconciles herself with the tragedy. But hunger and poverty drove Ira towards offering her body for money and in this act of immorality, Ira conceived. The charge of being a barren woman proved false. Rukmani and Nathan, without any fear of social reproach gave shelter to Ira. But destiny has already planned their fate.

Family ties can be healthy and happy only if all the members maintain symmetry of love and affection. Soon these things seem to be nothing more than dreams when Arjun and Thambi left home for Ceylon. Murugan got employed in the city and he too left home. One by one all the three left home leaving their parents together to share the bitterness of hunger and sufferings. Rukmani says:

Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear, constant

companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear; fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger; fear of the blackness of death. (79)

That year the rain failed, it was harvest time but they had nothing to reap. The paddy had taken all their labour and left them empty handed. It will not be wrong to say that the hunger of need disintegrated the family. The only members of family who could not bid farewell were Rukmani and Nathan. The warmth of domestic felicity received jolt after jolt owing to the hostility of nature in the form of flood and draught and the development of tannery due to which they lost their land as it was sold by the zamindar to the tannery officials. The family came under debt left with no option Rukmani and Nathan decided to go to their son Murugan who work in the city. After facing difficulties they finally reach the residence of their son only to know that Murugan has left the town two years ago leaving his wife and children to starve.

Trivial pursuits and unaccountable happenings may unsettle the foundation of the rich, but the poor bear whatever ills and evils face them. Without money and left with no option Nathan and Rukmani, weak and aged though they were, had to work as labourers on a quarry in order to earn money so that they can return back to their village. Hard work and poor pittance made them what they had been. Rain and cold continued for some days but Nathan and Rukmani did not stop working. Nathan, owing to physical weakness fall ill and like a huge monster the town gradually sucks away the life of Nathan:

And so I laid my face on his face and for a while his breath fell soft and light as a rose petal on my cheek, then he sighed as if in weariness and turned his face to me, and so his gentle spirit withdrew and the light went out in his eyes. (188)

Nathan dies Rukmani was left alone to bear the hardships of life. This fall proved fatal. None except Puli was there to extend help and sympathy not even her own children were there to support her in hour of her need, on the contrary it was Puli who helped Rukmani to reach her village. The novel presents the theme of endurance beyond strength in the character of Rukmani and Nathan.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya successfully unfold the character, behavior and attitude of her leading characters toward life through patience and perseverance. Rukmani and Nathan, as wife and husband, as parents and as head of the family bear testimony to the pains and pleasures of life. The novel demonstrates how Rukmani and Nathan's loyalty and spirit remains unbroken to the last. It shows that one gets used to anything and it is not unbearable for those who are habitual of constant sufferings. Despite want, poverty and hunger they do not go beyond the famous teaching of the Gita: action is thy duty, reward is not thy concern. The chain of misfortunes does not tie them to selfishness, vengeance, cowardice and unethical means. Rukmani and Nathan do not lose their hope for better days till their last breath.

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