

Tale of headman's daughter in kamala Markandaya's *nectar in a sieve*

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is a woman novelist portrayed the role of rural women in agriculture. Indian culture is embedded in agriculture for centuries. Her novels blame the vagaries of nature disaster and industrialization for crisis in rural India. The most advanced stage of these issues are lead to hunger, poverty, starvation, degradation of land and human life. It ultimately drives away the farmers from rural areas to urban areas in search of better life. Kamala Markandaya observes the Indian agriculture passing through a period of severe crisis. Although some features of these crises in agriculture started manifesting themselves in certain parts of south India during pre-independence period, these crises had assumed a serious dimension since the introduction of tanneries in rural areas. There is a general perception that unbearable burden of debt and starvation augmented as a result of natural calamities is indicative of a crisis in Indian agriculture. In this paper, an attempt has been made to find out the causes of the crisis, problems faced by the agriculture sector and at the end how rural tenant farmers overcome these crises for sustainable living. It is observed that Rukmani had overcome the hurdles through her innate capacity to withstand the exploitation and rise above the poverty. She achieved her identity through self-confidence, perseverance and hopefulness, fight for their rights and protecting the land and nature.

Keywords: fate, immoral activities, headman's daughter, rural tenant farmers, rural woman

Introduction

In order to indicate the contrariness of human life, Mrs. Kamala Markandaya uses a literary device called "Fate". All the desires are not fulfilled in human life. Many times things happen in opposite direction and what we expect, takes place in opposite direction. Thus, the fate of life or circumstances may be defined as situation which is the exact opposite of what has been expected and desired. Life expects that it is happened by fate. It is also known as the irony of fate. Therefore, it is a fact that the irony of fate or of circumstances, or of life lies in the frustration of human desires and it is accepted that some supreme power or fate dominates human beings.

Since the literature is the mirror of life, irony plays a very important role in it. Irony has become a strong medium to create tragic effect. Kamala Markandaya like the Greek tragedians puts the responsibility for man's misery on fate that will not allow mortal to exercise free will successfully. Her characters are all the victims of the irony of life, of 'Fate'. What happens to them is quite contrary to their wishes and expectations. Since their happenings are not desired and unexpected, they face sorrows and sufferings.

Srinivas indicated that in Mrs Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* has composed with the unexpected and undesirable problems in the life of Rukmani and Nathan. Both of them are good at their hearts, yet have to face the irony of fate. They seem to become playthings in the hands of cruel destiny. Rukmani whose father was a rich man, heads the village, thinks that she would be married like her three sisters. As the poverty of her father ruins her fate she is married to a poor tenant farmer, Nathan.

Here Shiv K. Kumar recollects that traditional facts in generation growth of everyone's life. In the same way, he pointed out that in Mrs. Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*: Rukmani's husband Nathan expects male child from her. After the marriage, both Rukmani and Nathan lead a peaceful married

life, though they are poor. Later on, Rukmani gives birth to a daughter whose name is Ira. Nathan seldom pays his attention to Ira because he wished for a son.

Nathan comments about his girl child:

"Nathan at first paid scant attention to Ira: he had wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pulling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind; but soon she stopped being a pulling infant and when at the age of ten months she called him "Apa," which means father, he began to take a lively interest in her." (12)

After birth of Ira, Rukmani give birth too many children, Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam and Kuti and Rukmani feels a lot of difficulty in feeding her children.

Rukmani comments:

"With six children to feed we could no longer afford to eat all the vegetables we grew. Once a week I would cut and pack our garden produce, selecting the best and leaving the spoil or bruised vegetables for ourselves, cover the basket with leaves and set off for the village." (18)

Kamala Markandaya's first novel is a home novel which analyses fate of headman's daughter in peasant family of south India. The main theme of the novel is to analyze the sufferings of rural woman, journey of fate and process of optimistic in her life. As many of the narratives in the novels revolve around the rural phenomena which are much relevant to the present day woos in the society.

Results and Discussion

Mrs. Kamala Markandaya is a keen observer of life in villages and small towns. Charming pictures of country life and varied

experiences of the rural folk have been described by her. The excellent history of village life with all the pleasures and pains of the village life has been given in her novels. Nature plays an important role in the life of the peasants. Nathan and Rukmani are usually crushed by the natural happenings. Sometimes it is heavy rain that ruins their fate and another time drought becomes the cause of their decline. After the marriage of Ira, it rains hard that everywhere there is water. Both of them lose their peace of mind. Thus, heavy rains ruin them completely. Next year farmers have to face drought. They stare at the sky which is cruel, calm and indifferent to their need. The drought continues until the farmer's condition becomes more pathetic. At last one day it rains but it is too late to support the farmers. Irawaddy is one of the main causes of tragedy in Rukmani's life as she is a barren lady and rejects by her husband. She comes back to her mother's house.

