

Tremors and Traumas: A Psycho-Familial Analysis in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

Dr. Shalini Sharma

Associate Professor, P.G Department of English, GGM Science College, Cluster University of Jammu (CLUJ).

Abstract:

In Indian English literature, Kamala Markandaya—an outstanding novelist on the contemporary commonwealth literary scene, has initiated the lead of women's transformation from 'possession' to 'person' through her writings. Among the eminent personalities and writers who were fraught with compassionate feeling towards the Indian woman, Markandaya comes foremost. In almost all her novels, she seems to be undergoing strenuous exercise to upgrade the status of women in the Indian society. It is her acute and realistic observation of society and feminine sensibility which makes her stand second to none among Indian English Novelists. In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the resilience, comradeship, fellowship and companionship as panacea for all the tremors and traumas in the lead female protagonist Rukmani's life. After experiencing social alienation, tiring situation Rukmani has an affirmative vision of life. The advent of the tannery, the calamities of wind and weather, the social taboos cause tremors and she is traumatized but she faces life with endurance and tolerance.

Keywords: Struggle, alienation, resilience, reconciliation, affirmation

Introduction

Indian fiction in English deals with different aspects of social-economic, political, cultural, psychological and linguistic changes in the Indian mindset. It also records the changing ethos of village life and culture. Similarly, Kamala Markandaya's writings closely highlight the clash between the traditional world of values and customs, and the industrial advancement bringing ultimate transition in the form of collapse. As a matter of fact, Indian village is an identically structured entity. We have hierarchical social structure based on various castes, social service classes, farming community and their financial status. It is an essential dimension of the Indian psyche. In this regard Jabir Jain defines village as follows: How does one describe a village? "A layman's idea of a village would be a place with a dominant agrarian economy, open spaces, separate household units with some cattle or goats around them, a shared community life and a unique bonding between the inhabitants" (1). Thus, the village economy is based on agriculture. It gives rise to an agrarian class structure. In this context the farmers, landowners, service classes and the traders constitute the part and parcel of traditional rural society. The land owner, landlord in the feudal system was an aristocrat. Besides, the moneylender held a conspicuous and prestigious place in the rural life. In the moments of adversities and calamities like draught, flood and destructive fog the helpless and poor farmers and farm workers were forced by circumstances to meet

the money lender and borrow loan from him at a very high rate of interest. Many a time, especially at the time of sowing, the farmers use to paw their land, cattle, house or ornaments of their wives to the moneylenders and usually they failed to get them back due to the inability to return the loan. It is believed that the post-colonial age has developed as a result of the basic changes in society and its structure. In post-colonial India the form of the previous feudal system is changing. The industrialists, politicians and businessmen are the replacements of the lords and moneylenders. Industrialization has deeply affected the village life and culture.

Discussion

Nectar in a Sieve underlines the result of industrialization on the villages and its rural population. This novel recollects the deep sense of transition in terms of the loss of calm and peaceful life of the countryside caused by the clatter and din in the process of urbanization of village. It reveals the deep concern of the villagers—their attachment and predicament, hope and happiness as well as peace of mind and sense of contentment. Markandaya sensitively projects nostalgic reverberations of rural ethos and pathos in terms of inevitable changes and transformations hovering around the village life. With deep inclination Markandaya ruminates skies, plants, fields, sparrows and running brooks. She regrets when the peace and tranquility is replaced by the glamour of carts carrying bricks, stones and cement. *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is centered round a poor peasant woman Rukmani, who is the symbol of the deepest and crudest poverty in India. A.V. Krishna Rao emphatically asserts:

Kamala Markandaya's novels— seem to be more fully reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India as she attempts to project the image of the changing traditional society. As such, Markandaya merits a special mention both by virtue of the variety and complexity of her achievement, and as a representative of a major trend in the history of the Indo-Anglian novel. In her novels, she not only displays a flair for virtuosity that orders and patterns her feelings and ideas, resulting in the production of a truly enjoyable work of art, but also, more important, she projects the national image on many levels of aesthetic awareness. Indeed, her novels seem to be uniquely reflective of the national consciousness in its multiple forms with the characteristic sensibility of the modern, educated Indian woman. (355)

Rukmani represents a large mass of underprivileged women in rural India. She is one of the very strong and authentic figures of Kamala Markandaya's novels. She is not simply a village girl, a loving and devoted wife and a sacrificing mother, she actually transcends these limited physical identities to represent the universal mother figure. A.K. Prasad rightly explores the magnetic dimension of the narrator heroine Rukmani and suggests, “She is the centrifugal force providing sap to the other aspects of the body of the novel and helping it to stand erect. Kamala Markandaya has not confined to any particular class, creed or convention. She is conceived as the encompassing, enduring devoted, sacrificing, suffering, loving and forgiving mother figure” (126).

