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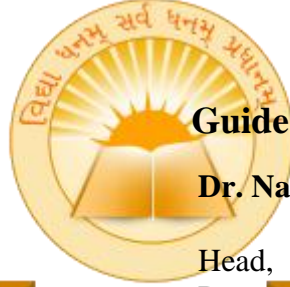
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Portrayal of Village Life in Transition: A Study of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya holds a reputed position in the field of Indian English Fiction. As a keen and conscious observer of society, she artistically shares her life experiences in her creative expressions. Her novels are full of varieties and present broad perspective of life. Her novels are based on east west conflicts, feminist issues and depict real characters who are victim of social evils. As a great story teller, Markandaya unfolds mysteries and realities of life in a comprehensive manner. Markandaya started writing novels after India's Independence in which she addressed various issues. *Nectar in a Sieve* is her first published novel which captures the changing scenario of Post-Independence India. In the novel, Markandaya has painted realistic picture of Indian rural life and highlighted the social, economic and cultural problems of people during the transition period after the freedom. The present paper aims to study the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* in which Markandaya has depicted rural life in the transition period.

Key Words: Rural life, Transition, Problems of people, hunger, poverty, marriage system, industrialization

Nectar in a Sieve: A Novel of Rural India

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) is the first published and well acclaimed novel by Kamala Markandaya. After the publication, the novel received considerable attention from the readers and critics and announce the entry of Kamala Markandaya in the field of Indian English fiction. It is important to note that the novel was published after a few years of India's Independence and therefore, it captures some of the events and situation of the changing Indian scenario. The novel addresses numbers of issues like economic crisis, the status of woman in Indian society, marriage system, poverty, hunger and cultural clash. The novel also presents some of the memorable women characters and deals with the problems of rural Indian family and problems of settlement. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya brilliantly captures the soul picture of Indian village life after Independence and addresses all these issues which describes the villager condition in the transition period. The narrator and the protagonist of the novel is Rukmani who depicts unhappy life of



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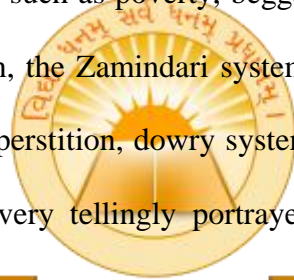
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villagers in a south Indian village during colonial rule in India. The novel beautifully captures the life of rural people and their struggle to exist against the changing environment. In the novel, Markandaya creates powerful, strong and heroic character of Rukmani who in spite of having woman identity remains self-motivated and optimistic to face and fight all hardship and despair. As Pradnya Ghorpade describes the novel as:

Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), is about rural India. It depicts the story of a simple peasant couple from South India. The novel deals with industrialization and its impact on rural life. The problems of rural India and the tragic predicament of Indian peasants have been depicted with moving realism. It focuses effectively on the theme of hunger. Social problems such as poverty, beggary, lack of family planning, crime, unemployment, prostitution, the Zamindari system, industrialization, demoralization, caste and class conflict, superstition, dowry system, low status of woman, evil of the marriage system etc. are very tellingly portrayed by Kamala Markandaya in this novel. (6)³



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Village Life During the Transition

Nectar in a Sieve is a novel of village life which shows the picture of rural India in a transition stage. It is observed that after India's Independence there is a shift in the life of Indian villagers. In fact, the villages play significant role in the Indian economic, culture and aesthetics. The villages are marked with natural beauty, peaceful environment, folk literature and loving people in the Indian tradition. The cultural, political and economic change affected the condition of rural. Markandaya being a conscious observer of the society understand the change brought by western civilization and industrialization. She tries to highlight that change in the novel to depict the transition in the life of people of rural India. *Nectar in a Sieve* is set in



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the backdrop of an agricultural village which has not changed since ages. The village people depend on the farming and earn their daily live hood from doing the same profession. They are habituated to face all difficulties and natural calamities. However, they are happy with their simple lifestyle and accept all hardships. The novel tells a story of the small south Indian village.