Rukmani comments about her daughter's fate:

"No fault of yours, or the girl's or her husband's," I told her. "It is fate. Nevertheless, I do not like to think of the future." "Why fear?" said the old lady. "Am I not alone, and do I not manage?" I thought of her sitting in the street all day long with the gunny sacking in front of her piled with a few annas worth of nuts and vegetables; and I thought of Ira doing the same thing and I was silent."(46)

After some days, there is a drought and all the peasants are bound to starve. Ira loves her brothers so much so that whatever is given to her, she provides it to her younger brother. Therefore, she prostitutes her body at the hands of tannery workers in order to feed her younger brother Kutty. The fate of Rukmani's daughter reached a climax when the barren Ira becomes pregnant and gives birth to an albino child. Though the society does not welcome her child because albino is the results of prostitution, Ira loves her child very much. Ira does not take this as a mark of shame with her child.

Irawaddy remarks about her son as:

"Fair! He was too fair. Only his mother failed to see how unnatural his fairness was or to notice.....However, if she dissembled well; no sign of strain or fear crossed her face, she was as happy as a bird with her son, singing to him, playing with him, clucking and chuckling as if he were the most beautiful boy any woman could have."(87)

Mrs. Kamala Markandaya presents sex as one of the major weakness of her main characters. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Nathan establishes sexual contact with Kunthi, a rustic lady. So Kunthi, an immoral lady many a times blackmails Rukmani. Kenny is an Englishman running a hospital to take care of the villager's health problem. One day Rukmani saw Kunthi in her house in wretched condition. Rukmani came to know her that her husband deserted her and started to live with another woman. She told Rukmani to give some meal. Since Rukmani was a hunger stricken, it was very difficult for her to come daily. She threatened Rukmani if she was not helped by her, she would disclose her intimacy with Kenny. Kunthi blackmail Rukmani to get rice and other items, she also like the westernization and industrialization in rural areas. In spite of Rukmani's plight for foods, she gave seven days ration to Kunthi. Nathan was also black mailed by Kunthi. He admitted that when he was a bachelor, had illicit relationship with Kunthi; after this they

faced a starvation. Many a times they ate grass in to lessen the pangs of hunger. But of all the members of the family, Kuti suffered the most, though Ira took great care of him. One day Raja goes out and does not come back. Some people bring his dead body and inform that he was caught in an evil act of theft. Ira sang dirge and her sorrow flows to Rukmani also. Nathan prepared a bier. They took out the funeral at dawn. Woman did not join the funeral. After three days of Raja's death some officials come to Rukmani and tell her how Raja was stealing things. They want to compensate his death, but Rukmani does not accept it. At the time of their departure one of them glances at her.

Rukmani remarks about the fate of her son Raja's death:

"The other did not look triumphant: if anything, he seemed to have shrunk a little, he avoided looking at me altogether; but as they went out together he glances at me quickly, once and in that brief moment Rukmani sees that his eyes are grieving. I am very sorry for you" he said in a low voice. "May you find peace." He went, his face overlaid with shame and misery."(69)

In *Nectar in a Sieve* eastern attitude to suffering is summed up by Rukmani, and the novelist shows its clash with the western outlook in her meeting with Kenny, the English doctor. Rukmani is optimistic with a little rice that will last "until times are better" inspite of flood ruined the life of Rukmani. Kenny, a representative of the western view point takes it as the folly of mind. Again when another problem crops up, he asks Rukmani to cry if she needs help. Mr. Kenny says that suffer in silence is of no use; on the other hand Rukmani remembers eastern culture and religion. "Yet our priest fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments, and all this so that our soul may be cleansed." Rukmani do not like to be agitated for she is safe in God's hands. They are ready to accept each misery until they broken his eastern outlook is challenged by that of the west.

