

Tradition, Modernity and Transition: An Eco-Feminist Study of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*



Dr. Sanju Choudhary

Assistant Professor, Department of English
University of Rajasthan, Jaipur (Rajasthan)

Abstract

Indian fiction in English carries various facets of socio-economic, political, cultural, psychological and linguistic changes. It also records the changing ethos of village life and culture. Similarly, Kamala Markandaya's writings closely highlight the clash between traditional world of values and customs, 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 factors. Thus, the village economy is based on agriculture. It gives rise to an agrarian class structure. The farmers, landowners, service classes and traders constitute the part and parcel of the traditional rural society. In the post-colonial era some basic changes took place in the structure of the agrarian Indian society. Industrialization has deeply stirred village life and culture. Kamala Markandaya is one of the most outstanding Indian women novelists writing in English. She is gifted with extra-ordinary vision of life. She uses fiction as a vehicle for communicating her vision of life. In her novels she depicts race conflicts, temperamental disparities, cultural conflicts and sexual perversion as factors working in the form of barriers to communication. The picture of rural India juxtaposed with the glamorous westernized life of England finds a prominent place in her writing. The present paper is an attempt to explore the falling down of the traditional agrarian society and the psychological, emotional and economic impact of the modern advancements. She modestly attempts to project the image of changing traditional society.

Keywords: Socio-Economic Changes, Industrial Advancement, Transition, Agrarian

Introduction

Kamla Markandaya had practical experience of life in rural area as well as in urban areas. During her childhood she lived in South Indian village and observed minutely the life of villagers with a view to acquiring the basic knowledge of rural life. As an expatriate writer she has acquired a first-hand knowledge of the British policy of colonialism and imperialism too. Her fiction reflects the East-west encounter. She values Indian traditions and culture more than those of the west. Her novels are reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India. She comes

to the fore with a determination, to carry on her fight for the oppressed women in male dominated society. In the Western countries, the women's issue is mostly one of identity, job equality and sexual role. But in India, it is the question of stark survival. The few who have escaped the vicious existential circle through education and better opportunities find themselves in a constant conflict with modernity and the oppressive weight of tradition behind.

The novel was written in 1954, a period of intense urban development in India after the in-

dependence. The novel effectively portrays the unspeakable sufferings of the farmers. *Nectar in a Sieve* underlines the result of industrialization on the village and its rural population. The title of the novel is taken from the poem "Work without Hope" by ST Coleridge. An excerpt from the poem is the epigraph of the novel.

Work without hope draws nectar in a
sieve

And hope without an object cannot live.

The novel effectively depicts the unpleasant transformation of the straightforward, conventional, pastoral, and idyllic hamlet into a loud, congested metropolis. The emergence of a town in a village completely alters the village's environment and the residents' way of life, who only experience devastation, annoyance, and enduring poverty. The novel recollects the deep sense of transition in terms of loss of calm and peaceful life of the countryside caused by the clatter and din in the process of urbanization of village. She started writing novels when India was just at the threshold of newly-won freedom. In those days, people found poverty, hunger and starvation everywhere due to communal disturbances. Thus, communal disharmony was a burning issue for the whole nation. On the other hand, both Industrialization and urbanization were eroding the very basis of rural life.

The novel evokes a strong feeling of transition in terms of the rural lifestyle's loss of serenity and peace brought on by the clatter and noise of the village's urbanization and industrialization process. She started writing when India was struggling just after its partition and its newly won freedom. People back then encountered destitution, famine, and starvation everywhere as a result of social unrest. Therefore, social unrest was a major concern for the entire country. On the other hand, the very foundation of country's living was being eroded by urbanization and industrialization. To draw your attention to the issue of eco-feminism, which has been seriously addressed by many of her contemporaries including Pundalik Naik in *The Upheaval* (2002), Shivram Karanth in *Return to Earth* (2002), and

Sarah Joseph in *Gift in Green* (2011), describe the effects of tanneries, mining, modernization, globalization, and industrialization on agriculture. The novel *Dweepa* (2013) by N D'Souza and Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffee Dams* describe the effects of dam building on local people and the environment. *Animal's People*, (2007) a book by Indira Sinha, highlights how urbanization affects both environment and people. *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2006) by Indira Goswami examines animal sacrifice as an ecological catastrophe.

