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A SAGA OF INDIAN RURAL LIFE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF KAMALA  
MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE* AND MUNSHI PREMCHAND'S *GODAN*

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya and Munshi Premchand, in their novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Godan* respectively, deal with the arduous struggles of the rural folk against the established social orders. Both novels enjoy a canonical status in Indian literature owing to their realistic and timeless portrayal of Indian peasantry and its everyday struggle on the field and elsewhere to earn a square meal a day. Premchand is also referred to as the 'Upanyas Samrat' (Emperor among Novelists) for his diverse writing and his ability to appropriately portray rural India. He witnessed a lot of penury and injustice in his personal life, and thus, he could authentically portray the inner turmoil and exploitation of his characters. Kamala Markandaya, a leading Indian novelist, entwines social and political aspects in her novels. Eager to understand the ways of rural living, Markandaya lived for a long time in a town in South India, where she got a glimpse of the rustic life of the peasants, along with their issues and caprices. The main objective of this study is to critically analyse these two novels, *Godan* by Munshi Premchand and *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, to understand how they portray the problems related to the rural front. These novels take readers on a journey through the unfathomable layers of rural society, and they witness the rural folks' struggle for a living, their uncomplicated pleasures, melancholy, and a desire to cling to hope. The pivotal characters in these novels epitomize their dreams, transformations, and the inward strife that corresponds with the external socio-political embroilments, which free them from the hindrances of a specific period and make them pioneers of their times. This paper is an endeavour to compare, without bias, the narratives of Indian rural life depicted in *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Godan*.

Keywords: Indian peasantry, injustice, rural, saga

Introduction

Modern literature has evolved over time, from the magical and fairy tales that entertained readers with their long flights of imagination, to the contemporary realistic literature that awakened the society to the

extant pressing issues. While writing, an author conceives his/her own reality, which may be inspired from some other work or may just mostly depict the genuine world; however, it can never shun the socio-political milieu of the author's time. Literature expresses the views of the majority and encourages them to comprehend the genuine idea of a definitive reality. Writing and society share a complementary relationship; scholars provide clear insights to the general public, and the general public learns from them. Literature is brimming with stories that depict human life and activity through certain characters to convey specific messages to the readers.

Kamala Markandaya and Munshi Premchand's subjects in *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Godan* should not be undermined among their diverse ranges of fictional oeuvre that have portrayed prevalent socio-political issues. They articulated their voices against the injustices and exploitations and raised the status of the common man by depicting them as heroes and heroines. Though the two authors belonged to two different regions of India, their hearts bleed for the trials and tribulations of people residing in the villages and small towns, who have otherwise remained unknown. They highlight the victimisation of the peasant folk at the hands of the powerful forces that work beyond their controlling power.

### Discussion

The story of *Godan* is set in the poverty-ridden village of Belari, somewhere in the Awadh province in Uttar Pradesh in the pre-independence period. Premchand portrays the village as: "What was the village it was Providence, ten to twelve houses, whose roof was half-tiled, and collapsing further" (*Godan* 141), whereas *Nectar in a Sieve* is set somewhere in a remote South Indian village against the backdrop of agrarian bankruptcy. Unlike Premchand, Markandaya does not mention the name and the time period in her novel, making the story universal. Both the novelists present characters that speak to nearly the entire diverse Indian population, simultaneously retaining their singularity. For instance, Hori in *Godan* and Nathan in *Nectar in a Sieve* represent Indian peasants who are the victims of unjust social orders but uninhibitedly cherish certain values and dreams. Dhaniya and Rukmani from these two novels represent the rural womenfolk who are sensible and compassionate and are content in the shadow of their husbands. Gobar, son of Hori, and Murugan, son of Nathan, represent the anger, fear, ambition, and cowardice of the new generation that dares to question the silent suffering of their parents. They refuse to be victimized by their circumstances, but in the end, fall headlong due to these circumstances like their parents.

Human conduct can be considered using two fundamental methodologies: the primary methodology focuses on the individual, while the subsequent methodology centres around the individual's class. Markandaya and Premchand amalgamate the two methodologies by placing individuals who represent a class amid the snog of respective trials and tribulations, and then analyse their responses to it as individuals. Both novelists discuss various burning issues in the rural society, such as social malpractices, self-inflicted violence, poverty, hunger, and migration, along with the secondary role played by women caught in the web of feminine ideals and humiliating social practices. Their works feature the different responses of people towards social change in a rural framework. A village's economy is fundamentally reliant on the lopsided ideas of soil, crops, weather, the amount of cultivable land, and the course of erratic downpours, which divide people into those who have sufficient assets to support themselves and their families and individuals who do not even have things necessary for survival.

