

CHAPTER - II

NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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NECTAR IN SIEVE (1954) is Kamala Markandaya's first novel. But this very first novel brought her recognition and fame as it portrayed a complex social scene touching upon many social problems.

Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel, who is also the narrator, is married to a poor tenant farmer Nathan, in a South Indian village. They have a daughter named Ira and six sons named Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvam, Raja and Kuti. Meanwhile the peace of the village is disturbed by the arrival of townsmen to build a tannery in the village. The evils of industrialisation like inflation, vice, ugliness and crowd crop up. Ira, who is married to a farmer is deserted by her husband as she is barren. The family on the verge of starvation has no option but to assent to Arjun and Thambi joining the tannery. But due to their voice of protest they are dismissed from work and they go to Ceylon. Murugan also goes to the city. Due to the terrible drought the family starves. Raja dies and Kuti falls ill. To save Kuti, Ira sells her body. An illegal son is born to her, who becomes the pet of Selvam. Starvation takes away old Granny and Kuti. Nathan is unable to pay his dues, he is evicted from his land by the Zamindar. Rukmani and Nathan leave the village in search of Murugan, who himself has left his wife and gone away. With the help of Puli, a young orphan, they live on charity and petty jobs. Nathan dies. Rukmani returns to her village with Puli, resolved to accept life as it comes.

The novel lives up to its sub-title, " A Novel of Rural India. " Most of the characters in this novel have a rural bearing. Hari Mohan Prasad calls Nathan and Rukmani, "symbols of teeming millions, archetypal figures like Adam and Eve".¹ Whereas Hemenway calls Rukmani" a living replica of the stereotyped Indian wife who regards her husband as her god and her children as her divine calling."² The village that is depicted in this novel is a South Indian village. Kamala Markandaya has not named her location. But the village becomes the microcosm of the rural India.

The novel presents the life of simple rural people of a South Indian village. These village people, who are worried about the minimum basic needs, viz., food, clothing and shelter, are engaged in activities like milking the cows and goats, churning butter, planting the seeds, planting vegetables, mulling rice and many other agricultural activities. They build huts or repair the existing ones. The women keep the house clean, wash clothes and also help their husbands in farming. Rukmani pounds red chillies into powder, collects dung for fuel and makes dung-cakes. The food of the rural people is very simple. They eat boiled rice, dhal, vegetables, curd and on occasions a coconut grated fine and cooked in milk and sugar, and a wheat cake. They drink the coconut water by nicking a hole with a scythe in the coconut. They have the fish, spawned among the paddy, when the rice

terraces are drained. They keep the surplus stock of fish away after drying and salting it. Even a sharp bite of chillie makes mere plain rice more palatable for them. But on festive occasions, they prepare rounds of rice, tinted with saffron and fried in butter; and hot curries out of dhal and chillies. They also prepare mixed sweet and spicy dishes of jaggery and fruit, boiled fish, roasted nuts etc. The men also enjoy toddy on such occasions. But at times of scarcity of food, due to drought or excess of rains, they eat whatever edible or non-edible things they get.

The rural people are illiterate. Rukmani, as an exception, knows how to read and write. But Nathan is illiterate. Rukmani teaches her children at home because she can not afford to send them to school. Arjun is interested in reading. Selvam too reads a lot of books. But the mass illiteracy of the village people result in their ill-planned economic activities. So they fast when the crops fail and feast when the crops are good. They are under constant economic plight by the merciless zamindar, profit-oriented money lenders like Biswas and the unpredictable weather. But yet the people lead a happy life in their mud huts, until they have a stock of food grains to fall back upon.

The village that has been depicted in this novel has two facets; one the quiet village before the introduction of technology and the other after starting of

the tannery. The village before the starting of the tannery was very peaceful. It was self-sufficient. Milk, curds, sugar, ghee and vegetable were available in plenty. Most of the peasants, though tenent farmers, were happy. Besides farmers, there were men of other occupations, like Perumal, the shop keeper; Hanuman, the general merchant; Durgan, the milkman; old granny, who sold peanuts and guavas; Biswas, the money lender; Shivaji, the Zamindar's agent; a mid-wife etc. The villagers helped each other. As is common in most of the villages, the money-lender was a man hated by everybody but yet approached by every one when in need. Rukmani liked going in the village and meeting its people, "for they were a friendly lot and most of them were anxious to help if they could".³ "They seemed to know each other so well" (15) and Rukmani got to know them all too, very quickly. The women helped each other in household work and also at the time of childbirths, feasts etc. Rukmani had helped Kunthi in her childbirth and Kall helped Rukmani so much so that she even attended to "sweeping and cleaning, washing and cooking" (26) The needs of the villagers were very limited. About the needs of the village women, Rukmani says:

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 the grain laid

away for hard times, a roof over you
and a sweet stirring in your body, what
more a woman ask for ?" (17)

The simplicity of the villagers is reflected in their dwelling places also. Rukmani's hut is "a mud hut, thatched, small, set near a paddy field ,...."(13) Most of the villagers have mud huts. Though Rukmani at first feels a disgust at "this mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch"(13), later becomes proud of it, just like a traditional Hindu wife, as it was built for her, by her husband " with his own hands " (16) And she soon forgets her father's house, which is quite different and superior to her husband's house. Such tradition, the acceptance of husband's house as one's own, whatever it may be like, is what Rukmani wants to pass on to her daughter, on her wedding day. Rukmani convinces Ira that " in a few months time her new home would be the most significant part of her life, the rest only a preparation." (53)

Agriculture is the main occupation in the village. Markandaya portrays, not the life of the big land-lords or agriculturists, but the life of the landless farmers, who are the worst-hit lot and also the most neglected people. Rukmani has come from a family, who own the land they till. But her husband Nathan does not own the land that he tills. Lucky that he is, definitely owing to his hard work and saving nature, he owns the ploughing

bullocks. Paddy is their main crop. Markandaya gives a detailed picture of the agricultural operation :

"Sowing time was at hand and there was plenty to be done in the fields; dams of clay to be built to ensure proper irrigation of the paddy terraces; the previous year's stubble to be lifted; rushes and weeds to be destroyed; then the transplanting. " (21)

We can see that Markandaya has closely watched the farmers in action. She describes the sowing of the seeds as follows

"Corn had to be sown too, the land was ready. My husband ploughed it, steadying the plough behind the bullocks while I came behind, strewing the seeds to either side and sprinkling the earth over from the basket at my hip."(28)

A landless farmer can not hire labourers. So he has to do all the jobs himself, taking the help of his wife. The Indian farmer is a prey to many problems. The landless farmer, in particular, is held in the octopusy clutches of constant fear; of the land being snatched away, the failure or excesses of rains, droughts etc.

Markandaya gives a very realistic and touching description of such fear:

"...The calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain and weather, immensities not to be tempered by man or his creations. To those who live by the land there must always come time of hardship, of fear and of hunger." (181)

For a farmer, life has not got a pre-set timetable. He has no hopes for the future. But yet he keeps hope, amidst fear of getting disappointment. Rukmani sums up the life of a peasant, when she says:

"Hope and fear. Twin forces that hugged us first in one direction and then in another, and which one was stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear; fear of the dark future; fear of the blackness of death." (110)

In such fear dwell, millions of families of the

Indian farmers. Rukmani's ^{family} becomes the representative of the traditional Indian family. The moments of happiness and sorrow, shared together by its members, the inter-personal relations of the family members etc., are very beautifully portrayed by Markandaya in this novel. Rukmani has come from a big family. Though after her marriage she enjoys freedom, as Nathan is alone, she knows her duties and responsibilities as a housewife. Though Nathan is the head of the family, he consults his wife Rukmani, who is literate and clever. They have mutual faith and understanding which is a must for any ideal family. The attachment between the two can be seen when Rukmani says :

"He suffered for me, not so much for himself, and I likewise, so that although together there was more strength there was also more suffering, and if each had been alone the way might not have seemed so hard; yet I know neither could have borne it alone."(184)

There is love and affection in the family. Nathan works hard. Rukmani supplements the income by growing and selling the vegetables. At the hour of need, Arjun and Thambi, the sons, join the tannery and try to

help their family. Ira, who is deserted by her husband, is given shelter without any complaints. For the sake of her bedridden brother, Ira sells her body. Thus we can see a sense of involvement, individual responsibility and sacrifice in the members of the family. But when the hardships strike harder, the disintegration of the family begins. Arjun and Thambi go to Ceylon. Murugan leaves the village. With the death of two sons, when Rukmani and Nathan finally leave the village, the family is completely disintegrated. But with the return of Rukmani, though Nathan is dead, there is hope of reorganization of the family. Disintegration of the family can also be seen in the case of Ira, due to her barrenness; Ammu, due to the gambling and womanising habits of her husband Murugan; and Kunthi, due to her loose character. The novel also portrays the kinship. Rukmani's mother used to travel by cart, for hours together, to visit Rukmani and her children. Rukmani would also visit her parents. The adoption of Puli, an orphan, as son and the concern that Ammu, who though deserted by husband, shows towards her in-laws, whom she had never seen before, are just two examples which mirror the traditional Indian mind.

