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AGRARIAN CRISIS IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S:  
*NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya as a woman novelist portrayed the role of rural women in agriculture. Indian culture is embedded in agriculture for centuries. Her novels blame the vagaries of nature (flood and drought) and industrialization for crisis in rural India. The most advanced stage of these issues lead to hunger, poverty, starvation, degradation of land and human life. It ultimately drives the farmers from rural areas to urban areas in search of better life. Again, Kamala Markandaya observes Indian agriculture is passing through a period of severe crisis. Although some features of these crises in agriculture started manifesting themselves in certain parts of south India during pre-independence period, these crises had assumed a serious dimension since the introduction of tanneries in rural areas. There is a general perception that unbearable burden of debt and starvation augmented as a result of natural calamities is indicative of a crisis in Indian agriculture. In this paper, an attempt has been made to find out the causes of the crisis, problems faced by the agriculture sector and at the end how rural tenant farmers overcome these crises for sustainable living. It is observed that Rukmani had overcome the hurdles through her innate capacity to withstand the exploitation and rise above the poverty. She achieved her identity through self-confidence, perseverance and hopefulness, fight for their rights and protecting the land and nature.

**Key words:** Agrarian crisis, agricultural sector, migration, natural calamities, tannery.

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INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya began writing novels while India was simply at the beginning of newly won freedom. The struggle for women in agriculture is her will to assert the identity, which forms an essence of womanhood. As agriculture evolved to create a multiple identities for women in the society, there is a need to study the threats faced by the Indian agricultural system. It is well known that women in India are high levels of involvement in agriculture production and dependence on agriculture for livelihoods. Globally, agriculture is a key element in the identities of rural people. Many of the struggles for recognition begin with land and

agriculture, which takes on multiple meanings. For women, land means more than a few paddy fields; it means her recognition as an individual. While earlier women were labelled as homemakers, now they are categorized as producers.

Kamala Markandaya in her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, critiques the tale and misfortunes of a peasant couple, Nathan and Rukmani of a South Indian Village. The research on the novel explicates that women's involvement in agriculture is very much important for economic growth and poverty reduction. As a tenant farmer, Rukmani vividly works hard in agriculture to establish her identity. She comes across many obstacles in rural areas which re-enforced the agrarian crisis. The tragedy of the downfall of agriculture in rural area is caused by a number of factors such as industrial economy, and tannery, migration and vagaries of nature. The flow of life in an Indian village has been realistically discussed with sympathy and skill. Thus the image of rural life is comprehensive and very outstanding. According to the novelist, Indian peasants face heart-rending sufferings because of natural and manmade phenomena. Indian peasant is basically a poor; therefore, he often faces starvation whenever he does not get his harvest in a proper manner. These sufferings are caused not only by the natural happenings but also by the general people, as we observe in the case of Nathan who has to face the ill-treatment of Zamindar.

The most prominent manifestation of agrarian crisis led to migration of people in search of jobs, hunger, poverty, illegal activities, starvation, degradation nature and human life. In this research paper, an attempt is made to critically analyze and interpret the nature and causes for agrarian crisis in rural areas and also attempted to elucidate the role of major woman character Rukmani in resolving the crisis.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Kamala Markandaya has elucidated three major factors responsible for the crisis in agriculture during the pre-independence period. The causes, sufferings and hopefulness of the rural women are portrayed through a Rukmani and Nathan of a small village. The causes for the crises are

1. Vagaries of nature
2. Tannery
3. Migration

#### **NATURAL CALAMITIES**

Nature victimizes the peasants, through flood one year, or drought the next, the net result is poor yield, famine, starvation and sometimes death. Peasants always face hardships of fear and hunger. This is the reality of the farmers in rural India. Sometimes heavy rain or sometimes drought can make them beggars, and even when plenty of fields have, they become helpless. "They live by our labors from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children, and if bad times are prolonged, we know we must see the weak surrender their and this fact, too is within our experience. In our lives there is no margin for misfortune". Kamala Markandaya's perception of Indian ethos is strikingly similar to that of contemporary social novelists, there is nevertheless a unique sensitiveness in her novels in terms of the extent, range and depth of perception. (Misra ) A thorough study of her novels clearly reveals that though she appears to be inadequate in her description of agrarian crisis in south India. She portrayed the reality to sensitize the readers about the root causes of poverty, hunger and exploitation rather than giving a microscopic descriptions.

The novelist elucidates the impact of nature upon rural India. Nathan and Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* face long and terrific rains, and the result is that they are put to a great loss.

