

KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S 'NECTAR IN A SIEVE': A POST MODERNIST READING

DR. AWDHESH KUMAR
Associate Professor, Department of English,
Meerut College, Meerut

Kamala Markandaya's novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* deals with the sufferings of peasants in the preindependent India. Nathan and Rukmani, the central characters in the novel are not individuals but like Prem Chand's Hori and Dhania in *The Godan* stand for every Indian farmer. Their tragic tale is the tale of Indian peasantry. They are the victims of landlordism a system introduced by the Britishers. Rukmani and Nathan till the land which does not belong to them and pay exorbitant rent for it even during famine and flood. Despite their back-breaking work at farm, they hardly get a square meal a day. Poverty and privations are their life-long companions.

Happiness of the Indian farmer depends on the moods of Weather-God. If the weather is favourable, he feels supremely blessed as the rich harvest would enable him to keep the wolf from his door. It arouses hopes his heart. Rukmani, overjoyed with the hope of rich crop, says,

*"While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eyes, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and sweet stirring in your body, what can a woman ask for? My heart sang and my feet were light."*¹

But weather is not always favourable and farmers are well acquainted with its vagaries. The drought or the excessive rain makes the fear of starvation imminent. So much so that a farmer is compelled to sell his possessions like vessels and clothes to pay off the rent. Thus insecurity and privations are part and parcel of the farmer's life. Rukmani tells us,

"The calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain and weather, immensities not to be tempered by man or his creations. To those who live by land, there must always come a time of hardship, of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty. This is one of the truths of our existence, as those who live by the land know.

Rukmani and Nathan face indescribable difficulties and hardships in their peasant life. They are forced to sell their utensils, clothes and even seeds, which hold prospect for the future crop in order to pay off their land rent. But they could not save their land and are forcibly deprived of it which compels them to seek refuge at Murugan's home in city. The sad news of Murugan's desertion of his wife adds to their frustration. They are reduced to the state of mendicants with all their meagre belongings stolen. Trying circumstances compel them to throw themselves upon the resources of the city urchin, Puli. They take up stone-breaking in a quarry outside the city. But they make only a pittance and their lot as urban poor remains as pitiable as their life on the farm. Nathan is completely shattered and dies as a broken man. Rukmani reconciles to her lot and returns with Puli to her native village. Despite so many trials and tribulations, Rukmani retains her motherly love and affection which is expressed in her adopting the leper Puli whom she entrusts to the care of Dr. Kenny.

Kamala Markandaya also shows the evil effects of industrializations followed by urbanization. Industrialization attacks the calm and quiet village life in the form of tannery. It devours green open spaces, polluting the clean, wholesome atmosphere of the village. The whole village, devoured by the tannery is turned into a spiritual wasteland:

"It is all noise and crowd everywhere and rude young hooligans are idling in the street and dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his money."

With the establishment of tannery, an industrial society based on the principle of exploitation comes into existence. It brings the filthy commerce of a town. The death of Rukmani's son, Raja, is compensated with money. It sets all ethical values at naught. Arjun and Thambi clamour for more to eat their fill. Ira who ever had been meek and docile, takes up prostitution. Rukmani cries in pain,

"Our money buys less and less. As for living in a town if town there is why there is nothing. I would fly sooner from it if I could go back to the sweet quiet of village life" *

Soaring prices and greed urge the villagers to demand higher wages. But when their demands are thwarted, they threaten to create trouble for their employers. This has caused a menacing tension all over the village.

In 'Nectar in a Sieve' Kamala Markandaya highlights the differences between the philosophy of East and West. West in the novel is represented by Dr. Kenny and the tannery. To west individuality is the peak and purpose of whole cosmic process. The westerners think of ego and set themselves against the play of nature. But among Indian it is the fate that finds an important place in man's life. Misfortunes befall a man due to the misdeeds of his previous birth. Indians take them as a punishment from God. When the rain fails, Rukmani like other villagers take it as a God's punishment to them. She tries to propitiate the Goddess with a pumpkin and a few grains of rice. She weeps at her feet in contrition for her sins.