Relentless of fate continues to follow Rukmani, and the undesired happening constantly occurs. As there is an alternate drought and flood ruins in rural areas, Arjun and Thambi join in tannery. Rukmani was not happy with their decision to join the tannery as tannery workers are of from lower caste or class people. One day Rukmani and Nathan went to city and way back turned to tannery to visit their son. The gate keeper informed them that the industry is closed due to the conflict between the laborers and management. The laborers are demanding for higher wages. But Arjun thinks that it is not fitting that men should corrupt themselves in hunger and idleness. At last both of them decide to go to Ceylon, a distant land. At the same time they shed their tears as they depart faraway places. S.Misra observed that some of the emotional factors which come across during the life of tenant farmers. While analyzing Mrs. Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, the narrator's life has many ups and downs. Rukmani decides to go to the city to seek shelters with their son Murugan. The cart-driver puts them down on the outskirts of the city. It is a large city, and instead of their beings one Kovil Street there are several Kovil streets. Rukmani and Nathan reach the collector's house where it is said to them that the beggars are not allowed. Finally, they reach the house of Murugan who is not there; but he deserted his wife (Ammu) and children. Ammu tells Rukmani that Murugan left her and there has been nearly two years. She tells them that he has left the city and nobody knows

the place where he has gone. Rukmani is shocked to notice that her son has deserted Ammu. Rukmani and her husband are tired and exhausted; they seek shelter in a temple. Their humble belongings and their money are stolen during the night. Ultimately, with the help of Puli and Birla, they reach the house of Murugan but find that he (Murugan) has deserted his wife and children, and that his whereabouts are not known. The Destiny has played a cruel joke on their life.

Rukmani and Nathan remarks about their son Murugan:

“We are Murugan’s parents,” Nathan said gently. “You must be his wife.” The girl nodded, then recollecting herself she drew aside so that we could enter came after us and stood biting her lip as if uncertain what to say. “These must be our grandchildren, “I said, trying not to notice her attitude. “I have long wanted to see them.” “No doubt ...” the girl said, her lips twisting a little. “No doubt you want to see your son, too. He is not here.”(121-122)

Once again they seek shelter in the temple, live on charity like beggars for some time. Nathan is completely broken and he thinks it better to go to village than to seek his son Murugan. He says to Rukmani “Better to starve, where we were bred than live here”. But they do not have the money to go back. So Rukmani starts the work of writing letters as she is an educated and uses her education. She tries to earn something by letter writing, and they take to stone-breaking. They get good wages, save little from day to day, and continue to live and work in the hope that soon they would have enough to pay the return fare to the village. A time comes when it looks that their hope soon materialize and they would be able to go back. They are happy and Rukmani purchases some rice-cakes – a delicacy which “they had not tasted for long- and one dum dum cart for puli and another one for her grandson Sacrabani.

Mrs. Kamala Markandaya had narrated the poverty stricken farmers as saying; they started the cruel sky, calm, blue and indifferent to their need. Shivaji came to collect his tenant dues. Shivaji face fell when he saw the crop loss as a result of cruel sky. At last Nathan and Rukmani had to sell a few earthen pots, two brass vessels and two shirts of their sons and two ollocks of dhall. Rukmani had paid her dues in spite of her suffering and lived with hopefulness. But unfortunately, Nathan condition becomes worse and wretched. One day when it has been raining for a long period, his condition becomes very pathetic. People carry him to the temple as he has been in the water. When Rukmani reaches there, she finds his body as chill as cold wind. Mount and Dana influenced by using western culture by studying of Mrs. Markandaya’s novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. People lay Nathan on the floor and Rukmani sinks down beside him. Somebody brings a light, a hurricane lantern. Someone comes with water. Nathan head keeps twitching from side to side. He calls his sons and mutters words that Rukmani does not understand. After sometimes Nathan passes away and all her hopes are shattered. Again, the unexpected and the undesired have happened.

There is no variety and complexity in Kamala Marandaya’s characters. The range of her characters is limited. Her characters are realistic and convincing. Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is a pathetic character who passes through the most deplorable condition; but she never loses her courage and patience. Though she is a tragic victim of rural life, she is a typical Indian rural daughter of headman whose love for the

earth is remarkable. Her sufferings in the hands of landlords and nature show that she is a representative of the uprooted peasants.

Conclusion

Indeed, Mrs. Markandaya’s characters belong to every class of society. She takes many characters from the poor class: on the other hand, she is adept in the delineation of the people of the rich class. One thing is sure that she delineates her women characters more beautifully than the male characters. Rukmani is an important woman character of a headman of the Indian village. Rukmani possess all the qualities of the heroine. She is successful in plumbing the psychological depths of her heroines. A critic points out in this connection as, the characters of her novels include peasants enmeshed in the struggle for existence between their dried-out agricultural land and the nightmare of urban poverty. Mrs. Kamala Markandaya narrated the Rukmani and Nathan who are the victims of the life. The story illustrates that woman is a plaything in the hands of cruel destiny which takes pleasure in inflicting pain and sufferings on rural peasants. The story tells that even though Rukmani born for a headman, circumstance made her to marry a tenant farmer and faced all the miseries. She successfully confronted and led a dignified life with her determination, confidence, perseverance and hopefulness.

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