"At first the children were cheerful enough—they had not known such things before and the lakes and rivulets that formed outside gave them less delight, but Nathan and I watched with heavy hearts while the waters rose and rose and the tender green of the paddy field was lost".

Thus, Mrs. Markandaya's novel vividly records the poverty-stricken, heart-breaking existence of the people of rural areas. She deals with the everyday problems of the rural community. Her depiction of these rural folk is not partial. She rather "creates peasants who betray the truly human characteristics of self-delusion and magnanimity." Like D.H. Lawrence in whose novels, *Sons and Lovers* and *Rainbow* the hard lives of the farmers

are marred by the coal blackened colliers. The novelist admits that the rural women were able to tide over the disturbances and lived a dignified life with hopefulness.

The author skillfully portrayed the sufferings of villagers in the event of heavy rain led to flood. On one day, Rukmani was busy with the marriage of Ira and couldn't care for her hut. There was a heavy rain and everywhere there is water. All the fields sink into water. It rains continuously for eight days. On the ninth day when Nathan and Rukmani go to see their field, there was nothing but water. Many huts of the villagers have been washed away. Both of them lose their peace of mind. They also find that storm has played havoc in the villages. Rukmani and Nathan come back to their house. At night again rains heavily. They were penniless and they gone to Honuman, a dealer in rice. He refuses to give rice and then gone to Biswas.

Rukmani commented that

"To Hanuman first for rice," said Nathan, excited. "The gruel we have been swallowing has been almost almost plain water these last few days." I quickened my steps; my stomach began heaving at the thought of food. Hanuman was standing in the doorway of his shop. He shook his head when he saw us.

Biswas assisted and sold two sacks of rice for two rupees. They return to their house and found that their rice crop was totally destroyed. They realized that they may get the next harvest only in the next year. The villagers begin to live on salted fish, roots and leaves and the prickly pear. They gather some of the remains of the paddy and put them into thrashing and winnowing. Out of it both Rukmani and Nathan get only two measures of rice, then on dried fish and on vegetables. It exposed the reality of flood in devastating the farmer life of rural India.

As a result of vagarious of weather in rural India, Kamala Markandaya expressed the reality that there was no income for the villagers. It created unemployment in villages and led the two sons of Kunthi joining the tannery. Though Kunthi is a lady of Rukmani's age, maintains her physical beauty. She wanders here and there and brought the attention of the villagers. Janaki came to know that Kunthi made affair with her husband who sits in his grocery shop. Janaki was full of anger due to the decline of her shop. Ultimately, the grocery shop closed down where her husband sits. Natural calamities coupled with immoral life of Janaki's husband led to loss of grocery shop and agriculture. Janaki and her family left the villages and moved to some other place. It was well documented that the agriculture in the rural areas ruined by the natural calamities and immoral way of life. Natural calamities not only directly affected a single family but also traversed laterally in multiple families and caused an innumerable loss human values and hope.

#### **TANNERY**

Industrialization not only mars the natural beauty of the country side, but it also creates various problems like alien population, prostitution, labor unrest, fear and increase in diseases. In *Nectar in a Sieve* the tannery owners "invaded our (Rukmani's) village with clatter and din and had taken from us the maiden where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us". In the same novel Ira takes to prostitution though it is the starvation that leads her to do so. Even then, if the tannery had not been established, she might have been saved from the degradation, but the tannery "changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants.... Ira had ruined herself at the hands of the throngs that the tannery attracted." The villager ceases to think of any one "but schemes only for his money."

Mrs. Markandaya presents south Indian life both in its traditional, conservative and rural aspects, with convincing sincerity and fascinating power. It is perhaps due to her great acquaintance with the rural scenes of South India.

In the pre-independence era Mulk Raj Anand presented the peasants tale of woe and hunger in the rural society. In the post-Independence period most of the Indo-Anglian novelists like Nayantara Sahgal, Anitha Desai and Bhabani Bhattacharya have presented a penetrating and sympathetic analysis of the different problems of rural life. But Kamala Markandaya with her capable representational realism and evocative descriptions of Indian arcadia. She achieves perfect poise between the rural reality and the disciplined urbanity of tragic delineation of the effect of poverty, natural disaster and unwelcome modernization upon a peasant family, but *Nectar in a Sieve* has usually potent qualities of stoic dignity and clear organization. Her most

prominent feature is her serenity and the sense of balance even in crisis. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar also remarked about the novel that heart is tempered in the flames of love and faith, of sufferings and sacrifice, will not easily accept defeat. Rukmani the narrator heroine is also 'a mother of sorrow'.