In the Indian framework, dowry system comprises of a bride's family giving cash or kind to the groom's family as a pre-condition for marriage; if a woman's family is not capable of this, it means she is forced to marry beneath her status, or worse, has to bear the jibes of the groom's family and the society for the rest of her life. Even in the present society, the curse of dowry continues to haunt a prospective bride's family, leading to a female child being considered a burden. Moreover, the continuing practice of valuing boys over girls makes a bride's family feel obliged to meet the dowry demands. This age-old tradition is more intense in the rural scenario. Hori, in *Godan*, works hard to raise enough dowry to get his daughter Sona married. Nevertheless, Premchand shows another angle of this evil tradition, where under the impression of a hollow pretence, Hori spends beyond his pocket and offers hefty dowry to the groom under the guise of his prestige.

However, by the time Hori's second daughter Rupa reaches marriageable age, his pocket is empty due to the debt of the previous daughter's wedding. Thus, due to the drastic deterioration in his economic condition, which led to his inability in raising sufficient money for a dowry, he is forced to marry Rupa off to an old widower. Thus, Rupa becomes an innocent victim of the dowry system, and ultimately, it also distances Hori socially from others. Rukmani is the central character of the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, with most of the incidents revolving around her. Being one of the daughters of the village headman, she dreams of a bright future. However, her family's entire fortune is spent on the weddings of her three elder sisters, and her father did not have a luxurious endowment to offer for her wedding. Subsequently, she is married to a landless farmer, Nathan, whose financial status is far beneath hers. Rukmani's mother states, "Four dowries is [sic] too much for a man to bear" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 4). Rukmani and Nathan once again experience the awful influence of the dowry system when their daughter Ira reaches the marriageable age and they do not have sufficient money to offer in her wedding. Rukmani says, "One hundred rupees will not win such a husband" (NS 38). Thus, both novelists unveil the long-standing social shades of malice that are amplified in the rural scenario in the form of the dowry system in the Indian culture.

Markandaya and Premchand uncover the horrendous face of the *zamindari* (landlord) system in rural India that causes social distress to innocent peasants. The plot of *Godan* revolves around the utmost desire of Hori to buy a cow, which is a symbol of prosperity and prestige in the Brahmin community, because considering his deplorable financial condition, the grandiose dream of having a land or a mansion is beyond his capacity. As he says, "We don't expect to become rulers and we're not asking for a life of luxury. All we want is just some coarse clothes to wear and some coarse food to eat . . . but that is even impossible" (*Godan* 225).

However, his dream of owning a cow does not sit well with the village priests such as Datadin, as they consider it only their prerogative. Moreover, they view Hori's desire as a transgression of the established hierarchy where only the upper class is entitled to possessions and the lower class is meant to obey them. Out of jealousy, Hori's brother Heera commits the heinous crime of poisoning the cow, and Hori ends up paying the price for this. Due to his frail financial condition, Hori takes a loan from Thakur, which subsequently plummets him into an irrevocable pit of debt. We find Hori pleading him for a loan of Rs. 10, and he is taken aback when he gets only Rs. 5. The structure of debt in the village is very well portrayed by Premchand:

"There are 5 Rs my master".

"There are 10 go and count again at home".

"No sir they are five" "One Rupee goes for gratification, Right"?

"Yes Sir" "One Rupee for paper itself Right?" "Yes Sir"

"One as my customary fees. Right?" "Yes Sir"

"One as my interest Right?" Yes Sir

"Five Rupees in cash. That makes ten rights"? (*Godan* 267-68)

Hori's harvest gets auctioned because of his inability to pay the debt. Datadin makes him work on his land and takes Rs. 200 as interest for a loan of Rs. 30. Premchand comments, ". . . and this was not just Hori's condition. There is a disaster in the whole village. There is no person who does not cry" (*Godan* 357). The tragedy intensifies when Dhaniya laments over the unending circle of interest, "Five years ago he had taken sixty rupees to purchase a bull, he had paid it, but the sixty rupees is still remaining because of the interest added" (*Godan* 39). The novel ends with Dhaniya offering her gold earrings, which are her last possession, to assuage Datadin over her inability to gift him a cow. Markandaya provides insights into the agrarian structure of India, which is controlled by landlords and moneylenders, who take advantage of poor and illiterate farmers by buying their harvests at low rates, which makes the labourers' months of hard work seem like a waste, or in situations such as a bad crop, pushing them further into an irrevocable pit of debt. Thus, a farmer's entire harvest is deducted and gulped unfairly by moneylenders and landlords. Nathan's family cannot be spared from the jaws of the landlord, which in the long run, drives them into desperate situations, and they have to fight for survival. Due to the uncertain climatic conditions and irregular rainfall, Nathan is forced to sell his meagre land to a landlord. Subsequently, he is compelled to approach a moneylender to obtain either cash or work to support his family, and thus, spends his entire life paying the high interest.