Rukmani is presented as eternal mother bound by love and affection to her hearth and home. Biologically woman is treated as a receiver who gives birth to human beings. Even on a philosophical and psychological plane, she is found more receptive, mimetic and absorbing who imbibes everything which normally comes her way—joy, happiness, pain, poverty, husband's house is her journey to motherhood. Even poverty, hunger coupled with misfortunes do not divert her piety. Rather these strengthen her spirit of struggle. She is not confined to any particular class, creed or convention. Her father taught her to read and write and this accomplishment invites the derision of the womenfolk in the village, where she settles down after marriage. Rukmani is not at all a woman easily defeated by

circumstances. Her quest for autonomy is checked repeatedly by nature as well as society. It is her inner strength of forbearance and resignation, which lends support to her in the face of her shattering circumstances.

Rukmani received the first tremor of her life when she got married to Nathan, a tenant farmer who is a poor match to her family status. Her father the Headman of the village is out of power when she is married to Nathan and he has no means to pay a lavish dowry for his child. Devoid of beauty and dowry she is forced to marry only a tenant farmer “who is poor in everything but love and care for his wife.” (NS 13). She has lived comfortably in her parental home. But her husband's mud thatched house makes her spirit droop at first glance. As Nathan is a hard worker and the harvest is plentiful she hopes that times will be golden. With a series of favourable seasons Nathan will be affluent to buy the land he tills on lease.

Rukmani is traumatized by the vagaries of nature also. She goes into ecstasies as she handles a good harvest. She is in raptures when she allows the gleaming grains of paddy to flow through her fingers. At the same time she foresees the turmoils of nature as Indian agriculture is the gamble of the monsoon. Rukmani describes her state, “Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in other, and which was the stronger no one could say. Fear of the dark future. Fear of the sharpness of hunger. Fear of the blackness of death” (NS 130).

The farmer couple till the soil, plant the seed, water the crop and it is time for harvest. They pray and wait in suspense. At the wrong hour rain pours down excessively. Rukmani receives a tremor when the waters rise and submerge their paddy. She says, “It rained so hard, so long, so incessantly and everything was lost.” (NS 39). The devastation caused is too much. The tragic role of nature causes trauma in Rukmani. At another time crops fail due to drought. The scorching sun kills the crops as well as Rukmani's hopes. As a mother of six children she has to wage war against nature. The land is parched due to the heat of the sun. The crops die without water. Food is scarce. The paddy turned to straw. Rukmani has only an empty larder. The children cry in hunger. With a little money that she has, she runs from pillar to post in order to buy rice. Starvation is her constant companion. The novelist paints a very tragic picture of hunger: “We fed on, whatever we could find; the soft ripe fruit of the prickly pear, a sweet potato half rotten, sometimes a crab Nathan catches near the river, a few bamboo sticks, stick of sugarcane, a piece of coconut picked from a gutter or sometimes new grass” (NS 87).

The second reason for Rukmani's trauma is the introduction of industrialization in her village in the form of a tannery. The English bosses buy the village yield for a high price and so there is price hike for every village product and even vegetables. The village hawkers and sellers sell their goods to the English men. Therefore, hunger and starvation increase. “The fruit of the peasant's labour goes either to the landlord or is destroyed by the ravages of nature” (Jain 79-80).