Marriage is not only an important social institution, but also is the foundation of a family. In the traditional Indian families, marriages are arranged and sanctioned by the elders. Though marriage means just the union of a man and woman, the society demands observation

of certain formalities. Hence wedding ceremonies have become a must, irrespective of the castes and classes. But the grandeur of such ceremonies vary according to the economical conditions of the bride's parents. When Shanta, Rukmani's elder sister, was married, her father was still in a well-to-do position. Hence it was a big wedding which lasted for many days and plenty of gifts, including diamond earrings and a gold necklace, were given to the bride. Feasts were served as befitting to a village headman. Rukmani's second sister Padmini also made a good match and she was also given away jewels and dowry. The third one, Thangam's marriage was attended only by her relatives of the same village and "not from surrounding districts as they had done before", and the only jewel she had was a 'diamond nose-screw'. (10) at the time of Rukmani's marriage, her father had lost his status as a village headman. As "four dowries is too much for a man to bear", (10) Rukmani was married" to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care" (11) Even the relatives murmured that "the match was below" (11) her. Her mother was also not happy. But it was the best that she could do because Rukmani was 'without beauty and without dowry'. (11) We can also get a glimpse of the traditional practice of early marriage. Rukmani was only twelve years old when she was married. When Ira Rukmāi's daughter, was 'past fourteen her marriage could be delayed no longer, ... most girls of her age were already married or at least betrothed". (51) The marriages are fixed with the help of

a middleman or a middlewoman usually. At the time of Ira's marriage old-granny acts as the ideal go-between. She fixed up a good match for Ira after verifying many proposals. Markandaya gives a detailed picture of the marriage celebrations, the gifts, the problems of dowry etc. She also highlights, in the form of the marriage of Murugan, that marriages done without the consent of the elders are not going to stay for ever. Murugan has married without such consent. He consequently deserts his wife and goes somewhere else. Marriages can succeed only if both the husband and wife are devoted to each other and if they have proper understanding. Though Rukmani comes to know about the extra-marital relationship between Nathan and Kunthi, she does not think about breaking the marriage-tie, true to the spirit of a traditional Indian woman. But the lack of such devotion and understanding causes the breaking of tie between Kunthi and her husband.

The woman, in a traditional Indian family, is always subordinate to the man. While the sons are considered as assets, the daughters are considered as a burden on the family. When the first-born child was a daughter, Rukmani was very disappointed. "for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?" (25) Nathan "wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pulling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind." (27) Rukmani even thought

that it was a punishment for her past sins. "I have no sons, only one child, a girl ... why should it be ? What have done that we must be punished, Am I not clean and healthy?", (32) The life of a woman, who has no children at all, is more worse. Ira's husband deserts her because she is barren. In the opinion of the rural womanfolk, education is not at all necessary for women. Rukmani's mother opines: "What use that a girl should be learned! Much good will it do her when she has many sons and a husband to look after". (22) Rukmani's writing practice is considered as "a foible of pregnancy" and 'nonsense' by Kali. Though Nathan calls Rukmani 'clever', "it cost him a great deal to say what he did". (23) It could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself was for he "could not even write his own name". (23) Even in town, when Rukmani wants to earn livelihood by reading and writing letters, she is jeered at by the townsmen. The only exceptional view, about education to girls, we find here, is that of Rukmani's father. He has taught all his six children to read and write. "because he wanted his children to be one cut above the rest." (21) Some even think to the extent that education is not only unnecessary, but it also invites problems. After the troubles that stirred up at the tannery, Kali thinks: "most of the troubles in the country sprang from the pages of books." (170) Most of the woman characters in this novel are simple, ignorant and traditional. Rukmani, though a traditional woman, is not weak and ignorant. Rama Jha remarks :

Rukmani is "A woman of fortitude and capable of deep understanding, it is she who bears through famine and flood and scarcity and is mainstay and binding force in the family." 4

Markandaya has portrayed Rukmani's character very vividly and has bestowed her with all the treasures like knowledge, strength, understanding, care and love; so much love that it is unaffected towards Ira, even when she comes to know that she has become a prostitute. She even forgives her husband Nathan, when she comes to know that he is the father of Rukthi's children. Such nobility is found in traditional Indian women.

