

Research Article

Famine, Poverty, and the Fragility of Traditional Livelihood in *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract: Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) is one of the most celebrated women novelists in Indian writing in English. Her very first work, *Nectar in a Sieve*, which appeared in 1954, is the “epic on rural life”. In this work, she has presented the life of farmers in their true colors. The novel honestly depicts the rural traditional means of livelihood and the introduction of modern industry through the tannery. The novel explores how traditional livelihoods are affected by the arrival of industry. After the introduction of the technique and modern industry, rural life was disrupted. The novel analyses the challenges faced by the rural community, from their traditional livelihoods to their modern aspirations for employment in their new setting. Nathan and Rukmani are the main characters in the novel and represent themselves not as individuals but as a whole community. Their sufferings and struggles ultimately voice the pain of the whole community. This research paper aims to examine the clash between traditional livelihoods and the meager employment opportunities.

Keywords: Livelihood; aspirations; rural; industry; challenge

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya is one of the most celebrated women novelists in Indian writing in English. She belongs to an upper-class South Indian family. She worked as a journalist and, to gain real knowledge of rural life, spent sufficient time among the village folks, as evident in her novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. She produced ten novels in her lifetime, but the eleventh one was published posthumously. Her writing vividly depicts her mastery of the language and the theme she has chosen to write on. From the traditional life and struggle of rural community she has penned down the struggle for the independence of India, she has portrayed the curiosity of young girls to know more about the least discussed topics, she has presented the clash between tradition and modernity, she has put forth not only the clash of the East and the West but also presented the best possessed by the both.

Critics praise her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* for its vivid portrayal of a rural community, its traditional way of life, and its realistic setting. The endless struggle and the outcome (which is insufficient) make the title appropriate and relevant. Rukmani, with her husband Nathan, represents the entire rural community of India; their sufferings and struggles are those of every rural Indian in post-Independence India. Nathan is a tenant farmer, which means he plows the field on a rental basis. The drought and the flood make his effort to own the land in the future futile, as the future is always uncertain and the rain is unpredictable. Their traditional livelihood is farming, and the people in the village live happily and cooperate in times of need, despite their poverty. However, with the advent of the tannery and the introduction of industry into the village, the traditional means of livelihood and way of life were disrupted. Now the competition prevails, the small shopkeeper has to leave the village, the traditional leather worker has to see the end of his traditional art, the poor old granny has to see a big portion of Rukmani's vegetables being sold to Biswas, the baniya, and it ultimately results in her death due to starvation. The modernity, in the form of a tannery, first provides Rukmani's sons with employment. Still, afterward, they "left because it frowned on them" (Markandaya 136), as Arjun and Thambi have to leave their village for good in search of employment at a tea plantation in Ceylon, miles and miles away. We notice that none of Nathan's sons is interested in farming, which is their traditional livelihood. They aspire to new employment opportunities and the chance to settle in this harsh world.

Kamala Markandaya's work is mainly interpreted in the context of the East-West struggle, the clash between tradition and modernity, and the feminist perspective. Here, I have tried to throw light on the means of traditional livelihoods and the aspiration to participate in the modern career options provided by industry, introduced in the second five-year plan of our country by the Prime Minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru had a vision for a developed India. Still, there was a reaction and clash within the community, as they were frightened by its introduction, believing it would snatch livelihoods. They were unskilled in this new field of modern industry. We witness it in the novel that all the officials belong to the white race (Britishers).

Review of Literature

The present novel under discussion, *Nectar in a Sieve*, is a powerful presentation of the rural life, poverty-stricken people, hunger and starvation, dauntless endeavor to survive the worst, female resistance against the patriarchal mindset of society, industrial revolution and its adverse effects on the rural community, adaptation of new means of livelihoods, and East-West conflict. The novel has been analyzed from various perspectives by scholars. Early critics analyzed it in terms of rural realism and human sensibility. They opine that Markandaya has portrayed rural life with poignant insight. They focus on farming as the only livelihood for rural folks, and the weather's uncertainty makes it difficult for them to make ends meet, as drought and flooding are common there. These studies portray Rukmani and Nathan as the representatives of the rural community.

