

SOCIETAL PROBLEMS IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S SELECT NOVELS

Mr.S.Sasintharkumar

*Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English,
Shanmuga Industries Arts & Science College, Tiruvanamalai*

Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is one of the most prominent Indian English novelists. She is a brilliant story-teller. As a technician, she is a traditionalist. Her power of narration is wonderful. She does not localize English language like other Indian English novelists. She writes English within the framework of English tradition. Regional dialects and literal translations of Indian swear words and proverbs are discarded by her. Her language is endowed with poetic beauty. Her novels are a microcosm of India. They centre on the dictum that art must have a social purpose and she depicts the life of a man or a woman in relation to society and to destiny. As a novelist, she is sharply conscious of the contemporary socio-economic realities, as they affect the lives of millions of Indians and add to their misery and indignity. She focuses on the family structure to establish her themes in different novels. She is different from her contemporaries in that she depicts vividly and with a rare understanding the realities of Indian life.

Keywords: tradition, modern, social injustice, spiritualism, materialism, poverty, hunger, starvation and regional dialects.

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is the most remarkable of the novels and it has been translated into fifteen languages. Her works reveal various social problems. In *Nectar in a Sieve* the novelist's purpose is to depict rural problems. Kamala Markandaya points out how the heavy rain drought affect the general life of farmers. She also throws light on pathetic condition of the tenant farmers. Common problems like the problem of unemployment and the problem of fallen women have been portrayed by her. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a tremendous story of the sons of the soil, who live from hand to mouth, on their small tenant- holdings produce in South India. Their abject poverty and inexorable miseries caused by the famine are described very pathetically by Kamala Markandaya. It is a subtle study of the traditional social milieu under the disturbing impact of change and modernity. She is concerned with man's struggle with hunger, nature, social change and modernity.

The most dominant character of *Nectar in a sieve* is Rukmani, who is the narrator of this novel. Rukmani is a living symbol of all affection and sympathy. The daughter of a village headman, she is married to Nathan, a poor tenant farmer who ranks below her in a status. She has been conditioned to resign herself to her husband's will and never call him by his name- the basic traits of a patriarchal society where women are treated as adjuncts to their husband:

It was my husband who woke me-my husband, whom I will call Nathan, for that, was his name, although in all the years of our marriage I never called him that,

for it is not meet for a woman to address her husband except as 'husband'. (6)

Despite the remarkable difference between her status and that of her husband, she loves her husband very much because of his innocent nature. This loving and considerate nature makes her proud of him. Both Rukmani and Nathan, live comfortably in their small hut. Nathan is a skilled farmer who has abundant crops and they can eat well and also save a bit for the rainy day. After sometime Rukmani gives birth to a daughter, Ira, while Nathan wished for a son. After Ira's birth, Rukmani feels that some bareness has started to affect her, so she consults Doctor Kenny who provides her with a nice treatment and she becomes the mother of many children. Now she has six sons and a daughter; therefore, she feels a heavy burden.

She clearly exposes that fear; hunger and despair are the unchanging companions of the peasants. 'Fear of the blackness of death'. The fear is of producing the *Nectar* out of the muddied ocean of poverty, dejection and the disease. The ever-rising population broadens the span and thickness the mud of this ocean. Rukmani is a child of transition between the separated autonomous village lives of an old and the new village dependent upon urban civilization. A bride at twelve, mother at thirteen, mother of six children at twenty-four and old at forty, Kamala Markandaya very carefully focuses our attention on the sympathetic realization that tropical flowers in their natural state blossom early, wither soon and yet retain a clinging endurance.

Rukmani symbolizes those unhappy villagers whose spirit of acceptance strengthens more in the midst of abject

poverty and utter ruin caused by rainstorms to the huts and fields. Without questioning the acts of nature, these rustics accept her anger and wait for the wind and rain to abate and then build their huts anew and plough their fields' afresh. Rukmani, a mother of sorrow, receives shocks aftershocks e.g., her husband's infidelity, her daughter's sacrificial going for body trade to save the family from starvation, the death of the child Kutti, the ejection from the house:

This home my husband has built for me with his own hands... In it we had lain together and our children had been born. This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us; for it stood on the land that belonged to another and the land itself by which we lived. It is a cruel thing I thought. They do not know what they do to us. (Nectar in a sieve, p 135)

Rukmani and her husband leave the village to join their son, only to find that he has disappeared, abandoning his wife and children. But the story of their depressed does not end here, they start stone-breaking and succeed, through with great difficulty, in saving some money so as to return to their village, but before that Nathan dies leaving Rukmani lonely and depressed. She, with greater difficulty manages to return to her village to restart the cycle of life with the hope of spring after winter.

Despair and dislike leads women like Ira to the flesh trade so that the death from starvation may not multiply. But her mother, Rukmani, who has become resistant to all pains and shocks, stands firm and not discouraged against all calamities and exploitations and survives all disaster.

