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## NECTAR IN SEIVE: DEPICTION OF INDIAN RURAL LIFE IN A REALISTIC MANNER

**Kuldeep Singh Duhan**

**Abstract:** Nectar In A Sieve by Kamala Markandaya is a relatively short novel that introduces the complexities of the life of rural people in India, and the tensions generated to their life because of modernization and industrial progress and by the socio-economic changes that occurred during the country's British colonization. It is the story of an arranged but loving marriage and rural life of peasants in India who hopefully try to way-out the problems of phenomenal change, that created disturbance in their peaceful life, with indomitable human spirit and finally overcome poverty and unending misfortune. It is also a novel about the conflicts between a traditional agricultural culture and a burgeoning industrial capitalistic society.

**Keyword:** Indian rural life, socio-economic changes, Bildungsroman, conflict, fatalism.

### INTRODUCTION

Markandaya's novel, Nectar In A Sieve, is a fictional account of an Indian woman's experience in the rural villages of India presented in first-person narrative voice from Rukmani's perspective. It is not the story of a particular individual and a particular village. That is why Kamala Markandaya has not assigned any name to the village. Even the locale of the village is vague and indeterminate. She gives it a timeless quality that speaks equally today as it did when it was written, shortly after India became independent of Britain. The novel presents Indian rural life as steeped in the darkness of illiteracy and ignorance. Most of the people are superstitious and do not realize the significance of education. For them having a son is more important than anything else. They are conservative people always contriving and conspiring. They are made not fight for their rights but for food. Rukmani, the protagonist, is presented as the epitome of self-sacrifice and patience within the novel, consistently working to uphold the traditional beliefs of her Hindu heritage, a background that was well-known by the author who grew up within the Hindu world. It is not merely the story of Nathan or Rukmani. It is the story of all Indians who live in a village. They represent the poverty stricken peasantry of India. Occasionally they do enjoy the life, but this nectar soon flows out from the sieves of their lives. There has been a struggle for ages in the lives of the Indian farmers but they never do leave hope. They are always making plans and taking actions that will lead to a new tomorrow that never seems to arrive, does not dissuade them from the pursuit.

The novel, written in the first person, complies with the first person realist narrative described by some feminist critics as 'ideologically appropriate to feminism; a way of telling women's story for the first time in an undisguised voice. It not only constructs a picture of the world in which the female view and women's concerns have precedence but also gives an insight into a traditional woman's understanding of aspects of a patriarchal society - dowry systems, the

importance of fertility of wives, women's seclusion, double moral standards. It is an insight, moreover, which emerges from what might be called an 'experienced' reality rather than a theoretical imposition of values which denies the complexity (and, indeed, the positive aspects) of tradition and its social consequences.

The author explores the inner conflict of a woman trapped between her old ideals and the incoming ideas of progress. At the same time, she is able to see how progress, as it is defined by the outside world in terms of factories and industries, is actually the cause of much of the suffering among the indigenous people of the region. Some of the events in the story, such as the existence of a temple in the city to which Rukmani and Nathan flee when they lose their farm, are based on real-life events. Kamala Markandaya, through the life and experiences of Rukmani, brings out the fact that the life in the rural India is difficult and exploitative in nature. The novel depicts the simplicity, ignorance and poverty of the rural Indian people. In spite of their hard-work, they live in abject poverty. Sometimes they do not have even food to eat. They have to depend on the mercy of the rain-God for their crops. But the rains are never in time and if at all they come, they bring floods and destroy the standing crops. Thus we find Nathan's crops being swept away by floods. Nathan finds that his family is left with nothing to eat. Then at times, there are disastrous droughts. All the crops are burnt down and result is always the same. There is starvation and death. The things come to such a pass that the young girls have to take to prostitution in order to avoid the starvation. Kamala Markandaya very realistically portrays the plight of the rural India. She depicts the working of the moneylenders in the village. The village moneylender Biswas has a lot of rice, but instead of helping the poor villagers he overcharges. He does not seem to have any of sympathy in him. Again we find that Nathan, a tenant farmer, works very hard on his land, but much of his earnings goes to the owner of the land. Ultimately, feeling desperate, Nathan and Rukmani migrate