Later studies examine the novel in the context of modernity and industrialization. They consider the tannery as the symbol of social and economic change in rural society. Some scholars have argued that industrialization undoubtedly provides employment opportunities, but it also destabilizes traditional livelihood options and disrupts the village economy and the socio-moral standards of society. Thus, the novel exposes the contradictory effects of developments. Some studies are focused on unemployment and poverty. They have pointed out the miserable condition of tenant farmers and the mistreatment they suffer at the hands of landlords. Studies from a feminist perspective reveal the misfortunes inflicted on the main character, Rukmani, and her dauntless struggle to survive the worst. Contemporary studies establish the novel as a document of the clash between tradition and modernity and its effects on the lives of the rural community.

Here are some reviews from the research papers of some scholars to prove the point: Dr. Paramjeet Kaur, in her research article entitled *Rukmani's Undaunted Struggle in the Novel: Nectar in a Sieve* focuses on the female protagonist Rukmani, who is the embodiment of struggle, suffering, and dauntless courage to face the calamities in her life. She is married below her status to a tenant farmer. She gave birth to one daughter and six sons. Two of her sons leave for Ceylon for good, her third son, Murugan, goes to the city to work there, her fourth son is killed while trying to steal the calf-skin, and the youngest dies of starvation. The fifth son, Selvam, stays with her but does not adopt his traditional livelihood. Ira is married, but her husband returns her to her parents owing to her barrenness. She leaves the village with her husband to live with Murugan in the city, but unfortunately, he is not there. There, they work in a stone quarry, and Nathan dies of fever and weakness. In Kaur's words, "the novel portrays the travails of Rukmani who faces crises in life with exceptional courage and extraordinary confidence. With an uncommon spiritual and mental strength, she absorbs all miseries and misfortunes that come her way."

Irene Lydia, in her eco-feminist study, *Women and Nature: An Eco-Feminist Study of Kamala Markandaya's Novel "Nectar in a Sieve,"* explores inhuman behavior towards women and Nature. They are treated as devalued and marginalized by male supremacy. They are ignored as a trifle matter after being used for their own accord.

She brings to light the female characters, Rukmani and Irawaddy, to make her point clear. Rukmani has been attached to nature since her childhood and replicates the beauty and endurance of Nature in her character. She passes her life in endless sufferings without any complaint to God or any other person. Irawaddy, her daughter, is also an epitome of suffering who is abandoned by her husband owing to her barrenness and finally adopts prostitution to save her starving brother, Kutu. Similarly, Nature is mistreated by the people. They built a tannery that disturbs the beauty and peace of the village. In Lydia's opinion, "My point of departure lies within earth, nature and environment when they are not given any rate in our societies; our land is abused and degraded, eroded by waste and chemical...In the same way women are not given certain respect, they are abused and not valued despite their hard struggle for the survival of their family." (Lydia, Irene.2433)

In their research paper "Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*: A Tale of Hapless and Desperate", Shalika Sharma and Pankaj Arora contemplate on the theme of hunger, starvation, sufferings and struggle by the key characters in the novel. The study highlights the complexity of situations faced by the female protagonist Rukmani. It shows how Rukmani is married at the age of twelve to a poor tenant farmer and adjusts to every situation. She gave birth to seven children- one daughter and six sons. The desperate situation comes first when her eldest son chooses to work in the tannery. They leave for Ceylon for good, one son is killed, the youngest dies of starvation, and her only daughter takes to prostitution due to hunger and poverty. In the end, Rukmani loses her husband, which is a blow to her soul. Thus, the study focuses on the novel's desperate and hapless scene.

M. Priya's paper "Poverty and Hunger in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*" also mirrors the theme of poverty and hunger as the central theme of the novel that shapes the characters and life in rural surroundings. The study sheds light on the ravaging power of nature, the exploitation of peasants by moneylenders and landlords, and the endless suffering endured by farmers like Rukmani and her family. The paper also highlights how the tannery (representation of industrialization) worsens the socio-economic conditions of the village folk. The hunger debases human nature. Rukmani loses her near and dear ones and notices the disintegration not only in her family but also in village life. To sum up, the study presents the novel as a social critique of life on a farm in postcolonial India.