Kamala Markandaya is undoubtedly one of the most prolific, well-known, and talented Indo-Anglian novelists, and a wonderful example of the increasing number of Indian women who are producing meaningful fiction in English. The novel typically takes place in rural and agricultural settings. She projects how contemporary developmental attitudes disrupt the peaceful and serene life of farmlands. A close reading of these works demonstrates how eco-feminists are concerned about agribusiness. This literary work has established a standard for Markandaya's evolution as an internationally renowned author. The book depicts the villagers' intense worry, their attachment and plight, optimism and happiness, as well as their calmness and sense of satisfaction. As unavoidable changes and transformations loom over village life, Markandaya delicately conveys nostalgic echoes of rural spirit and sorrows. She muses on the skies, vegetation, verdant meadows, sparrows, and flora with a strong tendency. She laments the day when the calm and tranquilly are displaced by the glitz of stone and masonry carts. Rukmani, the main female character battles against life with bravery and tenacity in this tale, growing to be a larger-than-life beacon of hope for many other women. The novel's main focus is on portraying the lives of peasants, including their activities, struggles, ambitions, laments, and the effects of the tannery on their way of life. Rukmani and her family take centre stage in the story. The main character Rukmani, is the wife of a meagre tenant farmer named Nathan and the daughter of a previous local headman. Her first six years of marriage are relatively trou-

ble-free. Rukmani uses all of her money on her daughter Irawaddy's wedding. Later, Rukmani is forced to sell her livestock due to the development of the tannery and the increase in the cost of basic necessities. Her sons Thambi and Arjun also work in tanneries, but ultimately they lose their employment and move to urban areas to look for work. Rukmani comments: "Change I had known before and it had been gradual but the change that now came into my life, into all our lives blasting its way into our village seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye".(156)

Markandaya spotlights how Nathan, being a hardworking tenant farmer leads a life of contentment in his native soil. The very concept of contentment is very lucid and simple for the rural folk. They just credit dire necessity. Rukmani, the protagonist and narrator ruminates her content:

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 have a good store of grain laid away, for hard times, a roof over you a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? My heart sang and my feet were light as I went about my work, getting up at sunrise and going to sleep content, peace and quiet were ours. (112)

In a similar vein, Kamala Markandaya reflects the peaceful scenes and sights of the village life in her novel *Two Virgins* also. But the hostility of nature and tannery destroy their peace and leads them to hunger and suffering. However, Nathan and Rukmani tolerate the blows of Nature and miserable poverty. Their intimacy strengthens them to survive submissively. The hostility of Nature and rapid growth of tannery leads their family to constant hunger, starvation and death but Nathan and Rukmani fight together. She writes: "I lean against my husband, he is already leaning on me, and together we achieve a kind of comfort". (89) Rukmani is the best support to Nathan in all agricultural operations. Markandaya gives details of the farm deeds.

Sowing time was at hand, and I was cut all day with Nathan planting the paddy in the drained fields. Corn had to be sown too, the land was ready. My husband ploughed it, steadying the plough behind the two bullocks while I came behind, strewing the seed to either side and sprinkling the Earth over from the basket at my lip. (45-46)

Nathan and Rukmani preserved social customs and traditions. Many a time they have to sustain toil and tribulations but they survive harmoniously and preserve marital relations. Even in very depressing situations they never showed any sign of breaking their marital relationship. Even in the moments of disapproval, they accept themselves. The relationship between Nathan and Rukmani as husband and wife presents a great deal with mute acceptance of all evils and endurance of good spirits. Shrisvastava believes it to be their virtue when he says:

Their fortitude and courage, their uncomplaining acceptance of good and evil days alike and firmness of their commitment bordering on devotion to their profession are virtues some of which are often mistaken as their drawbacks. (Shrisvatava 80)

Throughout their marital life Nathan and Rukmani take up their lot stoically. The catastrophe raised by hope and fear of natural blessings and disasters teaches them to surrender like grass that don't break. Toil and suffering has been an inevitable fate of their life. They never get astonished by its continuation but its cessation startles them. Both of them develop compassion for each other and sense of reconciliation. A rift is always possible in their life but Rukmani's compassionate heart excuses Nathan and puts hard efforts to keep their married life intact.

