

The Theme of Hunger and Degradation in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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ABSTRACT

Nectar in a Sieve reflects the stark poverty in Indian villages and its dehumanising effects on the people. *Nectar in a Sieve* deals with the theme of hunger. The story portrays the lives of the peasant couple Nathan and Rukmani who have to suffer a lot due to the vagaries of Nature and failure of crops. The paper presents the inevitable changes in the social and economic aspects in the wake of industrialization. Nature victimizes the peasants, through flood one year, or drought the next, the net result is poor yield, famine, starvation and sometimes death. The paper clearly exposes that fear; hunger and despair are the unchanging companions of the peasants. Kamala Markandaya brings out the fact that it is hunger which leads ultimately to degradation.

Keywords: Hunger, Starvation, Degradation, Confrontation, Suffering, Migration And Disintegration

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya's vision of life as revealed in her novels it is necessary to draw a portrait of the familial, social, political, economic, religious, ethical and cultural conditions of India since the middle of the 20th century as it will help us determine the nature and range of her vision of life. Privacy and family life go together for family home is where men, women and children can be themselves where they can close the door on the outside world. Actually the family is deeply involved in the affairs of society. Society does not have to knock on the doors of the individuals before making its influence felt as it is already inside the house.

Kamala Markandaya was genuinely concerned with the problems of rural India before independence. Among many ailments, hunger and degradation were the most torturing and disgusting. They were the greatest social concerns of India before freedom. In her various novels, she had dealt with several problems concerning various aspects of India like social, political, national and international in the form of the East-West Confrontation. References to human degradation could be found in almost all her novels. Her tragic vision found its best expression in her novels which she filled with her social concerns. She did it for the sake of human amelioration and betterment. "Kamala Markandaya's novels are generated by the tragic vision that finds in contemporary life a fruitful seed-bed for conflict." (Kamala Markandaya, 211) Kamala's first novel *'Nectar in a Sieve'* was a fervent cry of protest against social injustice, hunger and degradation which were the common factors of countless villages in India before independence. The novel was a powerful presentation of patience in the face of suffering. It was also a glaring example of labour when there was no hope. The narrator Rukmani was married to Nathan at the age of twelve; he was a tenant farmer rich in nothing except in love. They sold their utensils, sarees, and other domestic things and suffered patiently. The problem of starvation sprang up when their children grew and there was not enough land to accommodate all.

An English man established tannery in the village which ruined the peaceful atmosphere of the village on the name of progress and advancement. "Destructive in its side effects it indicates a new way of life." (Kamala Markandaya, 14) The tannery was growing up as a token of industrialization and mechanization, but for the villagers it was a symbol of disaster and destruction. Rukmani visualized. Another English man Dr. Kennington was introduced as a symbol of Western civilization. He was building a hospital for the sake of villagers. The tannery work was creating handicaps in the path of hospital building. Simple rural values were replaced by those of shoddy industrialization.

Nathan and Rukmani felt one problem after another. Finally, they had to leave their land which they had formed for thirty years. They were on the verge of hunger and starvation. However, their faith in better times was firm and unbroken. Dr. Kenny was annoyed by Rukmani's stoic resignation to fate and times, he cried out. Their paddy was destroyed; they expected no rice till the next harvest and lived on salted fish, roots and leaves, the fruit of the prickly pear and small fish. Then there was drought, the paddy became as dry as a bone and Rukmani had to face bitter hunger. Kamala gave passionate pictures of hunger through Rukmani. Kamala Markandaya gave a very impressive and accurate description of hunger. She

had emphasized the three stages of it - firstly when its pain was increasingly sharp and gnawing, secondly, perpetually dull and sickening one, finally, when the vast emptiness pervaded and the pain ceased to be painful Markandaya must have felt on keeping a fast. Kamala Markandaya's description of hunger and pain were very poignant and impressive.

Its effect on old people and children was the worst. The portrayal of hungry Kuti was simply superb. Kamala Markandaya must have observed hungry people in order to give such impressive descriptions. They were also journalistic and generalized. As she had stayed in England, she had not seen the harrowing scenes of hunger which affected Bhattacharya immensely. Hunger had its degrading effect on people; it drove Ira to prostitution and made Nathan 'as thin and dry as a hollow bamboo stick' (Kamala Markandaya, 104) It took away poor Kuti's life and remained insatiated even after Nathan and Rukmani left the village. They went to the city and sought Murugan in vail and worked pathetically in the stone quarry.

Markandaya painted from her backyard a guava tree which was reduced to a stump because of nature's ravages and human vandalism. "Kamala's assets were that she was very realistic and authentic in the presentation of hunger and degradation. They were created not only by Nature but also by over-lordism. Nathan and Rukmani faced cruelty caused by an unavoidable fate; Rukmani had her stoic resignation. These poor peasants had to fight against an unjust social order. These problems of hunger and degradation were because of 'the inequalities in the whole structure of society'"(Kamala Markandaya15) Kamala Markandaya did not give ready-made solutions, but she was sure of better times to come. Kamala Markandaya presented the theme with all its facets and aspects. "Far more terrible than physical hunger is the negation of self-respect, that denies the basic right of dignity to a human being."(Kamala Markandaya16) Farmers suffered from hunger but they suffered from a great degradation when they were turned out of their own lands. They could eat roots or leaves or the fruit of the prickly pear in times of drought or flood, but when they were deprived of their rented lands, they suffered from the greatest degradation.

