

Rural Poverty and City's Struggles for Survival as projected in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in A Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*: A Brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This is just an attempt to project Kamala Markandaya's significant niche in the pantheon of Post-Independence Indo-Anglian fiction and in the commonwealth scene and also as a notable novelist projecting such themes as hunger, poverty, affliction rootlessness, struggle for survival and human relationships found in the life in villages and cities. It examines how Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* is nothing but an account of the sufferings of the urban people, and how the cruelty of poverty resulting in suffering, death and misfortune is more explicit in both novels *Nectar in A Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice* exhibiting the skill of the novelist is showing the un healthy experiences of the poor.

Key words: Rural Poverty, City's Struggles.

As fiction is considered to the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression today, it has attained a place of pride in Indo-Anglian Literature. As a distinct literary form, Indo-Anglian fiction is, no doubt, the latest of literary forms to be evolved and the most dominant in the 20th Century. In the words of one modern critic, "It corresponds in our civilization to the epic in the primitive stages of some races, to the drama in the Athens of Pericles, to the essay in the Age of Queen Anne" (Dhavan 6). Indian creative writers in English have taken to this literary form rather generously and skillfully. A good number of enlightened Indian writers employ the English language as a medium of creative exploration of their experience of life.

Kamala Markandaya occupies a very significant and notable niche in the pantheon of Post-independence Indo-Anglian fiction and in the Common Wealth scene. She was born in 1924 in an affluent and aristocratic Brahmin family of South India. As she was born into a rich family, she got a thoroughly Western upbringing. She is not only the earliest Indian woman novelist of significance; in fact, William Walsh calls her "the most gifted of them but also one of the most distinguished writers on the literary scene today. "She is undoubtedly one of the major novelists of the Commonwealth scene. India is a country of her birth and England the country of her abode, and hence her writings reveal the cultural interaction and synthesis of both the countries. She is one of

those writers who are made aware of their Indianness as well as of the differences in the two systems of values; one rather acquired, the other inherited and often taken for granted" (Mukherjee 19). In her works, she richly deals with various social problems. Dr.A.A.Krishna Rao holds: "Kamala Markandaya's novels, in comparison with those of her contemporary women writers seem to be more fully reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India as she attempts to project the image of the changing traditional society. As such, Kamala Markandaya merits special mention both by virtue of the variety and complexity of her achievement, and as representative of a major trend in the history of the Indo-Anglian novel" (P 71).

Born and brought up in India and living in England, Kamala Markandaya is quite familiar with both the Eastern and the Western traditions and reveals the Indian society to the Western audience. She has her own individuality in creating a variety of characters and her skill is shown in her wonderful picture of village life with its merits and demerits. Being a woman novelist, her delineation of heroines is better than that of heroes. Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of contemporary Indian writing in English. Many women arbiters focus their attention on women's issues. Gradually a number of women novelists including Nayantara Sahgal,

ShashiDeshpande and Shoba De have come to write novels pertaining to the problems of women. Entering into the field of women's writings, women have an advantage in portraying women characters from their own point of view. They believe that they only can give the truthful picture of women in society. As R.K.Dhavan puts it,

".....many women have taken to reading women's Writing because it allows them a 'safe place'From which they can explore a wide range of Experience of the world, from which they can Identify with a range of characters and a Variety of existences"
(P 11)

Having won international fame and recognition with the publication of the first novel *Nectar in A Sieve* in 1954, she has to her credit publication of such novels as *Some Inner Fury*, *A Silence of Desire Possession*, *A Handful of Rice*, *The Coffey Dams*, *The Nowhere Man*, *Two Virgins*, *The Golden Honey Comb* and *The Pleasure City*. In almost all her novels, Kamala Markandaya projects such themes as hunger, poverty, affliction, degradation, East-West encounter, rootlessness, politics and human relationship found in the life in villages and cities. Her novels reflect the society of India and abroad and she presents Indian characters not as Indian people but as Indian influenced by the British:

She presents the actual world and not a

woman's world, questioning about modern trends to men, women and wedding. She enquires the social and emotional ties that restrict women. Her picture of Indian women is explained by the established social codes of conduct (Dhavan 10).

In all her novels, women play vital roles compared with men. Feminist perspectives are given priority in Kamala Markandaya's world of fiction. As Madhumita Ghosal and Mehry M. Major rightly put it,

“Her characters have some features found commonly in India and also a special attitude to strange mysteries seen in life. The author presents a remarkable response to the emotional complexities of life in her characters” (P 36).

