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NECTAR IN A SIEVE: SURVIVAL OF THE MOST ADAPTABLE**Kuldeep Singh Duhan**

Abstract: Set in an India village, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is a gripping story of one woman's survival of a checkered life, one that had no margin for misfortune. In this novel Kamala Markandaya depicts the lives of optimistic and accepting characters as superior to those who insist on keeping every aspect of their life and culture the same. By being intolerant of change, these characters attempt to keep their lives stationary, something that is virtually impossible. In her novel primarily about the changes brought upon a rural Indian society Markandaya expresses her opinion that change is essential, and that one who attempts to ignore it to stay happy cannot succeed. The story is about Rukmani, a young woman born into the upper crust of Indian society, but this birth status does not automatically guarantee her the prosperous future it might suggest. Conflicts of tradition and the outside world begin to insinuate themselves into Rukmani's life, bringing change almost faster than she can adjust. Struggling through poverty and heartbreak, as well as the changing socioeconomic culture of their village, she demonstrates a quiet, pragmatic dignity that is concerned with life. By telling the story of a young Indian woman as she weds her husband and grows old with him, raises a family and suffers several hardships along the way, author strives to present a picture of a changing world and how it is the love of a family that overcomes these tremendous challenges. Rukmani is indeed 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.

Keyword: Rural society, industrialisation, conflicts, change,

INTRODUCTION:

Told from the perspective of Rukmani, Markandaya gives the impression that she most closely identifies with the confusion and persistence of the peasant woman struggling to survive and cling to her values amid a rapidly changing world. Although Rukmani loses her birth family to the passage of time and her many of her sons to progress, she retains a quiet dignity in her acceptance of what life throws at her and her ability to carry on in spite of it. Although she gives in to despair occasionally, it never lasts long as is shown in a quick exchange between Rukmani and her husband upon her third son's departure to be a servant in a city two days' traveling away. "You brood too much,' Nathan, her husband said, 'and think only of your trials, not of the joys that are still with us. Look at our land – is it not beautiful? The fields are green and the grain is ripening. It will be a good harvest year, there will be plenty.' ... Thus he sought to comfort me, and after a time I was with him, thinking pleasurably of harvesting, and of plucking the pumpkins swelling on the vine, and visiting our son – and so we made our plans" (Markandaya, 1955, p. 98). Throughout the novel, although the things that have been lost are lamented as the beauty of a bygone day, the characters continue to look to the future, making plans and taking actions that will lead to a new tomorrow. That that tomorrow never seems to arrive does not dissuade them from the pursuit. After her two oldest sons have left for a far away land for unknown fortunes or destruction, another son has been killed at the tannery plant under suspicion of theft, a fourth leaves to be a servant in a faraway city and a fifth dies of

starvation while still an infant, Rukmani seems to have little left to be thankful for. Her daughter, likewise, suffers her own injustices, being brought back to her parents after not being able to produce a son as heir for her husband and disgraced further after being forced to take up prostitution in order to try to save her youngest brother from the starvation that is claiming him. The loss of their land seems to be the final straw, but when they arrive in the city to seek refuge from what they consider to be their most successful son, they find he, too, has disappeared from their lives forever. Struggling to earn enough money to return home, Rukmani loses her last pillar of support when Nathan dies of illness brought on by their destitute living conditions, she finds new support in the young boy they'd met in the city, managing to bring him with her back to her remaining son and daughter. 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. 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" (Selvam) (Markandaya, 1955, p. 254), 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. 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.

