



## KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE* : A TALE OF INDOMITABLE HUMAN SPIRIT

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**Abstract:** *The novel touches on several important social phenomena: the importance of traditional cultural practices, people's reluctance to change and the impact of economic change. Finally, it is a story about the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of values. It is a tale of indomitable human spirit that overcomes poverty and unending misfortunes.*

**Keywords:** *Consciousness, Tradition, Poverty, Values, Change.*

Kamla Markandaya exhibits very graphically the condition of human life on 20th century of Indian in her brilliant novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel touches on several important social phenomena: the importance of traditional cultural practices, people's reluctance to change and the impact of economic change. Finally, it is a story about the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of values. It is a tale of indomitable human spirit that overcomes poverty and unending misfortunes. In this masterpiece of Markandaya Dr. Kenny represents the West and the tannery stands for modern science, technology and industry. The opposite viewpoints of the East and the West are brought out through the contact of Rukmani and her family with Dr. Kennington though the relations between Rukmani and English doctor seem to be quite friendly. The mutual and the basic inability to perceive and comprehend the motivation and behavior of each other remains for each of them a common problem.

Kamala Markandaya has dealt with some of these problems like poverty, marriage, illiteracy, etc., in detail in her novels. Some of the customs, which make a mockery of the development of Indian women in society, can be easily observed more vividly in India. She moves forward to oppose such backward customs allotted with great skill and vigor. She is an expert in joining the East-West features and in framing a complicating network of the drama of

human relations

(Bhatt 61).

In the words of Sharma:

*She as an impressive explorer of human consciousness and of the convolutions intimate interpersonal relationship, caught in the whirlpool of disparate and divergent culture.*

(Sharma 1)

Dr. Kennington, a cultivated and enlightened British missionary has been nourished on the noble ideals of liberalism. Obviously, he is a humanitarian; and out of pity for the poverty-stricken and suffering people of India, he has sacrificed his conjugal happiness and pleasures of home for the service of humanity. He serves the rural folk and helps them tirelessly to overcome their miseries. He cures Rukmani and her daughter, Ira, of their barrenness. Later on, he builds a hospital in the village and renders service to people. He seems to be playing two roles. Basically, he is a good foreign missionary whose purpose is to serve the backward people. He is also presented as an observer of life in India and provides the novelist with an opportunity to make an image of the country, as experienced by a sympathetic outsider. He stands for the best outlook of the West. His sense of duty is responded to by Rukmani with her feelings of love, devotion and of worship.

In the beginning, the relationship between Rukmani and Dr. Kennington is one of faith and

fear. When she approaches him for his assistance in having a son, she thinks:

*If he wishes to help me he can, so much faith had I in him. My heart was thumping out a prayer.* (NS 20)

When Dr Kennington asks her to come and see him, she becomes afraid. She says:

*My fears came crowding upon me again. I had never been to this kind of doctor; he suddenly became terrifying.* (NS 20)

The relationship between Rukmani and the English missionary appeared dubious for the people of the village including the sons and daughter of Rukmani. Though free meetings between men and women are quite natural and common in the Western countries, but in India such meetings are often looked down upon and censured by the public. Women living in a village regard such kind of meeting very unfair. It is clear with Kunthi's conversation with Rukmani when the latter is on her way back home after her meeting with Dr. Kennington :

*"You keep late hours", Rukmani. "No later than yours", I replied, not liking her tone. "I have my reasons".* (NS 59)

Kunti further says :

*Your husband would give much to know where you have been tonight.* (NS 60)

The relationship of Rukmani, a native woman, with Kenny, a whiteman, is not in accordance with the Indian moral values. Biswas, the moneylender of the village, is of the opinion that such meeting is immoral. He tells Rukmani: "They say he is a good friend to you" (NS103) When Rukmani retaliates by saying that Kenny is a benefactor to her family, the moneylender quietly says: "He is also a man". (NS 103)

The relationship of Rukmani with an Englishman is not approved by her children too. Her son Arjun is also dead against her idea of approaching Kenny for getting him a job in the tannery. He boldly remarks:

*White men have power. Indeed they have over men, and events, and especially over women.* (NS 52)

Without doubt, Kenny has an immense love and affection for Rukmani and her children. On the other hand, Rukmani has also a great regard for him. Indeed, Kenny and Rukmani are intimate friends and yet their basic cultural difference crops up in their thought, conversation and behaviour.

Margaret P. Joseph points out:

*The difference between things as they were, as they are and as they ought to be between the ideal and the actual or between the East and the West.* (Joseph 211)

Simply, Rukmani is not against change but she is against a sudden change and the loss of social values. She says:

*But the change that came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way in our village seemed wrought in a twinkling of a second.*

(NS 27-28)

At the very onset Ruku (a nickname for Rukmani) launches into her life story, describing what it means to be desperate and poverty stricken in rural 20th century India.

Rukmani begins her flashback reflecting on her marriage to Nathan. Ruku was the fourth daughter of a once-important village headman. As their wealth and status dwindled, it was hard to gather dowry for Ruku. As a result this fourth daughter was married to Nathan, a poor tenant farmer with no land, but a noble man nonetheless with heart of gold. Ruku settles into a simple farming life very happily, as Nathan is kind and loving with her.

*While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for.* (NS 39)

Here Rukmani describes her ideal life. She delights in simple pleasures, and her ranking of important things includes food to eat and the beauty of the land. A happy life is made up of countless external factors, and while Rukmani is grateful for

many of them, she can endure with only a few if she must.

*Words dies away the listening air was very still the black night waited,*

*In the straining darkness I felt his body moving with desire, his hands on me were trembling, and I felt my senses opening like a flower to his urgency. I closed my eyes and waited, waited in the darkness while my being filled with a wild, ecstatic fluttering, waited for him to come to me. (NS 21)*

Sharma observes "the novel raises very disquieting and disturbing questions about racial integration, loneliness and cultural tug-of-war at its ugliest". (Sharma 4)

### Summary:

In short, the novel is a heart wrenching tale that depicts the hardships and joys of a woman's life in rural India Rukmani is faced with struggle after struggle with no indication that her circumstances will improve. Each time her situation worsens, Rukmani endures quietly, holding on to the hope that things will soon be better. She believes that a person's spirit is the most important factor in overcoming the harsh realities of life. The element of tradition of change has been reflected very minutely here. The novel concludes with the message of hope.

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