Kamala Markandaya presents the evil effects of industrialization upon rural beings. The tension between tradition (that symbolizes the rural life) and modernity, that stands foe industrialization, is presented in her works. *Nectar in a Sieve* presents the drastic assault of industrialization on the rural society. Through Rukmani, the narrator, the novelist describes the evil effects of industrialization upon the pleasant rhythm of rural India. Shiv K. Kumar in his essay "*Tradition and change in the novels of Kamala Markandaya*" rightly asserted that Rukmani, whose boundless faith looks definitely beyond all physical suffering and partakes of that peace that surpassed all understanding.

*Nectar in a Sieve* presents the devastating assault of industrialization on the rural society. Through Rukmani, the narrator the novelist describes the ill effects of industrialization upon the placid rhythm and calm beauty of a village which is symbolic of rural India. The disasters that fall upon the peasants "are the result of the combined impersonal forces of nature and industrialization." "The advent of tannery creates sordidness, loss of traditional values and social degradation. It brings vices, social filth and moral debasement in its wake. Thus the village is violated in the name of progress by the building of a tannery, owned by an Englishman and its busy industrialism smears the peaceful countryside with its soiled hand."

In *Nectar in a Sieve* when Rukmani and Nathan go to the tannery to see their sons, they find its gate closed. Their sons return with angered faces at dusk. When Rukmani asks what the matter is, they reply in brief "We asked for more money, they took from us our eating time." Later on they go on strike in the tannery. Then firmly decide, "We shall not go until our demands are met." On the other hand the tannery officials declare that "those who did not return to work would be replaced." Thus, the conflict ends with the defeat of the laborers and receive low wage. The tannery had degraded the land virginity and reduced the crop yield. It also drove the farmers to debt and starvation.

#### **MIGRATION**

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the novelist describes the conflicts between urban civilization and rural civilization. Her rural beings desire to lead urban lives and the city-bred people want to lead rural lives. Rural people bewildered by the harsh realities of their lives, are affected by activity of the market, as bustle that worked up each time nearer a town, and the lights strung along the street like necklace. This novel reflects the stark poverty in Indian villages and its dehumanizing effects on the people. Hunger forces the rural people to eat grass and Nathan and Rukmani realize, "that hunger is a curious thing; at first it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and there is gnawing pain as if your very vitals were being devoured."

In *Nectar in a Sieve* she discusses the poverty of Indian villages. It is the story of the conjugal life of Nathan and Rukmani, the peasants, Poverty forces them to wander from door to door in search of rice. Here Arjun and Murugan leave for Ceylon to get jobs. Thus, the migration had led by industrialization which created havoc in the society. It exploited the farmers and created an immoral way of life in rural areas.

#### **CONCLUSION**

To conclude it can be said that agricultural sector in India was facing a crisis in the pre-independence period. There is a widespread perception that the "agrarian crisis" is more or less an outcome of natural calamities like drought and flood which no one can fight. Agrarian crisis also occurs due to inhuman behavior of money lenders and landlords. This has led to a huge migration of people—farmers or otherwise— from rural areas to urban centers in search of jobs. Those who can't afford to migrate as they have huge debts to pay to money lenders often faces hunger, illegal activities, poverty, starvation and death. Whenever crop failure happens due to natural calamities such as drought, floods etc, it's the landowners who get the compensation and not the land tiller.

Finally, agricultural sector in India is facing a crisis till today. The industrialization process, which started in the 1940s, is one of the reasons for this crisis. The solution of the problem is not in a few "packages"

but in drastic changes in the present economic policies related to agriculture. The novelist realizes, the migration of rural people will be stopped when the vast majority of the people, especially the farmers in the rural areas, become prosperous and are really empowered. Kamala Markandaya portrayed better handling of the agrarian crisis by tenant farmers. Rukmani, a peasant woman was capable of handling the crisis with silent, submissive and ready to accept everything that comes her way with a calm resignation. Her unflinching faith in God, strong will power and morality give her strength to face vicissitudes of life attitude. The agrarian crisis of the pre-independence period is still continuing in one or other forms. Thus, Markandaya succeeds in proving through this novel that it is the natural calamities and tanneries are responsible for agrarian crisis. Agrarian crisis can give birth to the social evils like prostitution, disintegration of family, and a mad rush towards city. So long as crisis exists various social evils and malpractices continue to thrive. The hope for betterment lies only in the surviving morality in a few human beings.

Hence, even today the farmers are facing the numerous problems due to liberalized economy. Agricultural laborers and people's organizations in civil society should work collectively to assist and persuade the government to rid off the agrarian crisis. It will aide in promoting the sustainable livings.

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