Rukmani and Nathan sell bullocks and domestic goods to cover the landowner's dues. Raja, their third child, perishes in a battle with workers at the tannery. Due to the wrath of nature, Nathan and Rukmani lose their harvests, which causes them to go hungry and starve. Their additional

boy Kunthi succumbs to hunger. Their daughter Irawaddy turns to prostitution to feed her starving sibling. Sivaji, the landowner, gives property to the tannery workers. Rukmani and Nathan, who are without property, travel to the metropolis to meet their son. Unfortunately, they cannot meet him there and begin working to support their lives. But she returns to the village to reside with her son and daughter because she felt rootless and dislocated in the city.

The Impact of Tannery on Agrarian Culture in *Nectar in a Sieve* illustrates the contemporary mindset towards growth in the shape of a tannery that encroaches on the village's longstanding agrarian culture. Markandaya makes an attempt to connect two sets of men from separate provinces to the establishment of a tannery in the village. People who possessed land were known as Zamindars, while the other group consisted of impoverished, landless labourers who toiled on their farms in exchange for meagre wages. Under the Zamindari system, landowners who have granted peasants property for cultivation receive taxes from them. Sivaji, the Zamindar, is a representative of this system.

The aim of Markandaya is to portray the peaceful rural life that is ruined by the construction of a tannery. The hamlet was peaceful and serene before the tannery was established, and farmland was the main form of employment for the locals. Due to the tannery's building, the village's entire appearance altered over the course of two months. Bullock-carts loaded with bricks, stones, cement, sheets of zinc, corrugated iron, bundles of rope, and hemp are constantly overflowing, disrupting the environment. Additionally, the nearby communities' chimneys, which continuously consume bricks, are unable to satisfy the demand for building tanneries. They are demolishing homes around the maiden, and there is a long line of bullock waggons transporting stones, as the small boy Arjun so eloquently states. (27). It creates a sense of foreboding caused by the threat of impending global warming portrayed as either a deluge or a draught by nature. The negative effects of development have disrupted

agricultural culture as well as compelled locals to work on tannery building projects.

Sivaji, the landowner who rents his property to peasants Rukmani and Nathan, who till Sivaji's field, represents the landowning Zamindari in the book, which is another significant aspect. Sivaji is less concerned about Nathan and Rukmani's income, despite the fact that they have been farming for more than thirty years. One day, the proprietor shows up and announces that the property will be sold to a tannery and must be cleared within two weeks. Nathan responds to this inhumane behavior as follows: "The property will be sold. We must proceed. This morning Sivaji arrived. He claims that nothing can be done. Land is being purchased by the tannery proprietors. They offer fair rates." (134). Nevertheless, the tannery's presence has an impact on the locals' livelihoods on various levels. First of all, everyday commodities' costs in bazaars rise to levels that are unaffordable for the average person. Moneylenders take advantage of the people when they are in need.

The destruction of small-scale company owners by larger retailers is the third crucial characteristic. For instance, Rukmani conveys her displeasure with the effects of the tannery on an elderly woman's vegetable-selling company. Previously, Rukmani sold veggies to the grandmother; however, as bazaar costs increased too much, she began selling vegetables to the shopkeeper in an effort to increase her profit. The tannery brings about a paradigm change in the villagers' lives, and Markandaya has painted a starkly contrasted image of the village before and after its introduction. However, because of her link to the soil, she says, "But we never went hungry as some families were doing. There was always food in the house—at least a bagful of rice and some dhal, if not more—because we raised our own plantains and coconuts". (26). Due to the sluggish sprawl and spread of the tannery's flourishing tentacles, which eventually consume the peaceful pastoral land of the village, the agricultural culture and the small merchants' conditions steady and progressively degrade.

