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Markandaya's Nectar in A Sieve : An Outcry of Rustic Life

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya's some of the fictions written on the background of British ruled India present the rural India and the outcry of the rustic people. The terror of technology encroaches the villages and plight of rural people is unbearable. Establishment of the Tannery in the village of of Rukmani shows us how introduction of Industrialization forces the villagers to give up their traditional livelihood. The village people are forced to go to the city and spend their lives in slums. The flow of village life has been portrayed realistically with an apprehension of bad impact of the industrial revolution.

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya holds an important place among Indian writers in English with international fame and recognition. Her very first novel "Nectar in a Sieve" (1954) reflects the rural life and outcry of the villagers due to growth of industrialization. The impact of industrialization on the Indian population is presented with different angles. The role of the peasants, lower middle-class family members living in the city, the tribal and the other downtrodden common people clearly presents the scenario of Indian society at the advent of industrialization. The main assumption of the writer is that each individual is free and responsible citizen to choose a profession only when the chain of "unfreedom" is broken. The rustic people to avoid starvation is forced to accept working conditions they would not accept in other time. Kamala Markandaya's concerns in her work may be seen as those of Leavis and Thompson who in their work *Culture and Environment* say that "the outward and obvious sign that the loss of the organic community was the loss of a human naturalness or normality may be seen in the building of the industrial era."¹ The rustic life has been subjected to violence by inducting industries into its atmosphere. Ironically, such violence and disruption take place in the name of progress and the village life has to endure all sorts of agony due to industrialization as the authors of *Culture and Environment* mentioned.

Indian village has always been the heart and soul of this country since the ages. Indian civilization and cultural values are nourished in the villages facing all odds. The focus of all-round development was given to rural India where industrialization began to grow. This changing aspect has been the subject matter of some Indo-British fictions. There are a few Indo-British writers who showed interest in this subject. Raja Rao's "Kanthapura" (1938) is a successful attempt on rural India caught in the background of freedom struggle. Markandaya develops her character of Rukmani and Nathan on the tradition of K.S. Venkataramani's "Murugan the Tiller" (1927) in an atmosphere of changing rural economy.

Rukmani and Nathan are the typical couple of a South Indian village with their peasantry life full of anxieties. The dramatization of a tragic life in an Indian village in the wake of industrialization is clearly shown through the character of Rukmani. Rukmani's agony by the impact of industrialization is the agony of thousands rustic people who lost their villages and traditional livelihood on the wake of industrialization. Rukmani's peasant and social life give vent to the psychological conflict between the desire to ask question and defy at the same time. She has also the tendency to accept and submit. Markandaya is not confident enough about the potentiality of her art to explore psychological enterprise at this moment.

“Nectar in a Sieve”, has been aptly described as a microcosm of Modern India. One may call the village Kamala Markandaya's Malgudi or her Kanthapura. It is symbolic of India. Rukmani and Nathan symbolize the rural masses of India. Kamala Markandaya had a first hand, intimate knowledge of the life of the rural poor, and hence her delineation of it is remarkable for its realism and penetration. In this way she has rendered the soul of India not only to the West, but also to the educated elite of India living in the cities. The setting is provided by a South Indian village, situated in the neighbourhood of a city. The hard facts of village life, as presented in the novel, are true of all Indian villages, whether in the south or the north. Likewise, the characters are more important as representative types than individuals.

Kamala Markandaya's “Nectar in a Sieve” is a complex work of art, and that is why it has evoked most varied responses. There is no doubt that there is much suffering, hunger and starvation, disease and death, in the novel. It is the life-story of Rukmani in her own words. The social background is provided by a village in transition, and the conflict and tensions are caused by the intrusion of modern industry. Life lived in rural India is the backdrop to the personal story of Rukmani and Nathan, and her suffering and the disintegration of her family fuse and mingle with the disintegration of the rural way of life under the impact of modernity.

The flow of life in an Indian village has been realistically depicted with sympathy, understanding, and skill, and without comment. The picture of rural India thus presented is comprehensive and all embracing. We are the Indian peasant in happiness, in his pride, in his fields and crops, in his fatalism and unflinching faith in Divine Providence. We also get a realistic account of his heart rending suffering and helplessness. He is poor and often on the verge of starvation. He is exploited by the village Banya and the landlord who insists on realizing the amount of his loan even though the crops have been completely ravaged and ruined by rains. A.V. Krishna Rao remarks “Rukmani and Nathan, the peasant couple of south Indian village are victims of two evils; *Zamindari* system and the industrial economy.”² But this is not to say that Kamala Markandaya has created a world full of evil, suffering and despair. There are noble souls like Dr. Kenny whose sympathies overflow the barriers of class and nationality. Dr. Kenny discovers that the passivity of the Indian masses is a great disadvantage. The suffering of the rural dwellers is accentuated as a result of the wider conflict between the agrarian and industrial way of life. Rukmani lives in such a village and the disintegration of the rural way of life under the impact of industrialization is reflected in the disintegration of her own family. The travails of Markandaya's Rukmani are the travails of the rustic Indian women at large.