The author has juxtaposed Rukmani and Kenny as representatives of Oriental and Western cultures and traditions respectively. Kenny "has the dual role of sympathetic observer of the Indian scene and representative of the finer traditions of the West". Rukmani stands for the traditional Indian attitude to suffering enshrined in contentment and complacency. But Kenny represents the Western ideas like liberalism, progressivism and protest. His sympathetic exhortation to Rukmani is an attempt to show her the path or reason from unqualified resignation. Hence, his advice is to cry out for help and not suffer in silence, Kenny tells Rukmani... "You must cry out if you want help. It is no use whatever to suffer in silence. Who will succor the drowning man if he does not clamor for his life...? There is no grandeur in want or in endurance" (Nectar in a sieve, p 113).

Nectar in a Sieve, based on the traditional pattern of life in countless villages all over India, is a passionate cry

of protest against social injustice. The tragedy of Nectar in a Sieve is a result not of tragic flaw in a man's character or of man's primal fall from grace, but of inequalities in the whole structure of society.

Possession presents the perpetual conflict between the Indian spiritualism and the Western materialism, the former winning over the latter. Caroline Bell tries to 'possess' Val completely by hook or by crook, but the spiritual values of the Indian culture are so deep rooted in him that he succeeds in liberating himself from the clutches. Kamala Markandaya wants to emphasize the fact that the British rules exploited the innocence of the Indians and tried to possess them both physically and mentally, but ultimately they failed and had to quit India. Caroline takes Val to England and tries to exploit his talent of painting for selfish gains. But she cannot exploit him fully. In Possession, Kamala Markandaya expresses her strong views through Anasuya:

Possession, I thought appalled: attenuated form of the powerful craving to have, to hold, which was so dominating and menacing a part of Caroline; which left a grey and ugly trail of human misery such as, horribly swollen but not unrecognizable, one saw stumbling in the wake of power-societies and empires. (Possession, p.199) Markandaya intended to focus on all the three possessors and victims, both sacrifice and predator. There is a philosophical undercurrent; one's craving to possess turns back on itself and one becomes possessed. The protagonist of Kamala Markandaya's novel Possession is Valmiki. Kamala Markandaya's intention in naming her protagonist is evident. Traditionally, Valmiki is the saint-poet who composed the Ramayana. According to tradition, he was a hunter who became an ascetic on divine inspiration, with the learning to chant the holy name of Rama; turned ascetic and one day discovered that he had become a poet. And he met the Sage Narada who told him the entire story of Rama and then set it down in verse. The obvious meaning is that the painter in the novel is a painter by inspiration, not by instruction. He is introduced as a "simpleton" and a "goatherd" to Anasuya, the Narrator, by a village boy. He takes her to the Swamy's cave where she meets her English friend Lady Caroline Bell, who is under the effect of rural arak. With the pride of someone who has discovered something hidden so far, she speaks to Anasuya in a perfectly clear voice.

"Look", she said. "He paints He's got nothing, nothing of anything he ought to have, but he can paint can you see? Do you see?" (Possession, p 90).

An artist is born in a culture. It is his lifeblood. The born artist is not born the complete and faultless artist. He has to grow and to the extent possible, develop himself too. He develops not only as an artist but also as a human being. In the process he may be borne by acute internal conflicts, or depressions. Material demands, sensual demands and emotional demands may ravage his soul. They may distract him and even destroy him. In the best of circumstances, life and experiences can strengthen and broaden his vision and he may come out a more refined being for his immersion in life. The Swamy acts as the Surrogate father to Valmiki consummately. He does not give instruction in his art but influences him in his understanding of his culture and in his basic attitudes and values. Kamala Markandaya portrays both the master and disciple as being soaked in the Indian Ethos, thinking of art as something sacred dedicated to the service of the divine spirit.

Caroline implies that she has seen what others have failed to see. She feels that Valmiki is wasted there. She has decided to take him to Paris to London. She seeks Anasuya's help to get his family's permission to take him with her but Anasuya refuses to help her as she is afraid that "he should not be lifted too high, left fall too far, for he was neither old enough nor calloused enough to bear it" (Possession , p12).

Valmiki is stimulated to know Caroline plans to meet his painting. He knows from Anasuya that Caroline plans to meet his family, and he happily consents to take her to his home. Anasuya realises that the few grains of administration she had proffered might well be food and drink to him, after the simpleton's fare with which he had so far been fed (Possession ,p12-13).

She dispenses with the East-West polarities, because she thinks the delineation of the Swamy of Possession is weak. Even if one wised to read ethical dichotomies, Swamy is not a true spiritual leader, and so one would be on a slippery slope. Thus Valmiki leaves his native village with full of dreams of becoming somebody different from the goatherd he has been known to the villagers. He does not have even a definite dream for his future. Anything that is a different from his present situation is a welcoming state to him.