The other set back of industrialization is that the youth are weaned away from their land. Rukmani's sons know very well that the land that they till does not belong to them. They do not want to be tenant farmers like their father. So they willingly quit their land and decide to go to the distant tea plantations in Ceylon. Knowing the decision of the two elder sons Rukmani feels tremor in her heart because they are going to be lost forever. With a heavy heart she bids them bye. Another son Raja gets an appointment in the tannery for a low wage. Very soon he is beaten to death on a suspected act of stealing calf's skin. To crown her miseries her youngest son Kuti dies of starvation. One of the saddest features of poverty spread by industrialization is the disregard for moral values. The beauties of the village have a field day and they trade their charms to the tannery crowd. The grinding poverty drives Ira, the daughter Rukmani to earn a little money by the sale of her body. She being unproductive is deserted by her husband and

when she returns home she cannot bear his little brother Kuti's starvation. So she feeds him with the money. "The traditional Indian attitude to suffering is summed up in Rukmani" (Joseph 17).

Misfortunes never come single but in battalions in the life of Rukmani. The final tremor comes in the form of a command to quit the land in which they sweated for 30 years. As far as there is land there is hope for Rukmani. It is only when the landlord, tempted by a high price sells the land to the extension of tannery Rukmani finds herself completely at sea. The cup of her misery is full when she is asked to quit the land. The farmer couple leave the land with a heavy heart to find green pastures in urban lands. In the city they search for their son who has already deserted his family. Their meager belonging is stolen and they survive on the charity of the people. They are reduced to the state of beggars. They find a job as stone breakers. The strain of the job make Nathan collapse. He dies in an alien land on the lap of Rukmani. The sudden death of Nathan falls as a great blow on Rukmani. Exile from her native place and the death of Nathan cause trauma in Rukmani.

In spite of the tiring situations of life. Rukmani has an affirmative vision of life. She rises above the trials and turmoils and faces life with courage. She possesses the strength of character. The fear of the dark future, the fear of the sharpness of hunger, fear of the blackness of death never curtail her spirit. The advent of the tannery, the calamities of wind and weather, the social taboos cause tremors and she is traumatized but she faces life with endurance and tolerance. Even after Nathan's death Rukmani picks up courage and returns home with her adopted son Puli. She suffers calmly and never gives in. She bends like grass so that she may not break. The novel ends with a note of affirmation when Selvam reassuringly tells his withered mother. "Do not worry, we shall manage" (NS 189).

Rukmani is cast in a heroic mould. Though her cup is full of sorrow she searches for nectar in a sieve. She exposes her indomitable spirit in spite of being pestered on all sides with problems of survival. She is a symbol of boldness to fight against all oddities of life. None of these incidents can change Rukmani's soul's inclination towards lumination. To her misfortunes and sorrows are essential ingredients of life. Her heroic struggle and her mute acceptance and silent suffering give depth and integrity to her character and land her with an elevated, philosophical outlook. Thus, Rukmani, the main protagonist of the novel grows from a girl into an old woman. In her long life as a woman she meets with a whole gamut of experiences. But none of them can distort her soul's inclination towards life. As the novel proceeds Rukmani emerges dynamic and positive. She sustains her husband, her daughter and even herself in times of adversity and progressively attains a clarity of perception and a lucidity of soul. During famine she tries to console herself with thoughts such as, "well, we are in God's hands. He will not fail us" (NS 80). In the evening of her life leaving her eventful past behind, she sets out with Nathan on her voyage. She undergoes extreme mental conflict, but she dares to face life, extending her love and support to Nathan. According to Krishnaswamy, "Rukmani, in her resilience, in her powers of endurance, prudence and diligence, is head and shoulders above Nathan"

(364). She bends but never breaks. After all her hopes are frustrated, Nathan and Rukmani work hard and strain themselves to collect the money so that they could go back to their village. This claims the life of Nathan. This is the final, shattering blow to Rukmani. She says, "If I grieve, ...it is not for you, but for myself, beloved for how shall I endure to live without you, who are my love and life" (189).

Conclusion

Thus, Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* presents a woman who proves herself to be as resilient and resourceful as the earth. The positive attitude of this woman is an outcome of her inner strength that can withstand social oppression. Her strength does not lie in her muscular power but in her inherent capacity

for compassion, sacrifice, nurturance and acceptance of the inevitable. Chronicling the experience of the Indian woman, Markandaya shows her as the pillar of society supporting, strengthening and enduring everyone around her. As R.S. Sharma remarks, “Kamala Markandaya's sense of involvement in the social life of India, her keen observation combined with critical acumen, and the feminine sensibility brought her international fame with the very first novel” (136).

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