Premchand highlights the grave issue of caste system rooted in the minds of the people, where the 'upper castes' look down upon the 'lower castes', whereas Markandaya presents the huge disparity between the affluent and the poor; in both cases, the former consider it their prerogative to control the lives of the latter. However, Premchand also manages to portray this wide financial gap. According to Ahmed, "Here Premchand represents India's sorrowfulness in Hori's character" (53). Dhaniya believes that the crimes of the poor are always highlighted, while no one bothers to blame the wealthy. She recalls the stringent pain of poverty that has haunted her family: "Three boys die in childhood. Her mind still says, if she had provided them with medicines, they would have survived but she could not get the medicines due to poverty" (*Godan* 9). Similarly, the vulnerability of nature and the disappointment over the yield exacerbate the destitution of Nathan's family, worsening their condition to such an extent that they are compelled to sell their meagre belongings to pay the interest on the land loan. Voicing her utter poverty, Rukmani says, "Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever at hand to jog to his elbow should he relaxed. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear; fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger; fear of the blackness of death" (NS 81).

Markandaya portrays the negative consequences of industrialisation in the Nathan's village, such as value climbs, low wages in exchange of excessive work, and in particular, the hardships of the peasants when they are left without any alternative to farming. Nathan mourns over the miserable situation that arises due to a price hike in the market, making him unable to align his soul and body. The author seems to establish that instead of propagating industrial advancement for the profit of a handful of powerful people, it is essential to encourage higher agricultural yield because agriculture is the backbone of the rural economy. Thus, both Markandaya and Premchand advocate the end of the feudal system that makes the peasant class suffer endlessly without any respite.

From time immemorial, marriage has been a mandatory institution, particularly for women so that they can live meaningful lives. Divorced, separated, or lone women are ostracized in Indian society. Although the scenario has been changing, on the rural front, the situation remains unchanged. Markandaya and Premchand are equally concerned about the plight of the rural womenfolk, who are trapped under social traditions and are discriminated on various grounds. They display the internal struggle and conflicts of female characters who are charged with promiscuity and are subjected to name calling in the society, whereas men's characters are not questioned. Premchand's and Markandaya's methods of dealing with the miserable plights of their female characters differ slightly; however, the purpose of displaying the reality of women working behind the curtains is the same. In *Godan*, Gobar falls head over heels for Jhunia, the widowed daughter of Bholu, but because of criticism, Hori hesitates in accepting Jhunia as his daughter-in-law. Gobar flees after impregnating Jhunia, and she has no choice but to seek shelter in Hori's home. The village people consider her a promiscuous woman and are outraged at him for allowing Jhunia to stay at his home, regardless of the fact that Gobar is equally responsible for the pregnancy.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Ira articulates the poignancy of barrenness and prostitution in a society that considers motherhood as the primary function of a woman. Markandaya highlights that the inability to bear children can wreak havoc in a woman's life, which often ends up with her husband seeking another wife. However, men do not have to face the same ordeal even if they are incapable of reproducing. Ira is deserted by her husband because she is barren. However, Nathan legitimizes it, saying, "A man needs children" (NS 45). Her condition is described poignantly by Rukmani: "Ira was sitting with her face in her arms. She looked us as her father and I came in and her mouth moved a little, loosely, as if she had no control over her lips. She was lonely still but strain and helplessness had shadowed her eyes and lined her forehead" (NS 52). Forced by the perpetual poverty and the uncertain climatic conditions that destroy the crop, she is forced to sell her body to feed her family. Ira's prostitution results in her bearing an illegitimate child; however, it disproves her infertility. Nonetheless, her life remains chaotic, and she continues to survive one turbulence after another.

Furthermore, the novelists unveil the nuances of domestic violence that have been normalised owing to the patriarchal structure of the Indian society. Premchand portrays a realistic picture of the misery of the women, who even after struggling throughout their lives, instead of being appreciated or valued, face

emotional, verbal, and physical abuse at the hands of their husbands. Even after being there for Hori through harsh times, on an uneven path of life, Dhaniya has to meekly bear every form of abuse. Poverty and exploitation have made her rough and average-looking, but her spirit remains intact. Similarly, Jhunia and Punia, despite their financial and family situations, continue to face domestic violence without retaliating, as it is considered an everyday affair in the village. The condition of Selia is even worse than that of others, as she is sexually objectified, exploited as a labourer, and then ostracized by Matadin. The author observes: "Earlier he cunningly exploited her love for him; now she was no more than a machine which worked at his bidding" (*Godan* 64). Dhania slams: "All men are alike . . . When Matadin humiliated Selia, no one raised a little finger in protest, but when Matadin comes in for trouble, he gets all the sympathy in the world" (207). Similarly, Rukmani in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, does not retaliate even after learning about Nathan's extra marital affair, and at some point, or other, puts up with his abusive and whimsical behaviour.