Her Indian characters like the genial ex-Maharajah "Jumbo" the talented Brahmin rustic Valmiki and the

accomplished novelist Anasuya on the one hand are contrasted with the pasteboard figures of exploitative, shallow westerners like Caroline, Leon and Annabel on the other. The Swamy hovers over Valmiki like a benign spirit and ultimately rescues him from the "Possession" of Caroline:

Possession ...attenuated form of the powerful craving to have, to hold... which left a gray and ugly trail of human misery such as, horribly swollen but not unrecognizable, one saw stumbling in the wake of power---- societies and empires. (Possession, p 217)

As a novel of ideas, the work says much but nothing that could not, with greater fidelity and effectiveness, have been said by a tractarian. Markandaya claimed that she did not wish to be a didactic novelist (according to her paper "On Images,") but perhaps she did not realize that she had already become one in Possession.

The novels of Kamala Markandaya are complex works of art, and it is possible to read them on several levels .They reveal the Indianness in her Poverty, hunger and starvation, and the degradation which hunger causes, and East-West counter, cultural conflicts and tensions, are the major and ever-recurrent themes of Kamala Markandaya, but a number of other themes and ideas are also brought in. Then the East-West theme is studied as conflict between tradition and modernity, industry and agriculture, the rural and the urban, the material and the spiritual. Industrialization causes exodus from the village to the city and rootlessness, and hence this is also one of the themes of her novels. Being an Indian novelist, she also studies the fatalism of the Indians, their passive acceptance of their lot. Human relationship especially the husband-and-wife relationship, causes of mal-adjustment leading to the disintegration of the family are also examined. Her novels project the misfortunes, frightful horrors of the poverty and miserable deaths caused by starvation.

Hunger and starvation is the theme of many an Indo-Anglican novel, particularly Post-Independence novel, and it is seen in A Handful of Rice also. The second novel A Handful of Rice focuses attention on the curses and misfortunes of poverty, the problems of Unemployment and acute pains of hunger, lived by those who have migrated to the city. Industrialization of a rural community brings in its wake a number of problems, of which exodus to the city and rootlessness is fraught with possibility of suffering and tragedy. Many are thus compelled to go to the city. Ravi, the protagonist of the novel joins such an exodus.

The novel not only depicts the struggles to which he is subjected while trying to provide for his family, but also presents the inner drama in his mind as he is caught up in a conflict of opposing pulls. It is this struggle in Ravi's conscience that constitutes the kernel of the novel. He realizes the difference between the moral idea rooted in honesty and the moral fact as he sees it. The bitter fact is that honesty buys no rice and pays no bills. In this dichotomy between idea and fact, in the impossibility of bridging the gap between desire and honest fulfillment lies in the essence of the tragic in his life. He struggles against condition, not against crisis, and this seems to be reflected in the confusion in values such as Ravi has to face, creating the dilemma in his soul.

The theme of social injustice is highlighted in several ways. Ravi makes determined efforts to earn his livelihood through fair means. But his attempts fail and he blames the society for that. He is destroyed by a false society, represented by the "People" who deny him the basic necessities. His frustrations are reflected in his anger against society, called repeatedly THEY, or PEOPLE. Ravi's harsh treatment of Nalini, his incest with mother-in-law is only psychological results of his frustrated rage against society.

After his meeting with Nalini, Ravi has made up his mind to lead a decent and honorable life for Nalini, the girl who could make a man feel like a man even outside the jungle of his choosing, the girl for whom he was ready to repudiate all in his life that was unworthy. But it is the society that not only refuses to acknowledge his needs but simultaneously lures and irritates him by its vulgar display of wealth. He is inspired by the evident signs of wealth, when he visits Damodar in his splendid house and he admires the insides of the house of the Memasahibs. To go through the house of a rich man is like being in a trance for Ravi, and the sensation of pleasure that the experience induces in him is a strange feeling. Indeed these people are not real; in them the wells of compassion have been dried up.

'The gown was promised for Monday last week', she reminded him, 'not Monday this week.' 'My father-in-law died', said Ravi simply. To him it was an adequate explanation....The Memasahib did not soften.... She said, shortly, 'Rather sudden, wasn't it? Besides I don't see why it should have stopped you working.' (A Handful of Rice , p184)

Hostility from poor Ravi is not therefore unprovoked. Poverty breeds contempt, disgust and frustration which

result in anti-social activities. At least thrice, Ravi thinks of returning to the old way of lining because of his insufferable poverty. Apu dies and Thangam brings forth another child. The number of the bread-winners is reduced from two to one but the mouths to be fed are on the increase. Ravi pathetically realizes his helplessness when he cannot afford to send for a doctor to attend on his dying son.

