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REVIEW ARTICLE

STRUGGLE OF RUKMANI AGAINST SOCIAL EVILS

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Struggle of Rukmani against Social Evils

Dr. Monika

Dept. Of English, Kurukshetra

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Kamala Markandaya is one of the finest and most distinguish Indian novelist in English of the post-colonial era who is internationally recognized for her master piece 'Nectar in a Sieve' published in 1954. She has achieved a world-wide distinction by winning Asian Prize for her literary achievement in 1974. Endowed with strong Indian Sensibility, she depicts women's issues and problems very deeply in her novels. She explores and interprets the emotional reactions and spiritual responses of women and their predicament with sympathetic understanding.

The chief protagonists in most of her novels are female directors who are in constant search for meaning and value of life. In some of her novels she present an existential struggle of a woman who denies to flow along the current and refuses to submit her individual self. The feminist voice is heard in all her novels. In her first epoch-making novel, 'Nectar in a sieve' the narrator-heroine, Rukmani emerges a greater and stronger character than her husband. The author displays Rukmanies life which is full of hopes and frustrations, pleasures and pains triumph and defeat, rise and fall. In fact before writing this novel Kamala Markandaya went to live in a village to seek and opportunity of getting the firsthand experience of village life and the problems of rural fold and therefore this novel is mainly a product of her personal experience in rural living when work is done without any hope it becomes futile. Markandaya shows that happiness that stays in life only for a short while is like 'Nectar in a sieve' for the peasant.

The novelist has made Rukmani the protagonist; narrate the tale, in order to show the subtle intensities of the emotional fabric. She has made a woman the central character because she knows that woman is at the centre of the social economic structure of the Indian families. Rukmani is a symbol of an Indian rustic woman. Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of a once propererous village headman is married to a tenant farmer, Nathan, who is poor in all respects. Rukmani becomes the victims of the dowry system as her father is unable to pay her dowry. The fourteen years old Rukmani comes to her new homes the sight of which sends a chill down her spine. "This mud hut nothing but mud and thatch was my home." She cannot adjust herself to such a poor insecure

abode. But when she comes to know that the hut has been built by her husband with his own hand, her fear and humiliation turns into pride.

However, with the birth of every child their poverty starts aggravating. Till the birth of the sixth child their economic condition worsens to such an extent that they have to remain half fed though not starving till they grow vegetables in their own field. The rise in prices of the essential commodities compels them to sell the cattle. When Irawaddy, her only daughter turns fourteen she marries her to farmless labourer by spending all her saving on her marriage.

Unfortunately the flood destroys their crop in the same years and they have no other way but to survive on roots, leaves and plantain till the next harvest. To make the matters worse, four years after her marriage Ira returns to her parents as her husband and abandons her for not giving him an heir. Arjun and Thumbi, her two sons start working in a tannery and improve their economic condition. But soon they lose their jobs and got Ceylon in search of daily break. The rains fail, the year they leave destroying their hopes. As tenant Nathan is compelled to pay the revenue in order to save their tilling land for which they self their household material and bullocks. Rukmani's third son Raju dies of brutal beating by the tannery watchmen. The condition of the youngest child Kuti becomes more and more critical 'Ira becomes a prostitute to save her brothers but heer sacrifice however fails to save Kuti.

Kemington, a doctor another well-wisher of Rukmani gives a job to her fourth son in his mission of building a hospital in the village. The landless Nathan and Rukmani find no other alternative but to go to their son Murugan in the town for their survival. In comparison of her wife Nathan accepts his poverty. He remains the shadow of his wife. He works for his family but cannot get enough to eat. He stands only on his wife's emotional and physical support.

Nathan accepts his poverty, hunger and exploitation as his destiny. But he does not raise voice against the exploitation by his landlord, when his agent comes to collect the tax.