Superstitions and beliefs are just the fruits of illiteracy. The villagers have many beliefs. It is believed that 'cobras are sacred' (26) and hence they should not be killed. But Nathan, though illiterate, does not believe that and asks, "what would she have me do - worship it while it dug its fangs in my wife?" (26) Here probably Nathan's love for his wife made him to cross the barriers of a general belief. When Rukmani fails to get any child after Ira, her mother takes her to a temple, and together they "would pray and pray before the deity" (30) for a son. She also gives Rukmani "a small stone lingam", symbol of fertility, and asks her to wear it, so that she will "yet bear many sons." She thinks, lying on the death bed, she saw sons and "what the dying see will come to

"pass". (31) "But the Gods have other things to do; they can not attend to the pleas of every suppliant who dares to raise his cares to heaven." (31) But yet the villagers pray; when they want sons, when they want rains to pour and rains to stop. The beliefs pave way for customs. A woman can not call her husband by his name, but can address him only as 'husband' (13). A garland of mango leaves is to be tied across the doorway, as it is a "symbol of happiness and good fortune." (13) It is also a custom to have a naming ceremony "on the tenth day from the birth" (16) of a child.

Rukmani has followed the custom. She observes it even in the case of Ira's illegal child, which is definitely an exceptional and objectionable thing to the traditional minds.

A large family is also the product of ignorance in the village poor. The economic conditions of a family continue deteriorating with the addition of every new child. Rukmani's father could not afford to celebrate the marriages of the rest of his daughters in the same way he celebrated that of his first daughter. Rukmani and Nathan 'ate well' when they had only one child but the problems begin when they start getting more children. Rukmani thinks

"In our sort of family it is as well to be first born; what resources there are, have later to be shared out in smaller portions!" (35) and "for those who come after there was less and less." (36).

Rukmani who fed her family with all the vegetables that she grew could no longer afford to do so. She had to sell the best of the vegetables and keep the spoilt or bruised ones for the family. They can^{no} longer use milk, curds and butter in their daily food.

Protest is not in the blood of the ignorant people, for they know not that they are being deprived of their rights and they even do not know what their rights are. When they pass through bad times, they hope that the time will be better. For Kenny, a foreigner such attitude appears very strange. He angrily remarks :

"Time are better, times are better, times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools. Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand - cry out for help - do something? There is nothing in this country, oh God, there is nothing!" (63)

Kenny expresses his views even more bitterly :

"Acquiescent imbeciles, do you think spiritual grace comes from being want, or from suffering? What thoughts have you when your belly is empty or your body is sick". (155)

But the villagers only suffer and for them suffering has become a part of their life. Arjun and Thambi, as exception stand out of this stuff. They demand higher wages at the tannery. They become the spokesmen of the workers and start agitations, not heeding to the threats by the owners. The following discussion between Thambi and Rukmani, gives the views of two different types of people: one who are not ready to suffer and the other who want to accept suffering out of helplessness.

(Thambi) : "We shall not go back until our demands are met : "All the workers have stopped. We do not ask for charity but for that which is our due."

(Rukmani): "How can force them? "Are they not the masters? For every one of you who is out there are three waiting to step in your place." (92)

The tannery owners' threats force all the workers, except Arjun and Thambi, to join back the work. Arjun and Thambi think: "people will never learn." (92) Here, what Rukmani thinks, reflects the common man's mind :

"What was it we had to learn? To fight against tremendous odds? What was the use ? One only lost the little one had. Of what use to fight when the conclusion is known?" (92)

It is a foregone conclusion that the weaker section always loses in their fight with the stronger ones, the masters. But when the fight is with the fate itself then the weaker characters like Ira can raise their voices. When Nathan warns her, that he would not have her parading at night, she boldly says : "Tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long there is need. I will not hunger any more." (137) Perhaps hunger has made her so bold to raise her voice. Compared to the older generation, the younger generation has got more of the protesting nature. When the Zamindar asks Nathan to vacate his land, Selvam asks whether he has made a protest. To this Nathan helplessly replies : "What option have I my son! Naturally I protested, but it has availed me nothing." (183) Most probably with a sure knowledge that such a day would come in the future, Thambi bluntly refuses to work on that land with his father Nathan and says :

"If it were your land or mine . . . I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return? Far better to turn away from such injustice." (74)

Caste is a predominant force in the multicultural Indian Society. The essence of social relations in the village society, the caste system, fails to get a close observation in Markandaya's novel. In this novel, except

an occasional reference to the Muslims and Cobblers, there is no mention of any other caste. Though there is reference to Gods and Goddesses, they do not bear any identity. It appears Markandaya makes particular reference to the Muslim women with an intention to express her dislike towards the purdah system. We get a hint about the existence of the caste-consciousness among the villagers, from the following discussions between Rukmani and her son Arjun, who wants to join the tannery.