Social injustice generates poverty and hunger. At the beginning of the novel, Ravi says to Apu and Jayamma, "I'm hungry". After Apu's death Ravi's business falls and Ravi cannot make both ends meet. Due to poverty and its consequences, he shows his anger upon his wife and his son; even he beats Nalini. Because of poverty he fails to understand that his son needs instant attention of a doctor and this failure makes him lose his son. Rice is the staple food of many and very much necessary for existence and the word 'rice' is repeated many times in the novel and this repetition emphasizes the impact of hunger.

A Handful of Rice is also a tale of love. The love affair of Ravi-Nalini does not run a rough course but finds its fulfillment in marriage very easily. Though affected by adversity, the married love does not alter. But the most striking feature of this love is the ennobling effect of Nalini on the city rowdy. Ravi converts himself into a decent and loving husband. The magic power of Nalini is more on Ravi especially when he is disturbed and tempted by the luxury of Damodar. From the moment he meets Nalini, she becomes his guiding spirit. He falls in love with her at first sight. On seeing Nalini, he says to himself, "what a girl, he thought. Take a girl like that, and half a man's troubles would be over".

Ravi yearns for love. His passion for Nalini grows and he wants her as his wife:

Ah Nalini, he thought, Nalini. She was worth it, worth anything, even worth giving up the sweet life for. He put it all on her for getting the trinity of hunger, drink and misery that had been intermittent companion to his sweet life, and which had forced his entry into Apu's manage in the first place (A Handful of Rice , p 40).

Love leading to courtship is of very different nature in an Indian society. Ravi steals occasional chances to meet Nalini and succeeds in taking her to the corner shop for a drink and later on to the cinema. The courtship leads to marriage and this love is not altered even after marriage.

Markandaya seems to reveal the truth that there is no place for immorality for the eradication of poverty, hunger and exploitation from the society.

Ravi represents a battle ground where the forces of the good and the forces of the evil are engaged in the battle. Ravi resents his beautiful wife lying down on the floor. Ravi promises her a good bed. Then he wants to buy a new sari for his wife. He also wants to purchase a bicycle. But his desire fails. So he feels very sad. He feels lonely in the house. As nobody understands him he goes to the extent of doing punishable offences. Ravi is a strong hater of social injustices. He never likes the idea that the poor are only to suffer and the rich to rule over them. Social injustice and the feeling of inequality always make him angry. Ravi's economic conditions become very poor. At the end we find him joining a crowd which is looting rice from a go down. But Ravi succeeds in checking himself from stealing. He says 'I don't feel in the mood today. But tomorrow, yes - tomorrow...' (A Handful of Rice, p 237). The end has no conclusion. It gives no clue. It leaves several questions behind it- what does Ravi mean by tomorrow? Does tomorrow mean any hope for him? Do the poor have any future? Does the novel end with a note of despair? The readers have to answer those questions. The end of the novel is symbolic. No solution to the problem of poverty is offered. Everything is left to the readers. They have to see life with all its boredom, horror and glory.

Thus we see that the tragedy in the novel is brought about by the clash between the poverty - stricken poor and the sophisticated, cultured industrialist and capitalist. The other problems of population - inflation, rising prices and moral degradation and inner disillusionment are very realistically raised side by side. Even a rape counts for nothing in the face of the struggle for survival.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya emphasizes and studies social and economic conditions and their effects on character. She observes human beings as they behave and feel in the social scene. A spirit of realism always pervades her work. Her novels describe various human foibles and human relationships. She treats the novel as a medium of expression with a specific purpose, and becomes didactic. Though her each novel contains a different theme, she is pre-eminently a social novelist. In all her novels deals with the realities of society. Her main purpose is to present social problems which are closely related to human life. She depicts with moving realism the tragic plight of Indian society. Some critics have said that she has fictionalized the sociology of Indian society, but the fact is that her approach is absolutely realistic. She does not idealize her

characters but she throws sufficient light on the weakness of her characters.

References

1. Kamala Markandaya. *A Handful of Rice*. 1966. New York: Faecett, 1971.
2. ---. *Nectar in a Sieve* 1954. 7thed. New Delhi: jaico, 1994.
3. ---. *Possession*. 1963. Rept. Bombay: Jaico 1978.
4. Chauhan, P.S. "Kamala Markandaya: Sense and Sensibility." *Literary Criterion* 12.2 & 3 (1976): [134]-47.
5. Cuddon, J.A. *A Dictionary of Literary terms*. Rev. Ed. Delhi: Claroin, 1980.
6. Derret, M.E. *The Modern Indian Novel in English. A Comparative Approach*. Brussels, 1996, 112.
7. Drum, Alioce. "Kamala Markandaya's Modern Quest Tale." *World Literature Written in English* 22.2 (1983): 323-32