Conceptual Framework: Tradition vs Modernity

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) by Kamala Markandaya vividly presents the rural economy, the lives of peasants, and the social setup of an unknown South Indian small village. The primary livelihood of the people is farming. Rukmani and Nathan, the poor couple, honestly represent the village folk. Farming has been their traditional means of livelihood, as their ancestors'. Edward Shils (1981) described tradition as: "Anything which is handed down from the past to the present" (Shils, *Tradition*). Tradition means being handed down from one generation to the next, so Nathan and Rukmani wish to see their sons work in the fields and harvest healthy crops with their own labor. However, to their dismay, modernity, in the form of a tannery, approaches the village.

It lures their eldest sons to adopt a totally untraditional means of livelihood that was below their status (as working in a leather factory was the job of untouchables at that time), so Rukmani laments their decision in the words:

...but when one day he told me he was going to work in the tannery, I was acutely dismayed. It seemed it was going to be neither the one thing nor the other, neither land nor letters, which was to claim him. 'You are young,' I attempted to dissuade him. 'Besides, you are not of the caste of tanners. What will our relations say? (Markandaya 53)

Their choice of untraditional means of livelihood shows the impact of modernity on the young generation. As Karl Marx opines in *the Communist Manifesto*, "All that is solid melts into air" (*Marxists.org*). In Marx's opinion, modernity is the capitalist phase of society characterized by industrialization, class struggle, exploitation of labor, and the dissolution of traditional social relations. We witness all these characteristics of modernity in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Traditional Livelihoods in Nectar in a Sieve-

The present novel under study sheds light on the agrarian livelihood as the traditional means of employment. The unnamed South Indian village's economy is based on farming. Rukmani and Nathan represent the village community of all of India. Nathan works as a tenant farmer on the landlord's land, dreaming of purchasing a piece of land in better days. The main crop is paddy. Along with Nathan, most people engage in farming. They work hard from dawn till dusk in the fields, as there resides their hope of life. However, the cruel force of Nature shatters their dreams again and again. Sometimes it is drought that dries the crop for nothing, and sometimes it is the storm that floods their field and snatches their livelihood. There are some small shopkeepers in the village as well. Perumal, who is Janaki's husband, is a village shopkeeper, Hanuman is the rice seller in the village, and Biswas is a moneylender and shopkeeper who buys vegetables from Rukmani. There is a milkman named Durgan. The traditional village tanner is Kannan, who makes chaplis as his traditional livelihood. Natural disasters disrupt the lives of the village community at first. The storm ravages not only their crop, but the sheds of huts are carried away, huts are melted into the water, the thatched roof leaks badly and leaves no corner dry to take rest in it, and some people are killed in the storm. Necessities are unavailable, prices are high due to the lack of commodities, and to earn more profit, Rukmani's family goes hungry for many days. After that draught strikes the life to the worst. Hunger and starvation prevail all around. Rukmani loses her two sons, Raja and Kutti. Poor old Granny also starves to death. Rukmani's only daughter resorts to prostitution to save her brother.

Rise of Modern Aspirations

The symbol of modernity, industrialization, is introduced in the village in the form of a tannery. The first arrival of brick load in the carts rings the bell of danger in Rukmani's mind and many like her. Kannan foresees his livelihood being snatched by the tannery. However, Kunthi is hopeful and aspires to see her village become a city to fulfill her desire for an aspirational life. Rukmani is strongly opposed to