Despite the various setbacks that life throws at them, the female characters do not lose their enthusiasm for life. They enjoy the tiny bits of happiness that occasionally come their way in the form of weddings or festivals, which is when they live to their hearts' content. In both novels, Dhaniya and Rukmani have to confront the sudden deaths of their husbands. After Hori's demise, the villagers advise Dhaniya to offer a cow in charity as Hori's last wish. Not having the hefty amount that would allow her to afford a cow, she takes out the twenty annas she has saved for a rainy day, sets it in the chilly palm of her dead spouse, and tells Datadin that this is all she has. Rukmani has to bear the agony of Nathan's death in the city, where they had gone to pursue a living. She expresses her poignancy: "For, how shall I endure to live without you, who are my love and my life?" (*NS* 191). The loss of Nathan was the most difficult for her to bear, as he had been a true-life partner to her. However, she does not lose hope, musters the courage to return to her village with an orphan boy, Puli, and struggles to provide for both until her last breath.

Markandaya lived in a South Indian village and closely observed the daily life of the rural folk, such as their customs, culture, and individuals' peculiarities; the effect of this is observed at numerous instances in *Nectar in a Sieve*. For instance, as opposed to clinical treatment for curing her barrenness, Rukmani puts her trust on the stone lingam, an image of fruitfulness, given by her mom on her deathbed. Her superstitious ways are reflected on another occasion, when because of the disappointment of an erratic downpour, she turns towards odd practices, such as offering a pumpkin and a handful of grains of rice to a goddess, rather than finding out rational methods for collecting water. Markandaya highlights the passive attitudes of the villagers that make them rely to a large extent on fate, as they submit to the extreme turbulent situations that are either created by nature or are a result of the lopsided social structure. Instead of voicing their discontent, they either sit idly under some spiritual hope or accept their fate, because of which Kenny calls them "acquiescent imbecile" (*NS* 116). As Khan says, ". . . the narrator and her husband still cling stubbornly to a belief in the old ways and in the power of the land to sustain its people" (101).

Hori is also a God-fearing person who cannot think of transgressing the social boundaries and violating traditional values and customs and continues to silently bear the unjust exploitation. Hori says, "It is the voice of God that speaks through the punches, but what is written must happen. Nobody quarrels with fate" (*Godan* 57). At another instance, Hori says, "What can we do when God has made us slaves" (21).

Migration has been identified as a survival strategy among the poor, specifically among rural dwellers. It acts as a catalyst in the transformation of the destiny of individual migrants as well as that of the condition of family members left behind. Gobar is symbolic of a new generation, and appears to represent changes in the form of modern values. He retaliates to the fatalistic views of his father: "These are fancies, only to console the mind. God creates us all equal. Those who have power oppress the poor and become rich" (*Godan* 18). Born and raised in dire financial circumstances, he believes that material riches are the key to happiness, and thus, he leaves for the town in his search for better prospects, leaving his parents utterly dismayed.

Markandaya raises the same issue of migration on the rural front through Nathan. She expresses that migration from a village to a city includes a change of the "physical and social condition" (Majumdar and Ila 114), as both places offer different patterns of life. Likewise, it comprises of substitution of old values to make

a place for new ones, making it more difficult for the rural folk to adapt to their new situations. Rukmani and Nathan's life battle become progressively troublesome. Unable to stand the poverty and wretchedness in the village, they take shelter in the city, hoping it would bring some peace in their life. However, things turn out to be an antithesis of their expectations, as they end up working as stone-breaker at a quarry to earn sufficient money to return home; also, in a tragic turn of fate, Rukmani has to bear the sad demise of her husband. Nathan says, "I shall be where I was born and bred. This city is not place for me, I am lost in it" (MS 181).

### Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Premchand's *Godan* display the horrendous face of misery, which is a permanent fixture in the lives of the rural people. This study reveals the grim situation in the villages, where pseudo feudalism is a façade for corruption, manipulation, hypocrisy. The narrative offers a vivid glimpse of multiple problems that farmers have to encounter. Both novelists describe the various strata of rural society, their daily vagaries, hard work, struggle, dismal fates, and the miserable predicaments, which we are all aware of but hesitate to accept. They display the lopsided structure of the political pyramid in their work, where the upper part of the pyramid is commanded by landlords and moneylenders, and the base comprises of helpless inhabitants belonging to the peasant class. The novels make us realize the realities of life looming before us. It would not be improper to term these novels as harbingers of a new tradition of realistic writing that accurately presents the reality of rural life. This paper presents the age of rapid transition, political instability, and the miserable predicament of Indian farmers and their struggle against a rigid social set-up. Thus, the two novels that we based this study on can be termed as sagas of Indian rural farmers, as they articulate the reasons for their miserable states.

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