

Social Realism in Kamala Markandaya's Novels - Nectar in a Sieve and A Handful of Rice

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Abstract

The present research article portrays the social realism in the two novels of Kamala Markandaya namely Nectar in a Sieve (1954)¹ and A Handful of Rice (1966)². The paper aims at studying these novels which deal with poverty, hunger, exploitation and suffering. They depict the realities of Indian village during a period of intense urban development.

Kamala Markandaya has occupied an outstanding place among Indian English writers as one of the most important woman writer in English. She was born in 1924 in an affluent and aristocratic brahmin family of South India. She studied at the University of Madras, then worked as a journalist. In 1948 she settled in England and later married an Englishman.

As she is born and brought up in India and living in England, Kamala Markandaya is familiar with both cultures and traditions. Besides, she has her own individuality in creating a variety of characters. Her skill is shown in her wonderful picture of village life with its merits and demerits. Being a woman novelist, her delineation of heroines is better than that of heroes.

William Walsh calls her the most gifted and the most distinguished writer on the literary scene today. He maintains:

"She is undoubtedly one of the major novelists of the Commonwealth scene. India is a country of her birth and England the country of her abode, and hence her writings show the cultural interaction and synthesis of both the countries."³

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) is the first novel of K. Markandaya. It deals with rural India. It portrays the common problems of the farmers. Nathan and Rukmani, represent Indian farmers who face unlimited problems, trials and tribulations of life.

The title of the novel comes from a poem entitled **Work without Hope** by S.T. Coleridge whose lines form an epigraph to the novel:

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve.

And hope without an object cannot live.

(qtd. in Iyenger, 438)

The above quoted couplet expresses the theme of the novel adequately. When work is done without hope it becomes as fruitless as nectar in a sieve. If there is no objective in life, life becomes unsuccessful. The novelist also shows that happiness stays in life only for a short while like nectar in a sieve.

Markandaya has subtitled the novel as A Novel of Rural India, to reveal the life of innumerable Indian villagers.

The novelist has made Rukmani, the protagonist, narrate the tale. In order to show the restrained intensities of the emotional framework. She has made a woman

the central character because show knows that woman is at the centre of the socio-economic structure of the Indian peasant families. Rukmani is a symbol of an Indian pastoral woman.

Rukmani is the youngest daughter of a village headman, she is married to a tenant farmer, Nathan who is under privileged in all respects. Rukmani becomes the victim of the dowry system as her father was poor. She is made to live in a mud hut. She accepts it as her fate. With the birth of every child they become poorer and poorer. Till the birth of the sixth child their financial condition worsens. They do their best to improve the lot of their children but everytime they fail miserably. Ultimately they come back to their village. Nathan dies of hunger but Rukmani does not admit defeat. She regains her harmony.

The novel appears circular in structure as the story ends where it begins. The novel depicts the activities, hopes, expectations, joys and sorrows of the landless peasants who are exploited by their landlords, and shattered by the cruelties of nature.

The novel A Handful of Rice is K. Markandaya's fifth novel published in 1966. The theme of the novel is same as that of the Nectar in a Sieve. They both deal with hunger, poverty, conflict and cultural interaction. The only difference is in the

plot. Whereas Nectar in a Sieve takes place in a village, A Handful of Rice takes place in the town.

The novel depicts the life of a poor boy Ravi Shankar, who leaves his small village and goes to urban city in Madras in search of betterment. This is common in many Indian villages. The indifferent and harsh streets of the city lead him to the underworld of petty criminals. A chance misdeed acquaints him to a tailor, Apu. He falls in love with daughter of Apu.

He starts living in Apu's home. Ravi is educated and responsible so ultimately he alone has to run the house. Once he beats his wife Nalini and she runs away from home. Raju also dies, Ravi again goes to criminal Damodar and loots the grainary. Thus, he always struggles for a handful of rice i.e. food.

Meenakshi Mukherjee narrates Indian social values and their situation as follows:

"Modern Indian is torn in a conflict between two kinds of values - supremacy of social hierarchy and emergence of the individual. Sometimes the conflict neatly resolves into two issues - duty to the family and personal fulfilment."⁴

Dr. A.V. Krishna Rao holds:

Kamala Markanday's novels in comparison with those of her contemporary women writers seem to be more fully reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India as she attempts to project the image of the changing traditional society. As such, Kamala Markandaya merits special mention both by virtue of the variety and complexity of her achievement, and representative of a major trend in the history of the Indo-Anglian novel."⁵

Having won international fame and recognition with the publication of the first novel - Nectar in a Sieve (1954), she has to her credit publication of such novels as Some Inner Fury, A Silence of Desire, Possession, A Handful of Rice, The Coffin Dams, The Nowhere Man, Two Virgins, The Golden Honey Comb and The Pleasure City.

In most of her novels, she projects the life of rural as well as urban society, focussing on burning issues such as poverty, hunger, exploitation, degradation, and

East-West encounters. She leaves an indelible imprint on our hearts. She has, no doubt, immortalized her in English literature.

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