Another significant issue explored by Markandaya is how the tannery alters the mindset of the younger generation, as they no longer desire to carry on the family business of farming and instead desire to work in the tannery in order to make quick money. Arjun, Thambi, and Raja, the boys of Rukmani, have not demonstrated any desire to work the field; rather, they would like to work in a tannery. Rukmini says, "You are young, besides, you are not of the caste of tanners," in reaction to Arjun's choice to work in a tannery, expressing her objection and regret. What will our family members say? (53). He responds, "I don't know, I don't care," Arjun displays his carelessness and indifference. The most crucial factor is to consume. (53). Tannery not only destroys the agricultural culture, but it also causes the newer generation's identity to be shattered. Due to a lack of food, two of Rukmini's boys, Arjun and Thambi, first join a tannery and then travel to Ceylon to labour on plantations. Even worse, Raja, another of Rukmani's boys who also entered the tannery, is killed after being discovered in a theft there. This only makes Rukmani's already terrible situation worse.

Thus, many of the peasant women are forced to turn to prostitution as a result of hunger and the loss of conventional forms of employment. The adultery company is started by Kunthi, Rukmani's neighbor, to feed both her and her family. Markandaya described Kunthi in very vivid detail, saying, "I pondered if after all these years she had not at last discovered her own self, with painted lips and scented thighs that had housed so many men. Looking at her with a suspension of disbelief, I reasoned that perhaps the truth had been thrust upon her as I admired the damaged beauty. Women's chastity has been ruined by the crowd of males. However, the harmony of the peasant life is disordered ruthlessly by the intrusion of unavoidable industrialization and consequent urbanization- the agent of transition. This dismantling of country life is aptly sketched in the following words by a famous eco-critic "The tannery's imperceptible and lasting consequences filter down to all the layers of the village,

geographical, economic, social and moral. The calm, serene and peaceful atmosphere of the village is destroyed. The water of the river contains the stinking waste material of the tannery and the productivity of the land is decreased. (56)

The contrast between the rural scene and urban one is characteristically displayed. The peasants dwell in the thatched huts of mud baked walls, however, the construction of the tannery is made of bricks and cement. Besides poverty and lingering hope for food, the tannery contributes to the disintegration of Rukmani's family. However, Rukmani's fortitude in the midst of all evil forces, her sense to accept dejection and joyous moments with equal ease, her prolonged attachment to the native land and devotion to their profession are striking and inestimable in terms of authentic and sensitive projection. Rukmani feels gratified when she ruminates "while the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eyes". However, the arrival of tannery emotionally dismantles her when she witnesses a terrible change coming over the village. She takes it patiently aspiring for fruitful times. Her sons depart for distant lands in search of employment- it is due to the effect of tannery which affected fields and the small cottage industries the villagers are forced by the situation to migrate to the cities for seeking better prospects.

On the other hand the tannery, a devilish force of transition, devastated the service classes like the blacksmith and life of the weavers who experience a sharp recession in the consequent sale of handmade articles and substances. The fact that they are forced to depart to the foreign lands and urban areas in the aftermath of industrialization. However, Nathan and Rukmani have extreme attachment with native land but the consequences compelled/pressurized them to leave their familiar abode for the land they tilled is now sold to the tannery owners to gain more money. Thus, Rukmani's entire family gets affected by the terrible and unbearable change.

