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A VISION OF RURAL LIFE IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

VAISHALI RANGNATHRAO HAJARE¹, SHAIKH SAMAD²

¹Ph D Research Scholar, Department of English, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad (MS), India

²Ex-Principal, Vasantrya Naik Mahavidyalaya, Aurangabad, (MS), India



VAISHALI



SHAIKH SAMAD

ABSTRACT

Indian English Literature has gained unique position for combining its native perceptions with external influences in its themes as well as techniques. Kamala Markandaya is the finest example of such a mingling, in spirit as well as in essence. No doubt, Markandaya stands as one of the most outstanding Indian novelists writing in English. She represents the 'great tradition' of women novelists established in English by Jane Austen down to Virginia Woolf. The range of Markandaya's fiction is very large. She never repeats herself in her novels, and one can easily recognize in them various themes- political, economic, cultural, artistic, social, moral-spiritual, and so on, dealt with in a competent manner. For her graphic presentation of the Indian socio-economic scenario, she is known as "one of the major novelists on the Commonwealth scene". (Taranath,1972,p.307). The present research article highlights, the vision of rural life in her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* published in 1954. This novel portrays how the wind of industrialisation blows across rural India and causes the dislocation of tradition.

Keywords: Great tradition, graphic presentation, commonwealth scene, rural India, Industrialisation, Dislocation.

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INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya occupies a prominent place among Indian-English novelists. Markandaya started writing novels when India was just at the threshold of newly-won freedom. Poverty, hunger and starvation were everywhere due to communal disturbances. Industrialisation and urbanisation were eroding the very basis of rural life. In Markandaya's novels, six themes are prominent-- Hunger and Degradation, East-West Encounter, Fatalism, Rootlessness, Politics and human relationship. No doubt, a number of Indian-English writers viz. R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Bhabani Bhattacharya have also dealt with the themes of Hunger and Degradation, East-West encounter, Fatalism and Rootlessness, but Markandaya occupies a unique position in this regard. Kamala Markandaya is different from these novelists in her own remarkable way of depiction of a large variety of the realities of Indian life. The picture of rural India juxtaposed with the glamorous westernised life of England finds a prominent place in her novels.

Kamala Markandaya won international fame and recognition with the publication of her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* in 1954. Theme of Hunger and Degradation is portrayed in the context of rural India. In order to have first-hand knowledge of rural life, she lived in a South Indian village and observed clearly the life of villagers. After her marriage she settled in England as an expatriate. This experience enabled her to acquire a first-hand knowledge of the British policy of colonialism and imperialism. So she values Indian traditions and culture more than those of the West. Besides, she highlights the sufferings of ordinary Indians. In this connection S.K. Krishnaswamy observes:

“She, however, is not a theorist to dwell upon caste and class problems only, but Her concerns being predominantly socio-economic, her novels offer us a savage tale of brutality, ignorance, mental and physical bludgeoning that the ordinary Indian, man and woman is subject to,” (Krishnaswamy, 1984, p.162).

The novelist divides this novel into two parts: the first part depicts Rukmani's life as the wife of a poor tenant-farmer and the sweets and spoils of such a life, and the second part deals with the troubled wanderings of the aged couple in search of their son, their hardship and their final disillusionment.