The novelist is said to have achieved glory through her very first novel *Nectar in A Sieve* which depicts the story of the poor farmers struggling in poverty in a South Indian village. Rukmani plays the dual role of the heroine and the narrator here. She tells the readers how she got wedded to a poor tenant farmer, Nathan, at the age of twelve and of the couple's miserable plight in the realm of poverty. The village's beauty as well as peace is spoiled by the construction of the tannery in the name of progress. D. Kennington tries to build a hospital for saving the poor villages from diseases. Afraid of facing hunger, and its consequences, Nathan's sons Arjun and Thambi run to Ceylon to mould their lives

beautifully. Nathan's only daughter, Irawaddy, suffers herself to become a harlot for saving her brother Kuti from hunger. But all her attempts go waste and Kuti dies of utter poverty. Nathan and Rukmani are forced to leave their land on which they have worked and lived for thirty years. Ignored by the society, they go to Madras in search of their son, Murugan. On their way they lose all their possessions. They join the stone quarry and start saving money with the hope of returning to their village soon. But unfortunately Nathan dies of rheumatism and Rukmani alone reaches home, with the leper boy Pull who has been their guide in the city to meet her daughter, Ira.

Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* is nothing but an account of the sufferings of the urban people. Ravi, the hero of the novel strives very hard for a handful of rice and ends by joining the petty criminals. Nalini tries to transform his way of life. Avi suffers a lot under the joint family. With his father-in-law. Apu's death, disintegration arises in the family. Ravi, torn between traditional values and modern riches, loses his peace of mind. Avi becomes a victim of the society and transfers his contempt for the society to his wife, Nalini. He leaves his family and joins a mob to indulge in sinister ways of obtaining rice. Thus, the novel ends here.

Poverty, a despot ruling the world with very high taxes and unjust laws, has been pushing each and every one into a pitfall out of which

it is not so easy to come out for people. The cruelty of poverty resulting in suffering, death and misfortune is most explicit in Kamala Markandaya's two novels *Nectar in A Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*. In these two novels, the novelist shows the unhealthy experiences undergone by her creations under the rule of poverty. *Nectar in a Sieve* does present the unfortunate fate of the poor farmers in a southern village of India. As Hari Mohan Prasad puts it:

.....it is a poverty of the Indian village where farmers exist, undergo sufferings with patience and come out more nobler, more merciful in their actions with their rags, last breathing words and their stubborn attachment to the land like the branches of a tree spread everywhere but its roots implanted in the soil (Prasad 98).

The novel describes the life-story of the poverty-stricken Nathan and his wife Rukmani and how they face the financial crisis and economic depression calmly. Even the very beginning of her life is a clue to coming depravity. Since her father's fame as the Headman of the village vanishes, she undergoes unspeakable agony and penury being the last daughter; her father is not able to afford rich dowry and so she happens to marry a poor tenant farmer. When Rukmani comes to know about her husband's house as a mud hut, her misery sounds augmented:

This mud hut, nothing but mud and that chhead was my home. My knees gave, first

the cramped one, then the other, and I sank down. Nathan's face filled with concern as he came to hold me (Nectar 41).

But Nathan's sincere love consoles her and she tries to be cheerful. Rukmani and Nathan own nothing but a small portion of land, a milk goat and two ploughing bullocks. Life is very difficult for them and eating three meals a day is something impossible for them. Even the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter are denied to them.

Rukmani, a woman of firmness and nobility faces every problem and penury with great courage. But even her steadfast mind bends down when she delivers her first female child, and she says:

I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness, and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born? (Nectar 14).

Her mind gets perturbed by the birth of her daughter, Irawaddy because she would have to pay more dowry for Ira's wedding. Had she been blessed with wealth, she would not have worried about her daughter. But fortunately after medical treatment, she gives birth to her sons; Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvan and Kuti. It is Kenny who employs her sons Arjun and Thambi in the tanney that is built in their village by the English people. Life goes on smoothly with the earnings of Arjun and Thambi. But suddenly the wheel of

fortune turns against them. Arjun and Thambi get involved in a strike, against the tannery owners. When other laborers go to work, Rukmani's sons stay behind leading to their dismissal. Both want to escape from rural poverty and so they decide to shift to Ceylon just to earn their daily bread. Arjun desperately says;

I am tired of hunger and I am tired of seeing my brothers hungry" (Nectar 51).