Rukmani has been taught to bear sorrow in silence. She believes sorrow is a chastening process. So she remains stoic in the face of vicissitudes of life. She believes that nothing is unbearable and man's undaunted and indomitable spirit helps him to overcome all trials and tribulations by endurance. She patiently endures the vagaries of her life and waits for the times to be better. Her passive acceptance of her misfortune and sanguineness about the time to come irks Dr. Kenny who chides her saying,

"Times are better, times are better. Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die. You meek suffering fools! why do you keep this ghastly silence.

He believes that instead of enduring the things patiently man must fight against that heavy odds for his survival. The village huts are uprooted in the storm while the tannary withstands the onslaughts suggesting that the western rationality has the timber to survive, to fight the heavy odds. Nevertheless westerner Kenny fails to save his marriage from breaking down.

On the contrary, Rukmani believes that man's spirit has strength enough "to rise above his misfortune" She knows that all wants cannot be fulfilled:

"Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons of earth, varying only in degree what profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change.

Not only Rukmani but old Granney too has become used to bear misfortune with courage and fortitude. She lives alone making meager living by selling vegetable.

The western philosophy is rational, scientific and materialistic. It advocates for a certain amount of planning about the future. But Rukmani cannot plan :

"How can we ? It is not within our means....."

We are in God's hands.

In fact she has a firm faith in God and draws from it the strength to surmount all difficulties. She is deeply rooted in traditionalism. Though she accepts the western science to cure Puli of his leprosy, she does not accept it beyond that. Unable to appreciate each other's behaviour, Rukmani and Kenny nevertheless remain friendly with each other.

Kamala Markandaya also draws our attention to the human relationships, the way they are formed, sustained and disintegrated. The central characters, Rukmani and Nathan prize their relationship above everything. It is their harmonious conjugal bonds that give them strength to bear the buffets of cruel nature and corrupting influence of the ugly industrialization. Despair, disappointments and frustration abound their life but they endure them bravely like the true heroes and feel happy in each other's company. When Nathan while lying on the death - bed, asks Rukmani,

"Have we not been happy together?" "Always my dearest a/ways", says Rukmani.⁸

Rukmani, the youngest daughter of the village headman, due to the poor economic conditions of her father, is married to Nathan, a tenant farmer. She soon reconciles to her fate because she finds Nathan '*poor in everything but in love and care..... for his wife.*'⁹ She

lives with Nathan facing utter penury, privations and hardships courageously. Mutual love and understanding characterise their conjugal bonds. Rukmani feels Nathan to be with her even after his death. The novel opens with Rukmani telling us :

"Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me, coming gently through the mist and we are tranquil together. Then morning comes, the wavering turns to gold, there is a stirring within as the sleepers awake and he softly departs"¹⁰

Nathan's love and care for his wife does not let his landless status and limited financial resources come in the way of their happiness. He shows great patience towards his ignorant, plain child bride, who imbibes many household jobs from Kali and Janaki. He is aware of Rukmani's deep anguish and

disappointment on seeing his mud-hut. He knows that she is used to better living and makes sincere efforts to cheer her up, assuring her of the better times to come. His loving concern and good conduct wins Rukmani's heart. He says to Rukmani with a pleading look :

"Perhaps you are frightened at living here alone - but in a few years we can move - may be even buy a house such as your father's. You could like that?"¹¹

Nathan loves Rukmani immensely. So he builds his huts with his own hands for the welcome of his bride. Rukmani's heart is filled with joy at the thought of having a loving and considerate husband.

Nathan too is equally happy with Rukmani whom he considers the best of all women. On Diwali day when they enjoy themselves around the bonfire, Nathan lifts her up and says,

"I am happy because life is good and children are good and you are the best of all"¹²

There are occasions when Nathan loses his temper and uses harsh words. But even in anger he is never inconsiderate towards Rukmani. When he is unable to collect the required amount to pay to the landlord, he decides to sell everything including the seeds for the next crop. Rukmani does not acquiesce. Nathan angrily says,

"Do you think I am blind and do not see or so stupid as to believe that crops are raised without seeds? Do you take me for a fool?"¹³

Rukmani knows that 'It was due to the terrible choice forced upon us and he never meant to be harsh'.