The secondary impact of global warming on the traditional agricultural industry and the ecosystem is a very crucial issue. The people put up a

valiant fight to live. All of their labour has been devoured by the fields, and as a result of nature's wrath, all that is left for them to find are useless piles of desiccated hay. The situation of those who are landless is pitiful because they have nothing after settling their debts to the landowner and have no other options but to wait for another harvest. Rukmani's existence becomes one of pain and hunger. She writes "Plants withered and the grass began to decay; livestock and sheep crawled to the dried-up river and died there from a lack of water; lizards and rodents lie gasping on the ground in the scorching heat".(89)

Finally, women are nature's saviour and nurturer. Rukmani takes great pleasure in starting seedlings and tending to the garden's plants. In the yard behind the hut, she scatters a few pumpkin seeds, and shortly the seeds begin to grow tender green shoots. She goes to the neighborhood well regularly to get water for the vegetation. Later, a pumpkin starts to turn golden and crimson as it ripens. "One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin before," she says, full of awe. (11). She gains vitality from the pumpkin's development and begins to sow beans, sweet potatoes, brinjals, and chillies. She is confident that she can cultivate all of these vegetables successfully. Rukmani's labour in the fields, which symbolises her love of environment, conveys her close and complex connection with the natural world. Rukmani does, in fact, constantly pray for the improvement of her property, harvests, fruits, and harvest. When she says, "I was young and fanciful then, and it seemed to me not that they grew as I did, unconsciously, but that each of the dry, hard pellets I held in my palm had within it the very secret of life itself, curled tightly within, under leaf after protective leaf," she demonstrates a divine integrity between herself and nature. (14). Markandaya concentrates on the women cultivators of the *Third World* and illuminates their perspective on variegated cropping and the preservation of a healthy ecological equilibrium. Rukmani and her spouse emphasize the value of paddy's mixed farming. I quote: "Dung is too useful in our homes to be given to the land, for

it is fuel for us and protection against damp and heat and even ants and mice." Rukmani, the Third World woman farmer, has customary agricultural knowledge of cultivating the land. Did you not realize? (34). In fact, Indian farmers use dung as a significant source of fuel, germicide, and fertilizer. She begins working in the yard despite being unable to work in the field due to pregnancy. She is constantly amazed by the development of vegetation and veggies. Her labour in the garden has helped her grow physically, emotionally, sexually, and psychologically, which has deepened her connection to the land and reflects the philosophy of spiritual ecofeminism. The interconnection between woman and nature can here be traced through activities of Rukmani related to the field. The American eco-feminist Starhawk promotes this school of feminist spirituality, stating that "the second base concept of earth-centered spirituality is that of interconnection... (this) translates, natural cycles and processes, animals and plants" (Starhawk, "Feminist" 178). The book supports the beliefs of the majority of well-known eco-feminists that women have a responsibility to protect and preserve environment. "Environmental ethics can benefit by incorporating feminist insights on the limitations of traditional, philosophical conceptions of ethics," says American eco-feminist Chris Cuomo. (Cuomo 351)).

Conclusion

Rukmani, the novel's main protagonist is used to study this important aspect of ecofeminism. The first-person narrative method is used by Markandaya to highlight the seriousness of the issue surrounding the establishment of a tannery in the community and its effects on Third World peasant women. According to Indian eco-feminist Vandana Shiva: "Third world peasants, frequently predominately women, have pioneered in cultivation for more than forty millennia. In order to meet the requirements of the crop community and the environment, crops have traversed continents, enhanced crop types, and developed rotational and mixed farming patterns". (Shiva, *Staying* 98). She also writes: "Nature and women are turned into passive objects, to be used and ex-

exploited for the uncontrollable desires of alienated man" (Shiva. V 39) The narrator finally develops a deep affinity with nature and reflects spiritual eco-feminism. Nature provides her comfort and solace.

References

1. Markandaya, K. (1993). *Nectar in a Sieve*. Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House.
2. Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*, London: Zed Books : 6,98.
3. Srivastava, R.K. (1988). *The Novels of Kamala Markandaya*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University: 16
4. Markandaya, K. (1984). *Two Virgins*, Delhi, Tarang Paperbacks: 67
5. Devi, A.L. (2002). Desperation and Aspiration: Heterogeneous Phases in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*. *Perspectives on Indian Literature* (ed.) New Delhi, Jaico Publishers: 56
6. Starhawk. (2002). *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*. New Delhi, New Society Publishers: 178.
7. Christine, J.C. (1992). *Environmental Ethics* 14(4):351.