



## Dislocation of tenant farming families in Kamala Markandya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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### KEYWORDS :

Kamala Markandya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is a vivid record of the hungry rural peasantry whose life is afflicted by the existing social institution and rituals such as child slavery, landlessness, homelessness, casteism and illiteracy. It is about the dislocation of a poor teeming family under the pressure of hunger, poverty, landlordism and industrialism. It is "a saga of the sufferings of the peasants of India. It is a story of peasant couple riddled with economic factors, social evils and natural calamities. (Sharma 189)

*Nectar in a Sieve* centers round the acutely suffering a poor tenant farmer, Nathan and his wife Rukmani and their seven children Ira, Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvan and Kunti.

They represent thousands of uprooted peasants under the pressure of industrialism and landlordism. "Among the rural folk, there is a clear dichotomy between the upper class, the landlords and the moneylenders on the one hand and the poor tenant farmers and the labouring class on the other." (Misra 2) The novel is set in a village of south India. However, the anonymous locale is symbolic of the entire rural India. The village becomes the microcosm of the rural India. The subtitle of the novel, *A Novel of Rural India* lays stress on rural setting and its character.

Rukmani is a simple peasant woman whose persistent battle has been against poverty and forces that crush poor tenants. She is the younger daughter of a village headman. Her three sister Shanta, Padmini and Thangam are married long before. Moreover, the dowries for his daughter's marriage are too much for a man to bear. By the time Rukmani achieve womanhood, her father was very poor. Consequently he could not find a rich husband for her. Hence, Rukmani has to marry Nathan, a poor landless tenant. She does not complain about it, rather like a disciplined daughter accepts her lot.

The image of a garland of mango leaves across the doorway, dry and rattling in the breeze prefigures the couple's life and labour, the poverty and starvation in the village. In their struggle they display the characteristic Indian attitude to life. When Rukmani gives birth to a baby, she finds that it is a girl. The daughter is called Irawaddy or Ira. Nathan does not pay attention to her because he has had a desire for a son. Ira is a lovely child. There is chill fear that Ira is going to be their last and only child. But with the help and treatment of Kenny, an English doctor, who works in the rural area, Rukmani bears many more children-all male ones - Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvan, Raja and Kunti. Nathan and Rukmani's father are overjoyed. The placid rhythm of their life is broken by the arrival of the townsmen who build a tannery on the *maidan* near the village. Rukmani opposes this intrusion of modernity, industrialism and city upon the village and its tradition. The tannery ruins the beautiful countryside. The evils of Industrialism crop up-inflation, vice, ugliness and crowd.

When Ira is fourteen years old, Rukmani asks the old Granny to get a match for Ira and is ready to pay a dowry of one hundred rupees. At last they get an ideal match for Ira. That year the monsoon breaks early. It rains so hard that there is nothing but water. It finds every hole in the hut to come in. It rains for eight days and the tender green of the paddy field sinks under and is lost. Many of the huts are washed out. Nathan and Rukmani are very disturb and restless. They get nothing to eat except only two kilos of rice. When they have nothing to eat, they eat leaves and fruits of prickly pear.

After five years Ira is abandoned by her husband on the ground of childlessness. It is a tragic blow to the family. Rukmani takes Ira to Dr.

Kenny and have treatment. The family verges on starvation. When Dr. Kenny declares Ira no more a barren woman, Rukmani approaches Ira's husband and requests him to take Ira back as "there is nothing wrong with her now." (64) She further tells him that Ira would be able to bear many sons for him, but he answers her that he has "taken another woman" (65). Rukmani is, of course sad and thinks that it is not possible to remarry her to someone. For she has now no dowry and "without it no man would look at her, no longer a virgin and reputedly barren." (66)

Around this time Arjun is in his early teens. He is tired of hunger, so he decides to join the tannery. He says: "I am tired of hunger and I am tired of seeing my brother hungry. There is never enough, especially since Ira came to live with us." (53) Arjun and Thambi join the tannery, which exploits the workers and does not allow them even to go out and eat. Hence the workers go on strike. The tannery announces that the workers, who do not join their duties, would be dismissed from their work. And the officials do so. For their better future then they go to Ceylon. Murugan also goes to the city. Once again Rukmani and Nathan are in the grip of terrible drought. Raja dies of beating to feed his family. Again the family verges on starvation. The officials of the tannery give no compensation for Raja's death.

They are starved less because of the natural calamities, but more because of the exploitation by their landlords-land-owners, traders, and money-lenders. Though there is nothing to reap when the harvesting time comes, land owners sends Sivaji to collect the dues. He says: "You have had the land for which you have contracted to pay: so much money so much rice. These are just dues. I must have them." (77)

Hence, the tenants like Nathan and Rukmani have to sell the few mud pots, two brass vessels, the tin trunk, etc. to pay the dues. This continues every year and causes the starvation of Rukmani's family. Here after they feed on whatever they get the soft prickly pear, a sweet potato blackened and rotten. Early and later her sons roam about for material. Sometime they eat grass as well. Then there is pain in the stomach. Hunger holds them badly. But of them all, Kunti suffers the most, falls ill and ultimately dies.

Seeing her family starving, Ira is forced to sell her body and thus take to prostitution. Hunger makes Ira a prostitute. Consequently, Ira is pregnant; she gives birth to an illegal son. The news spreads far and wide. The people taunt them it becomes a heart breaking experience for them.