The disintegration of the rural way of life leads to much suffering and uprooting. Nathan and Rukmani and others in the novel are frequently faced with the necessity of making a choice. As long as a man has his roots he lives; and he dies if he is uprooted. Exactly such uprooting is caused by industrialization. Nathan had his roots deep in his land and he lives on so long as he is not uprooted from the land. He is able to face successfully, with courage and determination, the misery and starvation caused by unprecedented rains and draught. He survives through the ordeal, would have lived on as a satisfied and happy farmer, had he not been uprooted from his land. But the tannery swallows up their land, and they are evicted and dispossessed. The tannery assumes symbolic proportion. Bary Argyle, in his article “Nectar in a Sieve” says that “the tannery is the Indian symbol of social baseness and of industrial rapacity”.³ Nathan is forced to make a choice. He decides to go to the city to seek shelter there with his son Murugan. Rukmani reveals the deep agony caused to her heart by the following speech; “This home my husband had built for me with his own hands in the time he was waiting for me; brought me to it with a pride which I, used to better living, had show very nearly crushed. In it we had lain together, and our children had born. This hut with all its memories was to be taken away from us, for it stood on land belonged to another. And the land itself by which we lived. It is cruel thing, I thought. They do not know what they do to us.”⁴

This rootlessness is unbearable to Nathan and Rukmani. They travel by bullock-cart to the city at a distance of a hundred miles, and their journey, and their suffering on the way, has been described in detail, for it is symbolic of similar journeys undertaken all over the country in the wake of industrialization. Nathan's roots are gone, and so like an uprooted tree he cannot live for long. He falls and dies. Similarly others in the novel have also to make 'choices' and suffer consequently as a result of the choice they make.

There is no doubt much suffering, hunger and starvation all-round, but merely for this reason it cannot be called "a cry of despair". It would be more correct to call it an apotheosis of the human spirit, an outcry of rustic life. Like the great tragedies of Shakespeare, it reveals the heroic grandeur, nobility and endurance of

people like Nathan and Rukmani, who struggle relentlessly and heroically against an impersonal fate which seems constantly to pursue them, bent on destroying them. The working of this cruel and terrible impersonal fate, which often assumes the form of the vagaries of nature, is balanced by our admiration for the heroic grandeur and nobility of soul of such characters. Rukmani and Nathan experience the extremes of hunger and suffering, but their integrity remains intact and unshaken. In the city, they have to undergo unbearable sufferings, and are driven from pillar to post, as if by the working of some relentless, hostile and impersonal power but despite all this suffering, they continue to struggle with their heads bloody with the buffets of misfortune, but unbowed. Uma Parameswaram says, Rukmani is “a child of the transition between the insular, autonomous village life of old and the new village dependent upon urban civilization and in constant contact with it.”⁵

No doubt, Nathan falls a victim to this impersonal power, fate or destiny, pursuing them relentlessly, but Rukmani returns to the village, and is welcomed by her son Selvam and her daughter Ira. Puli, her adopted son, comes with her and is adequately treated for leprosy. The hospital of Dr. Kenny has been constructed and Selvam is well-employed. He is a loving and dutiful son and we have glimpses of Rukmani living to a comfortable old age with her children. Margaret P. Joseph has rightly pointed out that in *Nectar in a Sieve*... “Certain nouns are used in connection with the tannery to indicate the destructive role it is going to play in the life of Rukmani: its clatter and clamour and din, its stench of skins, its brews and liquors, its kites and crows, replace the “clear soft greens that had once coloured our village.... Cleaving its cool silences with clamour”.⁶ Ramesh Srivastava, on the other hand, has noted how the tannery has corrupted the moral and ethical values of the village people “...The tannery represents a world of immorality, greed and corruption invading another which is moral, happy and pure”.⁷

Kamala Markandaya echoes almost similar sentiments expressed by D.H. Lawrence:

Now, though perhaps nobody knew it, it was ugliness which really betrayed the spirit of man in the nineteenth century. The great crime which the moneyed classes and promoters of industry committed in the Palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness, ugliness, ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly clothes, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationships between workers and employers. The human soul needs actual beauty even more than bread (quoted in Leavis and Thompson, 1964).¹

In short, *Nectar in a sieve* is a realistic presentation of the suffering, hunger and starvation which is the fate of the Indian rustic people even today but merely for this reason it cannot be called “a cry of despair”. Rather, it is a great tragic novel, an ‘apotheosis of the human spirit’ like all great tragedies. The experiences it narrates, and the life it depicts, are as relevant today as when it was penned.

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