Rukmani's first child is another silent sufferer like her parents. The parents don't pay any attention to her before her marriage. The gravity of her state can be easily understood by Rukmani's words. She says, "Poor child, she was bewildered by the many injunctions we laid upon her and the curtailing of her freedom tried her sorely, though not a word of complaint came from her." At the age of fourteen, she gets married. After five years of marriage, her husband abandons her as he considers her a barren woman. She accepts it as her destiny and returns home to live with her parents. She does not raise her voice against this exploitation. She accepts her future with utter hopelessness. Rukmani says, "with a dowry. It was perhaps possible she might marry again, without it no man would look at her, no longer virgin and reputedly barren." Here too she has to suffer a lot due to hunger and poverty that the family faces. When she realizes that her younger brother is dying of hunger, she takes to prostitution. The prostitution cannot save her brother, only it makes her pregnant. Parvati Misra in her class consciousness in the novels of Kamala Markandaya observes:

"Nectar in a sieve is a vivid record of the hungry rural peasantry whose life is affected by the existing social institutions and rituals such as child marriage, widowhood, and negligence of female child, slavery, landlessness, caste-ism and illiteracy."

The exploitation leads to poverty, poverty creates hunger and hunger reverts to exploitation. Thus it becomes an unending vicious cycle. An old woman, Rukmani who had lost her husband and five of her six sons, who live in her mud thatched hut, narrates her extremely painful life's story which fills us with deep sorrow. Being a daughter of this soil, she knows what it means to be poor. Poverty breeds hunger. True one cannot judge the impact of hunger and starvation without passing through the terrible ordeal of being hungry.

Rukmani says for hunger is a curious thing at first it is with you all the time, walking and sleeping and in your dreams and your belly cries out insistently and there is a gnawing and a pain as of your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost and you buy a moment's respite even while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this, you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot it is with you. Rukmani describes the effect of hunger on their bodies. She says "Their flesh melted away and their skin sank and sinks between their jutting bones. Saw their eyes retreat into their skulls, saw their ribs curve out from under the skin."

Rukmani feels that her son has escaped from the cruel trap of hunger. She feels that her son shall not continue his battle against hunger. She does not want him to struggle again for survival. Thus Markandaya

shows her characters. Willingly accepting the death of their near and dear ones as a permanent escape from the eternal feeling of hunger.

Markandaya wants to project that not all choose the immoral path to overcome their poverty. Ira's choice of prostitution is not due to her own hunger but to save her brother's life. Even in the direst poverty, Rukmani does not lose her morality. She shows her willingness to share her meals with her neighbour Kunthi. When Rukmani gets married, they have enough to eat and store. But with the growing number of children poverty also grows. Even literate Rukmani is shown helpless. She knows that growing number of children is the root cause of their poverty but she feels proud of being a mother of six sons. Literacy cannot overcome poverty; it can help the woman to face the problems successfully. Literacy helps Rukmani to anticipate the possible problems and plan. Accordingly, it is her literacy which helps Nathan and Rukmani to survive in the city.

Poverty is imposed on Rukmani by the Social System. Rukmani accepts it and adjusts herself with the new surroundings like any other Indian daughter of her age. Even in poverty she celebrates the birth of her first child.

Nathan symbolizes the plight of the Indian peasants when Rukmani says, to those who live by the land there must always come time of hardship of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty? This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know: that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve. We live by our labour from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children and if bad times are prolonged we know we must see the week surrender their lives and this fact, too, is within our experience.

In a nutshell we can say that the writer focuses on the story of one woman living in poverty in rural India during a time of great change. Illiteracy, lack of any other skills, lack of fair planning also reasons behind their poverty. But in such types of conditions Rukmani does not lose her morality. We see these often controversial issues addressed by the protagonist, Rukmani ultimately, 'Nectar in a Sieve' provides infinite doors through which to explore these universal themes in the face of a changing society.

Markandaya thus succeeds in proving through this novel that it is the socio-economic condition that is responsible for various kinds of social evils. Poverty, hunger and exploitation can give birth to the social evils like prostitution, disintegration of family, and a mad rush towards city. So long as poverty exists various social evils and malpractices will continue to thrive. In such types of issues we do not lose our morality. Unfriendly faiths in God, strong willing power give us strength to face the better truth of life. The

hope for betterment lies only in the surviving morality in a few human beings.

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