Throughout the novel, Markandaya emphasizes the changes that every character must adapt to. While in some cases characters try to avoid change or feel pity towards themselves, only those who accept and adjust to change persevere. By showing the various choices that one makes, and their outcomes, Markandaya expresses her opinion that since change is inevitable, in order to survive one must have hope and be optimistic about the future. There are several situations in *Nectar in a Sieve* in which characters must deal with change, after which they learn that it is inevitable and must accept it. At first, Rukmani insists on disregarding the tannery, and is reluctant to acknowledge their influence in her life, "They may live in our midst but I can never accept them," (p. 32). Although she wants her life to return to normal, as it was before the intruders came, this is impossible; she must learn to share her land and culture with those who change it in "a myriad ways." Ruku does not find happiness until she learns to accept the changes that the tannery brings to her village, some of which she finds beneficial. Nathan, whose biggest desire is to pass his land on to his children, is faced with overcoming the disappointment of his sons' longing to leave their village. His biggest obstacle is to accept the fate of his sons, which he is able to do when he realizes that the better life his family is leading is because of the wages his sons bring home. Ammu, Ruku and Nathan's daughter-in-law, is not accepting the sudden change that life brought to her. She must support her family alone after Murugan left his wife and children in hopes of a better life. As several characters undergo change, Markandaya emphasizes that it is impossible to escape change and one must recognize it to persevere. Numerous times in *Nectar in a Sieve* characters are able to adjust to the change, and be hopeful for the future. Through different characters, Markandaya illustrates that without optimism and determination one cannot live contentedly. When Nathan and Ruku are too poor to return to their village from the city, Nathan reassures her by saying, "when the time comes, the strength will be forthcoming, never fear" (pg. 97). Because of his strength of mind, Nathan was finally able to succeed in surpassing the dramatic change in his life. Puli, orphaned at a young age and completely self-reliant, survives alone in the city because of his persistence and unwillingness to give into the pressures of change. He is able to adjust to change easily once again when he moves with Ruku as her adopted son.

Although he had seemingly little to lose, his ability to completely change his life is carried by his hope for a better future. Ammu, on the other hand, is more caught up in struggling with herself and her self-pity, rather than moving on and understanding her new lifestyle and responsibilities. Her irritation with fate and her bitterness interferes with her attitude towards her in-laws as she greets them with a "no smile, no welcome" manner. Markandaya shows that only if one has optimism and is hopeful to adjust to change can one truly learn to live with, and survive, changes in his life. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya depicts the lives of optimistic and accepting characters as superior to those who insist on keeping every aspect of their life and culture the same. By being intolerant of change, these characters attempt to keep their lives stationary, something that is virtually impossible. In her novel primarily about the changes brought upon a rural Indian society Markandaya expresses her opinion that change is essential, and that one who attempts to ignore it to stay happy cannot succeed. *Nectar in a Sieve* Kamala Markandaya emphasizes changes that every character must adapt while some cases characters avoid change feel pity towards themselves only those accept adjust change persevere showing various choices that makes their outcomes markandaya expresses opinion that since change inevitable order survive must have hope optimistic about future there several situations nectar sieve which characters must deal with after which they learn inevitable accept first rukmani insists disregarding tannery reluctant acknowledge their influence life they live midst never accept them although wants life return normal before intruders came this impossible learn share land culture with those myriad ways ruku does find happiness until learns changes tannery brings village some which finds beneficial nathan whose biggest desire pass land children faced with overcoming disappointment sons longing leave their village biggest obstacle fate sons able when realizes reason better life family leading wages sons bring home ammu ruku nathan daughter accepting sudden brought support family alone after murugan left wife children hopes better several characters undergo markandaya emphasizes impossible escape recognize persevere numerous times nectar sieve able adjust hopeful future through different illustrates without optimism determination cannot live contentedly when nathan ruku poor return village from city reassures saying when time comes strength will forthcoming never fear because strength mind finally able succeed surpassing dramatic puli orphaned young completely self reliant survives alone city because persistence unwillingness give into pressures adjust easily once again moves adopted although seemingly little lose ability completely carried hope better future ammu other hand more caught struggling herself self pity rather than moving understanding lifestyle responsibilities irritation fate bitterness interferes attitude towards laws greets them smile welcome manner shows only optimism hopeful truly learn live survive changes kamala depicts lives optimistic accepting superior those insist keeping every aspect culture same being intolerant these attempt keep lives stationary something virtually impossible novel primarily about brought upon rural indian society expresses opinion essential attempts ignore stay happy cannot succeed.

CONCLUSION:

Markandaya's first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, portrayed rural India struggling for survival. The story is enfolded in a flashback by Rukmani, an impoverished peasant woman in a South-Indian village. Her marital life with Nathan, a landless peasant, is the chronicle of hardships of tenant-farmers caused by natural calamities and greedy landlords. The clash of values occurs in the novel at several levels, but the most crucial encounter remains between the ideas inculcated by cultural traditions of India and the forces of progress unleashed by Western science and technology. It 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.

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