

## NECTAR IN A SIEVE- THEMES

Kamala Markandaya's debut novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* covers a wide spectrum of life in rural India. As such, the themes of the novel are varied; they touch upon every aspect of rural life in the country from poverty, starvation and suffering, the vagaries of Nature and how they affect the rural folk, their resignation and acceptance of what Fate has in store for them, the impact of industrialisation on rural life, the East-West encounter to the rootlessness and consequent tragedy. The novel tells the story of a gritty woman Rukmani who recollects her life "with calm of mind and all passion spent" in her declining years. It is thus not only a personal account of Rukmani's life and sufferings but also depicts the wider conflict that rural India faces with the advent of industrialisation with the ironies of life that impact Rukmani and Nathan.

### **Hunger, Starvation and Degradation**

Like Bhabani Bhattacharya's well-known and widely-landed attempt, *So Many Hungers*, which deals with the manmade famine in Bengal in 1942, *Nectar in a Sieve* has poverty and hunger as its theme. Set against the backdrop of an unnamed South Indian village, the novel depicts how hunger and starvation are caused by the vagaries of Nature—excessive rains or utter drought. The heroic struggle of Rukmani and Nathan against heavy odds raises the novel to epic heights, as in the case of Pearl S. Buck's Nobel Prize-winning novel, *Good Earth*, which portrays a similar tragedy in China. The novel, according to a critic, "recalls in its savage power and authentic atmosphere that great novel of China: *Good Earth*. It records vividly the poverty-stricken, heartbreaking existence of the poor tenant-farmers of Madras. But in its particular theme the story of Rukmani, her husband and children—there is a universality of love and loyalty that will appeal to readers all over the world."

## Heroic Suffering and Endurance

The protagonist-narrator of *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani is married to a poor tenant-farmer Nathan when she is barely twelve. Despite their poverty, they live happily in their mudhut built by Nathan with his own hands and their small paddy-field. They are contented with their lot despite poverty. But then misfortunes follow in quick succession. They are not able to make ends meet with their large family of a daughter and six sons. The available supply of food rapidly dwindles. Ira, their daughter, is abandoned by her husband as she is unable to conceive five years after marriage. They, however, bear it stoically as they can do nothing about it.

A tannery comes up on the outskirts of the village and it disrupts their lives. The family begins to disintegrate; prices rise; and unsocial and anti-social elements invade the idyllic village. Rukmani's two eldest sons, Arjun and Thambi, start working in the tannery because the little land that Nathan has cannot feed the large family. But their services are terminated as they are accused of formenting labour trouble in the tannery. They leave for Ceylon in search of employment, and Rukmani and Nathan lose them for good. Their son Raja is beaten up for stealing from the tannery, and he dies. The couple accept their loss with calm and resignation. There is no protest or loud lamentation as Raja's dead body is brought to Rukmani's hut. Rukmani then loses her son Kuti due to malnutrition even though Ira has taken to prostitution in order to nourish him back to health. She has a son of her own through a chance encounter with one of her clients. Rukmani, however, accepts all this and reminisces on her life which is continuously stalked by hope and fear.

*Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear, constant, companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever ready at hand to jog his elbow at us to relax. 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.*

Next Murugan leaves his parents to work as domestic servant in the city (presumably Madras, now Chennai) on Kenny's recommendation. When hunger and starvation stares them in the face, the couple decide to go to the city looking for Murugan who, they are confident, will

support them and look after them in their old age. But it is a futile attempt as Murugan, they learn, deserted his family a couple of years ago. They are robbed at the temple and reduced to beggary. Waging a relentless war against hunger and starvation, the couple start working as stone-breakers in a quarry till Nathan dies. Rukmani returns to the village with her adopted son, the leper-boy Puli, who has been a great help to the old couple in the city.