Markandaya's fifth novel, *A Handful of Rice* also deals with the theme of poverty like her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. But in the ratio of hunger and suffering they differ from each other. There is much depth and intensity of suffering in her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, whereas the difficulties and suffering faced by Ravi, the protagonist in *A Handful of Rice* to survive in the city are not touching enough to evoke sympathy towards the hero. Ravi's struggle to establish his identity in the city is the Kernel of the novel. Even the starting of his career as a vagabond searching for food and shelter is a proof of his bleak future. Ravi, having drunk at the prohibited time, forces himself into Apu's house and eats a nice meal there. While Apu points out that if Ravi had at least one rupee that would have helped him to buy a nice meal, Ravi replies:

“....what I wanted to buy was something quite Different, something that would stop me Thinking about tomorrow” (*A Handful of Rice* 9).

Having found nothing except penury, death and disease in his village Ravi runs to Madras with the hope of leading a better life. But he finds the same odds rooted in the city also. He joins the petty criminals in the city who live by black marketing and hoarding. There is Kenny to assist Nathan's family but there is nobody to help Ravi. Ravi has no house of his own and he sleeps on the streets and platforms. He lives a life between that of a clerk and a coolie. Then Apu accepts Ravi as his apprentice in tailoring. Life in *Nectar in a Sieve* never goes in the same line, there are always ebbs and flows. When there is a harvest, life is easy for them and when the harvest is bad, they even feed on rotten fruits, hay, grass and salted fish. Hari Mohan Prasad says:

Nature both in its pink petals and red claws forms the matrix of human existence in the rural Indian of this novel (Prasad 98).

While Rukmani's family suffers from famine, Ravi suffers from the pressures of joint family. Ravi's freedom is completely lost, for he is the main root of the joint family plant and he enjoys no privacy with his wife. His house is flocked by many parasites like Varma, Apu's nephew; Kumaran, the cripple and Puttanna, Apu's son-in-law. Only Apu and Ravi earn to feed the whole family while others remain idle and do nothing. That is the reason for all sorts of suffering and penury in the family. The minust point of the joint

family is that the other members of Ravi's family do not intend to work to improve the economic needs of the family and so ensues unspeakable misery and penury in the family.

In spite of all sorts of poverty and misery, the family relationship is maintained till the end in *Nectar in a Sieve* Rukmani and Nathan have a perfect understanding of each other and so life goes on easily without any quarrel even when the couple comes across thorns in life under the shackles of penury. But there occurs a breach in the family of Ravi in *A Handful of Rice*. The misunderstanding between the husband and the wife ends in trouble. So Ravi often beats his wife Nalini violently. His cruel behavior towards his wife shows his violent nature. As a result of his family disintegration, Ravi, unable to bear the cruelty of poverty, is ready to indulge in illegal acts like looting the granary. His sense of moral values is shaken by the waves of penury.

Markandaya's portrayal of the sufferings of the poor peasants under the despotic realm of poverty is very effective and real. The couple start living by breaking stones in the Stone Quarry. Hard physical labour in old age is baneful and killing. Rheumatism gradually swallows Nathan's body and finally he dies almost like a beggar. No human being could have helped shedding tears while reading the pitiable conditions of the couple. Ravi loses his job of hemming sheets for a hospital. Finally he is without a

handful of rice and a pie of his own. He accompanies a mob that marches towards the godowns to loot the rice. Ravi struggles very hard to get the rice but he got not even a handful of rice. As Margaret P. Joseph holds,

“Ravi's tragedy is that of the economically weak' who search for answers to the problems not only of day-to-day life but of existence itself; and the foundation of his tragedy is poverty” (Joseph 62).

Rukmani in her trials of penury comes out successfully, whereas Ravi, in his trials, fails rather miserably due to his lack of a steady mind and confidence. Thus, the rural poverty and city's struggles to survive get juxtaposed in *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice* respectively. The poverty that reigns in the village appears in the city also. Such poverty causes untold suffering bringing several other problems in its wake. Kamala Markandaya has given a graphic portrayal of the heroic struggle put forth by the characters against such poverty and affliction as pictured in her world of fiction.

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Many of life's failures are experienced by people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.

~ Thomas Alva Edison