In the novel, the establishment of tannery in the village shows the beginning of new era. It shows the slow development of Industrial world from organic to urban area. This sudden change affected the life of villagers and brought social, economic and cultural problems. Due to this situation, the problems like unemployment, hunger and clash in social relationships arise which divided the society. The change of rural life after industrial establishment is marked in the following words of Rukmani,

“Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men.... It had changed the face of our village beyond our recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants in myriad ways.... My sons had left because it frowned on them. One of them had been destroyed by its ruthlessness. And there were others its touch had scathed. Janaki and her family, the hapless Kannan, Kunthi even.” (63)

The village life was disturbed due to industrial impact and the arrival of tannery created many socio-economic problems. People became selfish and they even did not care about the funeral. “Once a human being is dead there are people enough to provide the last decencies; perhaps it is so because only then can there be no question of further or recurring assistance being sought. Death after all is final”. (123). The life of village did not remain peaceful and happy. At the result, the process of migration started which can be seen in the life of Rukmani and Nathan. They were forced to migrate towards city where their son Murugan is living. Later, they find that the life of city is more horrible and difficult to live. They wonder here and



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there in search of food and shelter and lived life like beggars. Thus, Markandaya has given detailed picture of Indian village life, its social, economic and realistic condition.

The Life of Farmers

In the novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya gives detailed account of the life of Indian farmers. Being an agricultural country, India heavily depends on the farming. The novel focuses on how the profession of farming is carried out in the Indian villages. The farmers work hard to work in the field in hope of getting good reward of their work. However, due to some natural calamities they suffer and their miseries are described in the novel. Nathan visits Hanuman, the rice dealer and explains him that the gruel his family has been taking was nearly plain water for the few days. But Hanuman is not kind and disappoints then he goes to Biswas. As Rukmani comments, "To Hanuman first for rice," said Nathan, excited. "The gruel we have been swallowing has been 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. The rain again fails the next year and each day the level of the water drops and heads of the paddy hang lower. In such condition, the Nathan decides to sell vessels, trunks shirts etc. As he remarks, "... rather these should go...than that the land should be taken from us, we can do without these, but if the land is gone our livelihood is gone, and we must thenceforth wander like jackals." (70)

At the course of time, their all hope vanished as rain again fails. Now, they have no rice to feed the family also. Rukmani tries to manage the small quantity of the rice. Their life becomes terrifying and distressing when the entire family finds itself in the grip of disturbing hunger and agonizing fear. The role of natural disaster is very significant in the novel. As Rukmani and Nathan recall that how their paddy crops ruined by the heavy rains. "It rained so hard, so long and so incessantly that the thought of a period of no rain provoked a mild wonder. I was as if nothing had ever been but rain... but Nathan and I watched with



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heavy hearts while the water rose and rose and the tender green of the paddy field sank under and was lost... The rains have destroyed much of our work. There will be little eating this year.” (106) Moreover, Rukmani and Nathan lost their land which they have been cultivating for thirty years. The landlord handovers the land to the tannery owner at the high price. It is Rukmani who realizes that hunger and fear have become part and parcel of peasants’ lives. The struggle, miseries and suffering of the Indian village farmers have been artistically and tragically described by the novelist.