Though they are devoted to each other, yet there have been aberrations in their lives. Nathan was drawn towards Kunthi and sired her two sons. Hence he always remains fearful lest Kunthi should divulge the secret of his illicit relationship with her to Rukmani. But eventually he has to confess his sin to Rukmani when the latter reproaches the children for stealing rice. On learning about Nathan's moral lapse, she is deeply anguished and feels cheated. But she does not give vent to her anguish as she herself has concealed from Nathan her relationship with Kenny whose medical assistance helps her bear a son and cures Ira of her barrenness. But she does not want her husband to know it because being a foreigner Dr.Kenny is dubbed as being with the rulers and oppressors. So she meets Kenny surreptitiously because as she is 'sure Nathan would not like his wife or his daughter going to a Whiteman, a foreigner'.

Like Nathan Rukmani too has been blackmailed by Kunthi, who extracted rice from her for not divulging to Nathan of her going to Dr. Kenny. Rukmani thinks Nathan to be her most precious possession and does not want to lose her:

"I need you", I cried to myself, 'Nathan^ my husband I cannot take the risk, because there is a risk since she is clever and I am not'.¹⁴

She tells Nathan that Kunthi extorted rice from her also and feels much relieved because now she was 'freed from the necessity for lies and concealment and deceit with the fear of betrayal¹.

Conjugal relationship of Rukmani and Nathan is strong enough not to be disrupted by this unpleasant episode. It provides them strength to bear with stoic calm immense suffering caused by industrialization and deprivation of their land. Their relationship is based on mutual trust, faith and understanding.

In Nectar in a Sieve' not only the conjugal but the filial relations also find a significant place. Children are second self of the parents. Hence a feeling of natural attachment exists between them. Rukmani does not protest her parents' decision to marry her off to a tenant farmer because she understands that her father due to his weak financial position can't give her a rich dowry as has been given to her three elder sisters. Rukmani, after marriage keeps on paying visits to her parents though they become few and far between due to the household liabilities.

Parents are always worried about the welfare of their children. Rukmani's mother shows her concern for Rukmani's bearing sons. While dying she gives her a lingam, symbol of fertility to enable Rukmani to bear sons. Rukmani's father is no less concerned with the welfare of his children. He teaches all his children reading and writing because "he wanted his children to be one cut above the rest." He believes that education would give them a solace in affliction and a joy in tranquility.

Though all children are equally dear to parents yet in Indian society parents show preference for a son. Rukmani and Nathan are extremely happy at the birth of their son. While the birth of Ira makes them sad since they wanted a son who could till the land beside his father and work with them:

"A son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land and not a pulling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind"¹⁵

Rukmani and Nathan are affectionate and their children remain obedient and submissive to them. Ira marries according to wishes of Rukmani and Nathan. Arjun and Thambi too hand over all their income to their mother. It is only when the circumstances become extremely hard and trying, the cordial relations between the parents and children undergo a change. In the fierce struggle for survival, Rukmani and Nathan become helpless before their children. They let Ira go for prostitution, much against their wishes, let Arjun and Thambi leave for Celone knowing fully well that separation from them would be unbearable and let Murugan go to city. They do not compel Selvam to choose the profession of their choice.

To sum up the filial bonds in 'Nectar in a Sieve' are based on mutual love and understanding. The adverse circumstances compel the children to go against their parental wishes, yet mutual trust and sympathy remain between them.

Thus Kamla Markandaya deals with multiple of themes in her novel which shows her deep understanding of the Indian rural life and its problems.

REFERENCES:

1. *Nectar in a Sieve* Twenty Three Jaico Impression; 2002. p.-7.
2. *ibid.* p.-134-135.
3. *ibid.* p.-46.
4. *ibid.* p.-46.
5. *ibid.* p.-44.
6. *ibid.* p.-113-114.
7. *ibid.* p.-131.
8. *ibid.* p.-188.
9. *ibid.* p.-2.
10. *ibid.* p.-1.
11. *ibid.* p.-4.
12. *ibid.* p.-57.
13. *ibid.* p.-76.
14. *ibid.* p.-83. ;
15. *ibid.* p.-15-16.