They had hope, so long as they had land, Nathan and Rukmani felt highly degraded when they were turned out of their land. Kamala Markandaya presented the heart-felt degradation of Rukmani in the following words:"This home my husband had built for me with his own hands in the time he was waiting for me; brought me to it, with a pride which I, used to better living, had so very nearly crushed. In it, we had lain together and our children had been born. This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonged to another. And the land itself by which we lived. It is a cruel thing. I thought, They do not know what they do to us"(Kamala Markandaya137)

Rukmani symbolized the feelings of a number of peasants who fell victims to hunger and degradation. She always felt that the establishment of tannery was responsible for their ultimate hunger and degradation. Rukmani and Nathan were compelled in the city to be stone-breakers in order to earn their bread. They suffered from a great degradation and disgrace when their daughter Ira was rejected by her husband because she was barren. They tolerated every kind of disgrace and degradation patiently and calmly. Old Granny died of starvation. In '*Nectar in a Sieve*,' she presented hunger and degradation in a village, in this novel, '*A Handful of Rice*,' she depicted these social problems in the city. "Rukmani in the village and Ravi in the town complement each to the design representing social injustice."(Kamala Markandaya, 57) Against all poverty, hunger and degradation, '*Nectar in a Sieve*' had optimistic notes. Uma Parameswaran observed: "*Nectar in Sieve* is the story of the faceless peasant who stands silhouetted in the unending twilight of Indian agrarian bankruptcy, the horizon showing through the silent trees now with crimson gashes, now with soul-exalting splendor, always holding out the promise that the setting sun will rise again after night, the night ever approaching yet never encompassing."(Uma Parameswaran, 92)

Nature played a very important role for the hunger and degradation of poor peasants. She had her innate uncertainties and tricks of weather. Rukmani was constantly aware of the uncertainty of weather. Rukmani's fears came true when her son Kuti died of starvation and Nathan also died of over-work, exhaustion and starvation. Nalini had attacked them in the form of rains first resulting in floods. After some time, they had no rice to eat. They were forced to live on roots and leaves, the fruits of the prickly pear and plantains. Drought was the second from of nature's attack. Rukmani expressed her heart-felt sorrow in these words when human beings wandered here and there like wild animals in search of food and ate whatever rubbish they could get. Kamala Markandaya justified the title by making her readers realize the true meaning of hunger and starvation. Unlike other Indian - English novelists, she presented things authentically on the basis of her experiences. Actually, hunger and starvation led people to degradation. If immorality was due to poverty and hunger what would we call it? According to Markandaya, it was not immorality; it was the question of the survival.

Kunthi was forced to join prostitution because of poverty, she even blackmailed Rukmani and Nathan; Ira wanted to protect her dying child by hook or crook, therefore, she became a prostitute. Our social system was responsible for all this

humiliation and degradation. Rukmani's daughter Ira was rejected by her husband because she was barren and in the village, the whole blame fell on the wife. Ira's return to her father's house was a great cause of degradation for the entire family. It was most humiliating when her father refused to eat the food she brought. "Yet the fault is not his, but nature's that wrecked a good harvest." (Kamala Markandaya. 16) Thus, negation of self-respect In '*Nectar in a Sieve*', Markandaya had firmly said that poverty, hunger and starvation could lead to the disintegration of family with a number of misfortune and problems.

Floods had destroyed all crops; Rukmani had some rice which would last until times were better. Kenny was angry, he cried out; Times are better, times are better; Times will never be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools." (Kamala Markandaya, 47) The younger generation, the sons of Nathan and Rukmani, getting fed up with hunger and degradation wanted to revolt against them. But when their parents showed a passive acceptance of their lot, their children left home thinking that their attitude would never change. They were impatient at injustice; they wanted to improve their fortunes. Thus, there was disintegration of family; actually, it was brought about by hunger and degradation. Selvam became angry when his father was evicted. He angrily asked: "You have made no protests." The managers of the tannery managed to break the strike. Arjun was angry : Rukmani did not understand what it was to learn. She went to Kenny who satisfied her : "I have told you before - you must cry out, if you want help. It is no use to suffer in silence. Who will succour the drowning man if he does not clamour for his life." (Kamala Markandaya, 115) But Rukmani felt that it was a sign of weakness if one cried out one must rise above one's misfortunes.

Kenny further asked Rukmani if spiritual powers come to solve their problems of hunger and degradation? At this she replied: "Yet our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed." (Kamala Markandaya, 116) According to the Eastern concept of life people had to suffer from hunger and degradation and other problems like social injustice calmly. Rukmani told Kenny: "Do not concern yourself - we are in God's hand." (Kamala Markandaya, 133) This was the basic cause of peasant's hunger and degradation. These people had a traditional resignation to Fate, God and even the vagaries of climate and nature. They had developed the mentality of passive acceptance. Kamala presented a problem of hunger and degradation in villages, she also gave a solution that by following the Western methods, and we could improve our standards.

Even tannery was good because it was a reflection of modern mechanical revolution, Dr. Kenny's establishment of the hospital was also a unique thing for the poor and the sick. Kamala exhorted people to change their mentality with a view to getting rid of such nasty problems of hunger and degradation. Herein lay Kamala's positive attitude o life. The leper boy Puli was healed of his leprosy in the hospital and Selvam had found a congenial job in the tannery. For the solution of the problems of hunger and degradation, we could not harp on the same strings; we had to look ahead with Dr. Kenny's eyes or a Western attitude.

CONCLUSION

In her novels Markandaya not only displays a flair for virtuosity which orders and patterns her feelings and ideas resulting in a truly enjoyable work of art but also projects the image of national consciousness on many levels of aesthetic awareness Markandaya's Indian sensibility enables her to grasp the plight of her Indian characters more easily than her British characters set in the Indian context. Most of her characters both major and minor are born by the conflicts between good and bad reason and faith .Eastern and western values honesty and dishonesty and the conflicts terminate towards the end of the novels with a message crystal clear

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