Hunger not only kills, it also degrades and dehumanises. Kunthi and Ira become street walkers to ward off hunger and starvation; Raja takes to stealing and is beaten to death. Rai Nicholson aptly remarks that corruption in the novel comes from within through starvation, and not from industrialisation. The theme of hunger, starvation and degradation has been depicted through the many vicissitudes of Rukmani and Nathan. Yet they do not lose hope. Nathan dies while longing to return to his village and to his roots, while Rukmani returns home to her family, calm and resigned but full of hope for a better future.

### **Fatalism**

People in rural India have an abiding faith in God and religion. Their passive acceptance of what is pre-determined in their lives is illustrated through the central figures in the novel, Rukmani and Nathan, who go through unimagined suffering and misery. It teaches them to bend, but not to break.

Rukmani and Nathan suffer terribly but they endure and continue to live on. This passive acceptance may seem cowardly to a Western observer like Kenny, who often loses patience with Rukmani. She, unlike her elder sisters, is married to a poor tenant-farmer but she accepts her lot uncomplainingly. She is happy and contented in Nathan's loving company in their mudhut. When told of his infidelity, she understands and forgives Nathan. The novel demonstrates that a spirit of acceptance strengthens one in the time of suffering. Faith in a better future sustains both Rukmani and Nathan, but it is not to be. Their suffering and misery is preordained and they can do nothing about it. Crops fail on account of excessive rain and drought but life goes on. They are indifferent to death or parting and when Puli enters their life, Rukmani and Nathan accept him with open arms as the son they never had. Similarly, Old Granny endures her extreme poverty and loneliness

with resignation and acceptance; she dies in the streets where she had lived and worked all her life.

### **East-West Encounter**

Most of Kamala Markandaya's novels are about "the cultural clash of the two modes of life, the Western and the Oriental, and the consequent actuation of the painful process of modernisation". Besides political relationship between India and its British masters for nearly two centuries, her novels show the irreconcilables between the two ways of life and cultures: idealism, mysticism and materialism. In *Possession*, she justifies her stand: "Undiluted East had always been too much for the West, and soulful East always came lapdog fashion to the West, mutely asking to be not too little and not too much, but right."

Kamala Markandaya does not, however, like Rudyard Kipling, believe that the twain can never meet. Her novels show that such a meeting is always possible at the personal level, as they do in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The relationship between Rukmani and Kenny, left deliberately vague and undefined, shows the clash of two cultures and an attempt to understand each other. Kenny has no patience with Rukmani's value system and well-entrenched beliefs in the son syndrome and fatalism yet he helps and treats her to beget a number of sons to continue her husband's line and is cynical when she talks of acceptance and resignation in the face of adversity. He helps her son Murugan to take up a job as a domestic servant in the city and takes on another son, Selvam, as his assistant in the hospital that he builds in the village. For him the child born out of a chance encounter with one of her clients to Ira is as valuable as a child born out of marriage. This shocks Ira because she has a different mindset. Yet Kenny is ever helpful to her and the other people in the village. Kamala Markandaya's message here, as in her other novels, is one of compromise: India must assimilate the best that is there in the western way of life in western science and technology. Only then can the country be transformed and modernised, and the twain will meet.

The West in *Nectar in a Sieve* is represented by Kenny, a thorough gentleman, a devoted doctor with a missionary streak, who works selflessly among the rural poor. He has cut all family connections to ameliorate the lot of the villagers, the poverty-stricken and the destitute

---

who are resigned to their fate. Extremely reticent, he inspires love, respect and awe almost bordering on worship in Rukmani. However, he fails to understand the "soul of India" and has a love-hate relationship with Rukmani. He fails to understand the Indian spirit of passive acceptance and resignation, their fatalism, their mute and cowardly (to him) silence in the face of social injustice and grinding oppression. He loves India and the Indians but he is also annoyed with them and often gets angry and irritated at their passivity, and unwillingness to better their lot. On her part, Rukmani also fails to understand Kenny and once when they enter into a discussion on their respective attitudes, Kenny strikes his forehead and asks Rukmani to go, admitting:

*"I do not understand you. I never will. Go, before I too am entangled in your philosophies."*

### **Impact of Industry**

*Nectar in a Sieve* is not merely an autobiographical account of Rukmani's life. It is also an account of modernisation of a village in India. The setting up of a tannery in the quiet, tranquil village disrupts life, leading to moral degradation and disintegration of families like Rukmani's. It brings in its wake the corrupting influences of modernity to the simple and innocent village folk. It disrupts their traditional way of life, which is symbolised by Rukmani and Nathan. They represent thousands of uprooted peasants under an industrial economy. *Nectar in a Sieve* thus becomes the study of a rural community in the throes of transition from the traditional agricultural-bound society to a modern, urban-industrial society. People like Kunthi are overjoyed at such a transition because they will now have all the amenities of city life in their village, and she looks down upon traditional, typical villagers like Rukmani. The East-West conflict thus widens and becomes a clash between tradition and modernity, between agriculture and industry, and the consequent suffering, misery and degradation that such a conflict causes. Economic hardships force Kunthi, and later Ira, to take to prostitution in order to support their families.

### **Tradition Versus Modernity**

Rukmani is rooted in tradition. From the beginning, she does not like the construction of a tannery on the outskirts of her village. She

---

gives a graphic account of the ugliness, sordidness and meanness which invade the village with the setting up of a tannery there:

*It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Night and day the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw material in—thousands of skins, goat, calf, lizard and snake skins—and took them away again tanned, dyed and finished. It seemed impossible that markets could be found for such quantities—or that so many animals existed—but so it was, incredibly.*

The sudden change in their life blasted it at one stroke. It despoiled the beauty of Nature, spread ugliness and stench all around, and wreaked havoc in the life of the rural community. The cool sequestered way of life in the village, far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, is invaded by filth and dirt, din and noise. "Already my children hold their noses when they go by, and all is shouting and disturbance wherever you go. Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us," laments Rukmani.

The sweet quiet of the village life withers away, and the urban squalor and vice take its place. Says Rukmani:

*If I could go back to the sweet quiet of village life. But now there is all noise and crowds everywhere, and rude young hooligans idling in the streets, dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his money.*

The tannery proves to be the root cause of the tragedy of Rukmani and Nathan and the disintegration of their family. The tannery becomes a source of inflation and vice, social filth and moral debasement. The village traders expand and prosper. They now deal with the workers from the tannery, and the prices rise. Rukmani recounts, "They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played and had made the bazaar prices too high for us." Kunthi, the village beauty, exploits her charms and becomes a streetwalker. Ira is also driven to prostitution by hunger. The local cobbler Kannan's work is taken away by the tannery, and Janaki leaves the village with her family. Rukmani views the tannery as the source of all her misery and troubles: "My sons had left because it frowned on them; one of them had been destroyed by its ruthlessness."

---

## **Rootlessness**

But the greatest tragedy in the life of Rukmani and Nathan is that the tannery swallows up their land. Unable to pay the annual rent and the landlord sells their land to the tannery at a very high price. Uprooted from the soil, they migrate to the city in search of their son Murugan. They do not find him and reduced to beggary. A sick and emaciated Nathan dies. To quote Dr. Krishna Rao, “Thus, in *Nectar in a Sieve*, a novel of rural India, she (Kamala Markandaya) dramatises the tragedy of the disruption of a Hindu joint family of a farmer owing to heavy industrialisation—a typically modern aspect of national economics”. Industrialisation, with its emphasis on urban development and the mechanisation of the means of production and distribution necessarily results in the social dislocation of the family. Hunger, starvation, destitution, desertion, eviction, prostitution and death—all combine to make *Nectar in a Sieve* a tragedy of rural India. The tragedy of Rukmani is the tragedy of rural India, of a person and of a people caught between two worlds. It assumes universal dimensions and an epic significance in the hands of Kamala Markandaya.

---