

Relevance of Affirmative Attitude: Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve

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Abstract – Literature belongs not to an age but to all ages. The same is true with Kamala Markandaya's novel Nectar in a Sieve. It is a post-independence novel which depicts the pitiable situation of Indian peasants. Independent India had to face a number of challenges at that time. Poverty was a great problem and there was spirit of despair everywhere. Farmers were suffering a lot due to lack of money and natural calamities. Writer's novel Nectar in a Sieve tried to spring positive and affirmative attitude in peasants' dying faith in life. Every character of this novel whether it is major or minor encounters stark reality of life with heroism and never grumbles in adverse conditions. Hope sustains life is the message which the writer conveys in the novel. It has universal appeal and is relevant in present time as today many peasants are committing suicide due to debt though now India has advanced a lot in every field. Thus the novel which was penned to confer ethical support to peasants of that time can be constructive to hopeless desperate farmers of today.

Key Words: Poor Framers, Pitiable Situation and Hopeless Desperate Farmers

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INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya occupies a very high place among Indian women novelists. She began her career as a novelist in an age when India was facing a number of problems like racial differences, disharmony, poverty and starvation. Being a humanist, she considers it her duty to save the people from depression. She does not write for art's sake but for life's sake. She is of the opinion that literature must be purposive and play a significant role in the betterment of humanity. She considers her novels to be a part of social structure and offers through them a positive message. She has touched upon all the important aspects of life. For her, life is a mixture of happiness and sadness.

Kamala Markandaya's debut novel, Nectar in a Sieve Published in 1954, is a saga of the sufferings of the poor peasants of an unnamed village in South India. The novelist depicts how peasants have to struggle hard to earn bread for themselves. But there seems something valuable in this struggle. The struggle is directly aimed at preserving life- a life in which subsist the sheer joy and dignity of being alive.

What makes Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve more significant is its universal appeal, its relevancy and suitability even today. The plight of farmers in all over India, especially in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, is not unfamiliar to one. There farmers are committing suicide due to debt and crop failure. In 2000, 22 peasants is the Kundur district of Andhra

Pradesh sold their kidneys to settle their debts. World Social Web Site reports that 25,000 farmers have ended their lives since 1997. The region in India with the highest level of farmer suicides is the Vidharba region in Maharastra-4000 suicides per year, 10 per day. Nectar in a Sieve can be said to be the epitome of the sufferings of these peasants but the affirmative attitude manifested by characters can be taken as role model for these desperate farmers. In the novel the characters encounter sufferings one after another. Commenting on the novel, C. Anna Latha Devi writes:

In this novel Kamala Markandaya depicts the two phases of life desperation and aspiration. In spite of social evils which are presented in the world she has an assertive vision of life. Nathan and Rukmani believe that there is affirmation of life in the midst of colossal human suffering. The character of Kamala Markandaya shows great powers of heart and soul even in moments of crisis and calamities.

The title of the novel is an optimistic and suggestive one which conveys the idea that if one faces difficulties of life with courage and patience, one can get happiness in life. To emphasize theme of affirmation, Kamala Markandaya in the epigraph of novel offers the following quotation from S.T Coleridge's sonnet "Work without Hope" Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve/And hope without an object cannot live," In which the

poet gives a message that a man should remain hopeful and try to perceive better aspect of a thing only then he can draw nectar from sieve.

Along with the tragic stories of starvation and suffering, the novelist gives message of affirmation. Affirmation is the quest for meaning and restoration of positive values in a world where everything appears to be meaningless. Encyclopedia Americana defines it as. "The functional adjustment made by an individual to his social environment, attained through modification of habits" (76). Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel, is an embodiment of patience and spirit of struggle. She fights against the heaviest odds and never accepts defeat. Sudhir Kumar Arora says. "Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a sieve is the story of Rukmani who never loses faith in life or love for her husband and children despite her endless battle against relentless Nature, time and dire poverty"

To explain the concept of affirmation of life more vividly, it is better to divide the whole life of the protagonist into three phases: Smooth tenor of early life of the protagonist: Intrusion of dark forces in her life and State of restoration of smoothness of circumstances. The smooth tenor of protagonist's life shows her in soothing conditions though she encounters some difficulties. The protagonist, Rukmani, shares her experiences of life. Rukmani's father dreams to marry her with great pomp and show in a rich family like her three elder sister. But by the time her turn comes, the power of her father has been reduced. So she is married to Nathan, a tenant farmer.

In the beginning of her marital life Rukmani feels quite insecure living in such a poor abode but her reconciliation to her destiny comes with disclosure, which is almost surprising and unbelievable even to her. She tries to make efforts to maintain the smoothness in their lives. She learns to work hard with her husband. Now she leads a comfortable life without any grudge of poverty. She realizes that money cannot make one happy. She tries to find pleasure in her paddy fields endowed with greenness and ripeness. She feels herself wealthy by the warmth of love. She narrates.