industrialization and recognizes its adverse effects on Nature and society. She says, "It will not gladden me. Already, my children hold their noses when they go by, and all is shouting and disturbance and crowds wherever you go. Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us" (Markandaya 31). However, the piece of land Nathan hired is not enough to feed the whole family. After the tannery was established, prices rose sharply. Rukmani's miserable condition is exposed when she says, "we no longer had milk in the house except for the youngest child; curds and butter were beyond our means except on rare occasions" (Markandaya 24). Arjun, the eldest son, finds it impossible to remain hungry perpetually, and one day he decides to join a tannery for a livelihood. Rukmani protests against his decision, but when Arjun reveals his desire for a full meal and to eliminate his hunger, she first recoils in shock, then realizes the pangs of hunger, and gives him silent approval. Thambi also follows his brother. Kunthi and Kali's sons have already joined the tannery. The positive effect of the tannery is felt for the first time in Rukmani's life, as she is now able to have sufficient food and also buys a sari for herself and clothes for Nathan. She saves some money for the hard times. Tannery proves a boon in her life when she celebrates Diwali with joy and satisfaction. She lights the earthen lamps around her hut, spends the money on firecrackers, and visits the fair with her children and husband. Murugan, her third son, also shows no choice but to work on the land and leaves the village to work as a servant (again, a non-traditional means of livelihood) in the city. After Arjun and Thambi's strike for higher wages, they are expelled from the tannery, but they do not opt to work as farmers; they choose to work on a tea plantation in Ceylon. When Rukmani asks the reason for their not working in the tannery and demanding "More money" (Markandaya 66), one of them replies, "Why, to eat our fill, and to marry, and for the sons we shall beget" (Markandaya 66). Thus, the modern aspirations lead the young generation to adopt modern means of livelihood.

Challenges of Employment and Displacement

With the advancement of tannery in the village, traditional occupations lose their value and ultimately take their last breath. Kannan is the village tanner and has been working for a long time. Still, after the tannery arrives, he loses his traditional livelihood and, in disappointment, leaves his village to settle in another village in search of a livelihood. Old Granny is the other example of this challenge and displacement. She lags in the rising competition in the village. Biswas, the village baniya, buys the vegetables from Rukmani at a better price, and old Granny has meager stuff to sell, which leads her to starvation and ultimate death. The competitive atmosphere forces Perumal to surrender, and he leaves his native village with his family in search of employment. Rukmani's sons also face the same challenge and suffer the displacement in the race of "survival of the fittest". Murugan opts to become a servant in the town, but his parents find no trace of him there when they need his support the most, after the landlord sells their land at a high price. Rukmani and Nathan's displacement was heart-wrenching. They lost everything for the land but were dismissed from it, and they roamed the town in search of their son. They stayed at the temple. Rukmani worked as a letter reader and writer, and then they both worked in the stone quarry, which was

unusual for them. In disappointment, fever, and weakness, Nathan dies an untimely death, leaving behind Rukmani in an unknown town among strangers.

Women and Employment Crises

The novel is narrated in the first person, and the narrator is the protagonist, Rukmani. Obviously, the life, struggles, sufferings, and endurance of women are displayed through the vivid characterization of Rukmani, Irawaddy, old Granny, and Kunthi. Rukmani works very hard with her husband, grows vegetables, and sells them to improve the family's economy. Her struggle proves futile in the combat with the malignant power of Nature and tannery. During the storm and drought, she has no cottage industry in the village to earn a livelihood. So, she sells all her belongings, her cattle, goat, and even a sari to survive the situation anyhow. The lack of employment pushes Irawaddy to take prostitution as the only means for the survival of her brother and herself. She contradicts her parents' disapproval of prostitution. She declares, "Tonight and tomorrow and every night. So long as there is need, I will not hunger anymore" (Markandaya 99). Kunthi, who first sees opportunity in selling her body, soon discovers in the draft that a defaced body and sagging skin have nothing to do with prostitution. Her husband and sons reject her, and she begs food from Rukmani. This all happens due to the lack of a cottage industry and a village economy.

Conclusion

The study of the novel clearly elaborates the unemployment crisis in the rural backdrop of post-independence India. The lack of cottage industries, the absence of training facilities for skill development, and the meager employment opportunities in modern industries with insufficient wages create havoc in the lives of rural folks. The protagonist Rukmani sets the example of "To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield" (Tennyson-178), but every time her enormous struggle pays very little. The unhealthy competition among the village shopkeepers shatters many lives. Through the character of Biswas, Markandaya has also highlighted the need for the banking system to lend money to villagers, as the moneylender always takes advantage of their miserable condition. The novelist has penned the complete picture of the agrarian economy, with its heart-rending realities. The novel offers a better understanding of tradition and modernity and seeks to convey the need for harmony between them. Though the novel depicts the period just after India's independence, it also underscores the theme's relevance in today's society.

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