With her earnings Ira is able to buy rice and salt and milk for Kunti. But Nathan does not touch a morsel of what she brings. Kunti improves for the first few days but then his improvement ceases to be, and soon it becomes clear that he sinks and becomes sightless; and at last he passes away. In the same way Old Granny also dies of starvation. And Kenny tells Rukmani that her husband is not getting enough to eat. He begins to suffer from diseases. Selvam joins Kenny for service. Murugan marries a girl from the town in which he works. Sivaji comes and tells Nathan that he has been evicted from the land; it is to be sold to the tannery.

So now, Nathan and Rukmani decide to go to Murugan. They go out by a bullock cart going to the town. They look tired and hungry. They wander in the town throughout the whole day to find Murugan, but they don't find him. In the evening they go to temple where food is

distributed free. Nathan and Rukmani are quite innocent. They leave their luggage near a pillar in the hall of the temple and struggle for getting the food, for there is large crowd. Nathan is crowded out only Rukmani gets the food. After sharing it, when they fall asleep, their money has been stolen too. Being hopeless and desperate, they again go out in search of Murugan. In the street Nathan asks some beggar boys, about the place, where his son works. One of them, Puli takes them to the place-house of Birla Doctor in Koli Street. The Doctor's servant tells them that their son does not work there now, but works for the collector in Chamundi Hill. He takes them to his house and offers food to them. Reaching the collector's house they meet Murugan's wife Ammu, who tells them that Murugan has deserted her and is not traceable. She shows an attitude of stiff unfriendliness. When it is clear that they are going to leave, she relaxes her tone.

Rukmani tries to earn some money there to return to the village as soon as possible. Puli, the orphan is convinced of their wretched condition and clings to them. Rukmani also feels affection for him. They go to a stone quarry to earn more. In this way, time rolls by and one day Nathan dies away. Rukmani comes to the village with Puli. She is now an old woman, lives with her son, Selvem and Ira.

The village people are worried about the minimum basic needs. Hence, their life is miserable. The novel explores wretched plight of the villagers through so many harrowing scenes in the life of the villagers. The very first is about Rukmani's marriage. She does not get the rich match, only because her father, the village headman is of no consequence; he is not rich enough to give much more dowry. Rukmani says: "By the time I came to womanhood even I had to acknowledge that his prestige was much diminished perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband, and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything." (8)

This shows that money is everything for the rich people. The absence of money makes Rukmani fall from the fringes of her own class in evitable. When she is married to Nathan a poor tenant peasant, the people of the locality humiliate her by saying that "it is a poor match" (8) The landless peasants are the most neglected people; and so they are oppressed by the landlords. Because of the poverty, she has to suffer then in her life and face humiliation oppression and hardships. In such a miserable situation Ira is born. When Ira is seven year old her first son Arjun is born and then Thambi, Murugan, Raja, and Kunti.

Whether the harvest is good or not, they have to pay rent on the land. They have to sell their possessions like utensils, two brass vessels, the tin-trunk two shirts of their eldest son, and whatever also they are left with even bullocks and seeds so as to retain the land. Nathan works for thirty years under the illusion of owing the land and of his sons working with him, but he is cruelly dispossessed of it. When the tannery owners pay good price, the zamindar oppresses them by selling all his lands to the tannery officers and Nathan and many others like him have to go landless. This indicates that the rich people are powerful in the society. They oppress the poor as per their whim for their materialistic gain. They treat the poor as if they are animals.

The next hart-reading scene in the life of the poor tenants is that the traders also oppress them. When heavy rain creates untold miseries to the poor villagers like Nathan and Rukmani, they run short of grains. They go to the rich tender like hanuman and Biswas, who are not kind enough to them: "Two rupees? How much do you think you can buy with two rupees? Take it or leave it. I can get double that sum from the tanners." (47) The rich traders like Biswas who turn even the time of scarcity into a season for profiteering. This shows the oppression and exploitation of the poor tenants by the rich traders and money-lenders. At such a critical time every year Nathan and his family have to live only on fish roots, leaves and some prickly pears.

Agricultural is the main stay of the village, which at once the tannery destroys. The harmony of the rustics' life disturb mercilessly by the intrusion of industrialization. The gap between the poor and rich goes on increasing. People think money is everything. Money is what everybody is interested and the poor get nothing to eat. All the relationships are counted in terms of money that has made people narrow minded selfish and self-centred. Rukmani says: "Now it is all on rise and crowds everywhere and rude young hooligans idling in the street and dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour, and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his money." (50)

Famine adds to plight of the poor people they are tired of hunger. Rukmani's elder son's Arjun and Thambi are force to join the tannery, which exploits the worker. When they go on strike Arjun and Thambi are dismissed from the tannery. Hunger and starvation makes Raja steal calfskin for which the watchman of the tannery kills him. To put it very briefly, Raja suffers a lot, and dies of oppression. Kunti, the last son of Rukmani too dies of starvation. Old Granny, another character in the novel also dies of starvation. The starvation leads to human degradation. Ira, Rukmani's daughter who is deserted by her husband on the ground of childlessness, might be married again, but poverty is the sole cause for tragedy. The simple, innocent peasants like Nathan and Rukmani have no option except becoming the prey of the two evils- Zamindari system and capitalist economy. Pradnya V. Ghorpade aptly states: "In the village, the landlords are at the top of social hierarchy. The landless farmers, the labourers etc. belong to the lower class." (10)

To sum up, *Nectar in a Sieve* is remarkable for its portrayal of rustics who live in fear, hunger and despair and who are oppressed due to the socio-religious forces. It reveals oppression of landless tenant farmers, labourers and under privileged by the various forces of landlordism and industrialism. The social oppression and economic exploitation evident in the system of tenant farming find and echo in Rukmani's rumination.

## REFERENCES

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