Hunger and Poverty

Kamala Markandaya has captured the authentic picture of rural Indian people, their life and suffering in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. The story of Rukmani and her husband Nathan shows how the life of rural people was disturbed due to Industrial impact and they face financial crisis. Poverty and Hunger is the main theme of the novel. The life of farmer became horrible due to natural disaster and social exploitation which resulted in starvation. In the novel, Rukmani’s family wonder place to place in order to find food and shelter. Rochelle Almeida observes, “Nectar in a Sieve exposed the cruel lot of typical Indian peasant who suffers silently a victim of the vagaries of nature, of the feudal system of zamindari, of the forces of technological progress which dislodge him from his native soil and force him to relocate an alien environment”.⁷ Ira’s selection of prostitute profession and plight of Rukmani’s son towards city shows that how the survival became difficult and poverty forced them to do so. In the novel, many characters were motivated to choose the possibilities against their will in order to search food. In spite of their hard work, the villagers remained poor and struggled to get food. It is seen that to feed her entire family, Rukmani divides rice into 24 small parts. Later, Nathan and Rukmani are forced to beggary due to their poor condition. The effect of hunger on the life of people is described by the character of Rukmani in the following words:

For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, walking and sleeping



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and in your dreams and your belly cries out insistently and there is a gnawing and a pain as of your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you buy a moment's respite even while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this, you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you. Then that too is gone, all pain all desire only a great emptiness is left, like the sky, like a well in draught and it is now that the strength drains from your limbs and you try to rise and find you cannot, or to swallow water and your throat is powerless and both the swallow and the effort of retaining the liquid, tax you to the uttermost. (87-88)

Marriage System



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Nectar in a Sieve closely highlights the marriage system in Indian culture. It is seen that the marriage of Rukmani, her sisters, her daughter and Kunthi were arranged marriage decided by elder people like Granny. In such kind of marriage system, the financial condition was more important than love. The custom of dowry was common to all such kinds of marriages. In Indian Culture, a dowry was offered to husband's family when they get married. The large dowry was given to husband if the woman is less attractive or want to marry in better family. In the novel, Rukmani's sisters were married with good dowries. At the time of her marriage, her father could not afford good dowry so she has to marry with a person whom she dislikes, a simple laborer. After marriage, Rukmani gave birth to daughter named Ira. It was not good news for her husband Nathan who desired to be father of a son. His reaction after Ira's birth is described, "Nathan at first paid scant attention to her: he had wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a puling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind..." Rukmani



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worries, “who will want a daughter for a first born? This attitude arises partly out of rigorous of dowry system...” Later, she has to pay hundred rupees dowry at the time of Ira’s birth. The woman was also given below status to man. Due to dowry custom, the woman’s family has to suffer. In most of the cases, the woman’s family offers most of their life’s savings but occasionally there may be more amount involved if the family is rich.

Impact of Industrialization

The evil effect of industrialization on the Indian villagers can be seen throughout the novel. It destroyed the life of many people socially, economically and resulted in hunger and poverty. Due to tannery, Rukmani’s family lost their happiness, land and money. It is responsible of Ira’s becoming prostitute and their son Murugan left the village. Arjun and Thambi who worked in tannery as a daily wage worker also lost their job due to strike. So, tannery is responsible for the suffering of the life Rukmani and the other villagers. The novelist gives a detailed picture of how Industrialization brought pollution, disturbance, impurity and social evils which affected the life of rural Indian people. Shiv K. Kumar describes, “Rukmani, the devoted wife of a tenant farmer, living in the soulful quietude of her little village, suddenly finds within this garden of Eden a serpent in the form of a tannery that begins to rear its ugly head, devouring green open spaces, pollution the clean, wholesome atmosphere and tempting simple gullible peasants into greed, ambitions and immorality”. (Kumar 205)⁵

In nutshell, the novel describes the life of villagers and their problems like loss of peaceful and natural environment, the miserable condition of farmers, the loss of agrarian land and unfriendly impact of industrialization. The life of Rukmani and her husband Nathan becomes hopeless and problematic in such environment where they lost their land. Markandaya artistically gives authentic picture of rural India, the suffering of people and impact of modern civilization in the frame of story.



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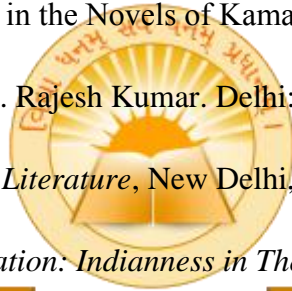
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