While the sun shines on you and fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you whom no one has seen before, and you have a good store of Grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and sweet stirring in your body, what more a woman ask for? (Markandaya 7)

This transition from fear to pride itself is significant and shows that glimpses of affirmation of life in her. It suggests that Rukmani has accepted her life with its shortcomings which is a sign of a brighter side of life and a positive thinking. Firkal remarks, "Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve demonstrates the importance of faith in life as a great sustaining

power. It is her firm faith that helps Rukmani to draw nectar in a sieve" (81)

Intrusion of dark forces in Rukmani's life starts with the establishment of tannery in the village. It disturbs her life and disintegrates her family. In search of job her three elder sons, Arjun, Thambi and Murugan leave home and the forth one, Raja, is killed by the workers of the tannery. This cruel tannery even dispossesses them of their land. This phase of Rakmani's life is full of difficulties. Another jolt comes in the form of their daughter's return from her husband's house. After five years, her husband brings her back she fails to bear child for him. After the role human agency, it is the turn of nature to wreak havoc and destructions. Indian monsoon has an irregularity and it can influence the entire peasantry. In one harvest season when crops ripened, the monsoon acts as a monster and destroys their paddy. The problem of food arises in the village but at this time of desperation, Rukmani does not lose hope and manages somehow to feed her family

To enhance their difficulties more, Zamindar's agent, Sivaji comes to collect the dues as usual. For the payment Nathan and Rukmani have to sacrifice their valuable things. But despite of their efforts to save land, in the next harvest, Sivaji informs them that this land is being sold to tannery and they have to leave it within two weeks.

Nathan and Rukmani have to go their son has gone away after deserting his wife and children two year ago. His wife, Ammu also pays no heed to her in laws. They are shocked and their hopes are shattered once again. With a heavy heart Nathan and Rukmani depart from there, and are again forced to take shelter in the temple. They get frustrated with city life and have an ambition to return their village but they have no money. At this juncture, Rukmani does not give up and decide to earn money by reading and writing letters. Nathan also boosts her confidence. To earn more, they decide to work as stone-breakers in the quarry. But the cruel fate once again plays a strange trick upon them. One day, when Rukmani tries to stop him, he rebukes her "Tomorrow and tomorrow it will rain. It is monsoon. I cannot sit here idling while the days slip past we are still far from home" (Markandaya 183). Here kamala Markandaya portrays this character as a man of immense hope and while returning from work. He consoles Rukmani by wiping her tears and says. You must not cry dearest. What has to be has to be....I am at peace. Do not grieve" (Markandaya 188). Nathan's words exhibit that life must be accepted in all forms and when the mighty death comes there is no use of grieving. He has full positive outlook even at death bed.

After Nathan's death, Rukmani has almost lost everything. But she again shows spirit of

endurance and faces the problem with courage. Without giving up hope Rukmani preserves against all adverse circumstances and stands like a firm rock. She takes the adopted child Puli with her and decides to return to village as soon as possible. She wants to forget bad experiences of city and starts looking to future afresh with her greater energies and sharper understanding of life. Her affirmative attitude endows self respect and self reliance in her. Noticing the shadow of her husband in her children, she is determined to live a contented life. Thus, despite of being hurt and the disastrous consequences, Rukmani manages to hold her house with great courage, and her hopeful attitude to tackle the cruelties of life helps her to come out if every difficulty. Though her family disintegrates and her son and husband die, she does not yield to circumstances at any stage of her life. K.V Surendranfocusing an unyielding spirit of Rukman's mental construct writes:

In a sense the whole story is centered round Rukmani, the narrator heroine. She is one who is destined to receive shock one after the other in her life. At the same time we find her overcoming the misfortunes which follows her like a shadow. In fact she is one who possesses a mighty will and it is exactly this will that helps her to find a way out even when she faces acute turbulence in her life.(12)

Along with the character of protagonist in this novel, through the minor characters also, the novelist does not allow her characters to give up hope of surviving at any stage of their lives. Ira is the very embodiment of self-effacement in the novel. Through her life story, the novelist depicts the picture of dedication towards one's own family. In order to feel her striving family. She becomes a prostitute. The character of the old granny in this novel is very small one, but she also has a positive sense of life and bright thinking towards the future. She is an old destitute woman and has nobody to look after her, but she does not repent for her loneliness and manages herself quite well. The decision of Rukmani's two sons to go to Ceylon to work shows the sense of affirmation to earn a livelihood from whatever sources they have. The novelist presents her characters in this novel, major or minor ones, with a rare realistic touch and their affirmative outlook towards life brings this novel to a positive conclusion.

The novel does not end at a note of despair. The negative aspects of circumstances are converted into positive vision. The major characters experience troubles and turmoil in life, but they rise above their desperation triumphantly because of their aspiration. It is due to their strong urge for the betterment of life that helps them to overcome the sorrows and sufferings of life. Their undying spirit reminds the famous lines of "Ode to West Wind" "If Winters comes. Can spring be far behind" (P.B Shelley 70). The novel ends with an optimistic note, Selvam, the son of Rukmani, says that whatever the situation may

be, they will manage. These words of Selvam provide Rukmani a great relief and now she also believes that they will be able to manage and their life will be better once again. Markandaya makes the readers feel that every human being should try to achieve betterment of life and should not lose heart in the midst of strife. Positive outlook towards life opens the way to achieve success. So it can be said that the novelist is quite successful in showing affirmative attitude in spite of so many sufferings of the protagonist and other characters. At present, the peasants who get disheartened due to adverse circumstances can take lesson from the life of Rukmani and Nathan.

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