to the city. This is clearly not a novel of direct protest and Rukmani is far from being a spokeswoman for change. It is in the stark and painful contrast between the misfortunes she experiences and the fortitude she shows, that allows Markandaya to draw attention to the suffering of peasants whilst presenting them as human beings who hold their dignity. The recurrence of tragic events throughout the novel work to emphasise the enduring nature of certain difficulties. Rukmani's initial failure to bear male children, for example, finds mythic resonance in her daughter's apparent barrenness, where the fluctuations of fertility are paralleled by the unpredictable yield of the land. Both women feel they are a 'failure'. Rukmani draws attention to the recurrence by recognising that 'the whole dreadful story was repeating itself, ...it was my daughter this time', but in her acceptance that 'we are all in God's hands' with only the doctor Kenny offering some thought of hope for her child, Markandaya increases the disjunction between her suffering and her stoicism. This stark polarisation between immense difficulties on the one hand and tremendous endurance on the other could be argued as contributing to an idealised picture of the peasant's perspective. However, it is in her very effort to present an accessible portrait of the rural mind that Markandaya comes close to deconstructing what Eurocentric critics might negatively describe as 'fatalism' and 'passivity'. Markandaya presents Rukmani's stoicism as more than just part of her nature - it is a perspective that is thoroughly rationalised in the novel, and one which I analyse in the next section. Fatalism and Passivity: The Rural Woman's Perspective Rukmani's stoicism is most evident in her 'fatalistic' comments and in her courageous acquiescence. When her daughter, Ira, is returned to her by her son-in-law because she has failed to conceive, Rukmani consoles Old Granny, the matchmaker who arranged the wedding: 'no fault of your s, or the girl's or her husband's. ... It is Fate '. Reflecting that Old Granny, an elderly and abandoned spinster, has got used to eking out a living by selling 'a few annas worth of nuts and vegetables'. We find Dr. Kenny always telling them to fight for their rights but they do not understand anything. They are fatalistic people. However, it does not mean that life is all that bad in the Indian village. There is a positive side also. We have warm social relationships and Rukmani, old granny, Kali etc. helping their friends out in difficult circumstances. The coming of the tannery symbolizes the process of industrialization and modernization of villages. With the tannery come the negative features of modernity and a fall in the moral values. Thus, Kamala Markandaya presents the reality of the Indian villages in the novel.

In the end, Markandaya indicates it is only the love of family that is able to sustain Rukmani as she survives the transition between one culture and another. Everything else has been stripped from her. She has lost many of her sons. Her daughter has lost any shred of status in the town since Ira's days as a prostitute and the birth of the albino child, Sacrabani. Rukmani's husband is gone and she was not even successful in bringing him home. However, Rukmani is able to bring the child Puli with her. "Out of my affliction I called to Puli. I do not know what words I used, when I think of what I my have said I shiver. ... And he, compassionate creature,

who drew from me the arrows of sorrow one by one, listened, and when I came home I was not alone". Describing her actions as violent in nature, using the term 'arrows' to indicate her rage at the injustice of her husband's parting, Rukmani still manages to turn this anger to the positive, bringing the child home to the only way in which he could receive medical care for the illness that had eaten away his fingers and therefore prevented him from being able to obtain gainful employment. The love that has been shown by Rukmani as they were growing up is then returned and extended immediately to Puli by Rukmani's children, who invite him to "Come with me and rest, I will prepare the rice" (Ira) and tell her "Do not worry, ... We shall manage", making this concept rather explicit. I have to agree with this conclusion. Although the family never seemed to have anything, Rukmani still managed to lose a lot by the end of the story. It is well demonstrated how this is true in the world in which Rukmani lives, but Markandaya never provides a date or a village name or any other form of identification that might indicate where in India Rukmani and her family lived. Because of this, her story takes on a timeless quality, which means that this conclusion must be as true now as it was when the story was written. This seems to be the case as the country just went through a time of economic trouble and natural disasters, making us realize that even those who seem to have nothing have managed to lose something in the turmoil. Those who managed to survive these events are those who were able to support themselves on their love for family enough to quickly overcome their grief and move on with the business of living.

#### CONCLUSION:

Nectar In A Sieve is a short but substantial novel about rural life told from the perspective of a peasant woman, Rukmani. It describes her married years, during which she is torn between 'Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged first in one direction and then in another', and skilfully brings home the way in which traditional faith strengthens the ability of those most vulnerable to face up to calamities. The novel describes, a rural society -unidealised, containing its own tensions - invaded and transformed by an uncomprehending and often brutal alien system. In the process both the values and the limitations of rural society are recognised. In the novel both narrator and narrative are charged with a universal significance. The novel is a Bildungsroman, highly charged and wellpaced, highlighting the peaks and troughs in the life of Rukmani; it is also the story of a dying village life. Written retrospectively and in the first person, the novel operates both as a personal testament of a peasant woman and as a portrait of an age and a community. Rukmani's idealism and naivety - evident from the beginning of the text when, as a child, she mistakenly believes that, though she is the fourth daughter in her family, her father's position as head of the village will secure her a good marriage and 'grand wedding' - and optimism, make the ensuing tragedies appear all the more enormous.

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