Rukmani, the woman protagonist of the novel is a child bride of just twelve years. Rukmani is living a happy married life with her husband, Nathan. Nathan is a poor tenant farmer of a South Indian village. After some period of their marriage, Rukmani gives birth to Ira, a daughter but Nathan wants a male issue. Their idyllic life, however goes on: with the help of Kenny, an English Doctor who works in the rural area, she bears many more children- all male ones- Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvam, Raja and Kuti. Then one day townsmen arrive to build a tannery on the maiden near the village. But Rukmani is hostile to this sudden intrusion of modernity, industrialism enter rural life- ugliness, vice, inflation and crowd. Rather Rukmani is happy and contented in so far as the tannery does not touch her family. Rapt in her own life and struggle for survival, she is oblivious of many changes. Then they arrange Ira's marriage to a young farmer who later returns her because she is barren. For lack of rain, crops fail, Rukmani's family verges on starvation. Arjun and Thambi join the tannery. After sometime they also dismissed from the tannery for creating trouble and leave for Ceylon. Murugan also goes to city for some job. Once again Rukmani and Nathan are in the grip of a terrible drought. Because of this drought situation, Raja dies and Kuti falls ill. So, Ira sells her body to feed Kuti. And the result of this prostitution, she gives birth to an illegal son. In the meantime the old granny dies of starvation, Kuti also passes away. The Zamindar forced Nathan to leave his land, so Rukmani and Nathan decide to live with Murugan in the city. Selvam, Ira and her baby stay back in the village to help Kenny, the English doctor. Rukmani and Nathan reach the city but they didn't find Murugan anywhere. The charity members forced them to do a job on very less amount of payment. In all that process and in that vast impersonal city, Puli, a young boy guided them. But after some time Nathan becomes terribly old and sick, unable to bear the rigours of such a life and he passes away. So Rukmani returns to her village.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, says A.V. Krishna Rao, “Markandaya dramatises the tragedy of a traditional Indian village and a peasant family assaulted by industrialisation: Rukmani and Nathan, the peasant couple in a South Indian village, are the victims of the two evils: zamindari system and the industrial economy,” (Rao, 1967, p.56). Rukmani views and accepts the tannery, Nature, liquidation, death, hunger, prostitution and other things. Her calm stoic acceptance of life has no metaphysical support but it is firmly established in an Indian woman's faith in the intractable laws of *karma*, her patience and fortitude and above all, a quality of compassion we associate with woman folk in India: “ Rukmani's calm acceptance of the reality of the situation is more in agreement with the traditions of an Indian woman”, (Rao, 1967, p.57).

Generally, rural people are not educated, but Rukmani is quite literate. Rukmani teaches her children at home because of their poor condition. She cannot afford to send them to school. As compared to city, in village, it is quite difficult to accept a woman without child or a woman with a daughter but without a son. In rural society the life of a woman, who has no children at all is worse. The husband in the rural area has the social sanction to discard his barren wife. So Ira's husband discarded her by saying her a barren.

In this novel most of the characters are rural, just like, Rukmani, Nathan, Ira, Kali, Kunthi, old Granny, Janaki and many more nameless characters have an unmistakable rural bearing. Their attitude, vision of life, manners and language belong to the countryside. That's why Hari Mohan Prasad calls Nathan and Rukman "Symbols of teeming millions, archetypal figures like Adam and Eve," (Prasad,1984,p.99). Superstitions and beliefs are a result of illiteracy. The villagers have many blind beliefs. But Nathan, though not educated, does not believe that. The rural people feel proud in having more children, considering it not only a concrete testimony of divine blessing but also a fortune in that there will be more hands to work on the farm.

In this novel, Kamala Markandaya disapprove the superstitious practices of the rural people. When rain was not enough for the field work, Rukmani throws herself on the ground, prays, offers a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to the goddess, but no rains come. The standard of living of rural people is almost primitive. Nathan's house is a small thatched mud hut near a paddy field in the vicinity of a couple of similar huts. A garland of mango leaves is a symbol of happiness and good fortune. So they always hang this kind of garland across the doorway. The hut has two rooms, one is used as a storehouse for grain and another is for everything else. The popular means of transport is the bullock cart, moving in the midst of sights and sounds from nature, which makes the journey enjoyable to both animals and passengers.

Conclusion

In this way, Kamala Markandaya portrays a realistic picture of the rural India and its problems through this novel. Since *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays rural India with pitiless realism and shows the winds of change blow across it with new social forces. One can compare this novel with the novels of Munshi Premchand especially *Rangbhoomi* and *Godan*. (Abidi,1982,p.48). *Nectar in a Sieve* has absolute 'Indianness' in its theme, the striking contrast provided by an Indian village to the Western cosmopolitanism that pervades much of the modern Western literary traditions. The present novel is the story of Indian family, Indian womanhood and the poverty, squalor and hunger of the bulk of India's population.

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