(Rukmani) : "You are not of the caste of tanners.
What will our relations say ? "

(Arjun) : "I do not care. The important thing
is to eat." (73)

Thus with the changing times, survival becomes more important than the caste factor. Though Markandaya avoids description and discussion of caste system, she gives a detailed description of the class system, which is the second factor of social stratification. In rural society, the landlords are the most powerful in social hierarchy. The landless farmers, the labourers etc., belong to the suppressed or the lower class. For the upper class people, what matters most is not humanity but money and more money.

Even though Nathan has tilled the land for many years, he is told that the land would be given to another one if he fails to make the payment. On Raja's suspicious death at the tannery, the tannery people are not worried about his family, but shrugging off their responsibility they try to

avoid the payment of compensation. Innocent of the ways of the world, Rukmani fails to understand that she can eke out a treasure from the tannery owners by way of compensation. Poor Nathan thinks that "money is not everything." (95) But for the rich people money is everything. People like Biswas, the money-lender, turn even the times of scarcity into a season for profiteering. Just like the caste-consciousness, class-consciousness is also present in the village community. People who are accustomed to the practice that the marriages are to be held among the equals, murmur that "the match was below" (11) her, when Rukmani was married to Nathan - a landless farmer. But this marriage would not have been possible if the status and economical conditions of Rukmani's father could not have suffered. Pascual Gisbert writes: ". . . there is a degree of mobility by which certain individuals may pass from one class to another."⁵ This mobility owing to the economical setbacks explains the passing of Rukmani's father from a higher class to a lower class, and that of Nathan and many of the villagers from peasants class to **other** occupational and working classes. Rukmani and Nathan had to wait for the free food at the temple; Kunthi and Ira lower themselves to the trade of prostitution. The upward mobility is very rarely seen in this novel, as in the case of Selvam, as he works with Kenny and in case of Puli an orphan, as he is adopted by Rukmani.

Social change is an inevitable process. This process is always going on; in some cases it may be slow

and in some cases it may be fact. It depends on the factors which are responsible for the social change. The major among the factors that we witness in this novel, is the technological factor. Technology changes the environment and influences the rural life. In this novel the tannery plays the pivotal role in bringing up such a change. The coming up of the tannery near the village invites a complexity of human responses and reactions. Unaware of the forthcoming dangers, the villagers at first view the townsmen with curiosity. But the first reaction, with a foresight of the impending consequences, comes from Kannan, the cobbler, who shows his resentment openly, for "he foresaw his livelihood being wrested from him, for he salted and tanned his own skins, making them into chaplies for those in the village who wore them."(41) For some people, the tannery proves to be a boon. "Day and night women twisted rope, since they could sell as much as they made, and traders waxed prosperous selling their goods to the workmen."(42) But soon the darker side starts to emerge out.

"They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played, and had made the bazar prices too high for us."(42)

Nathan thinks it is as well to accept the change. But

Rukmani who has seen the plight of the children and the changing values, says she can never accept it. Nathan advises that there is "no going back. Bend like the grass, that you do not break." (43) Some people like Kunthi welcome the change: "Are you not glad that our village is no longer clump of huts but a small town? Soon there will be shops and tea stalls, and even a bioscope. . . ." (44)

The village has lost its placidity. There is nothing but the smell of the tannery, the crowds, the shouting and disturbance. "Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us." (44) One can find there only the crows, kites and such scavenging birds which are eager for the town's offal. Industrialisation has brought demoralisation in the village. The simple villagers are worried to find "rude young hooligans idling in the street, dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour and no man thinks of another but only for his money." (66) Because of such hooligans Ira's freedom is curtailed. But money acts as magnet and that is why women like Kunthi fall prey to sex-hunters. They are not even worried at the disorganisation of their family life because of this. Ira also turns to prostitution. The quiet life and the village economics are both affected. Values have lost their roots and money is what everybody is interested in. Because of the hike in the prices, "money buys less and less." (66) Such a change is sudden. Rukmani thinks :

"Change I had known before, and it had been gradual. My father had been headman once, a person of consequence in our village; I had lived to see him relinquish this importance, but the alteration was so slow that we hardly knew when it came."(39)

Consequent upon the vesting of all the powers with the Collector, Rekmani's father, though a headman, is no longer a man of importance. But this change has shown its effects slowly. He could not conduct the marriages of his other daughters with the grandeur with which he had conducted the marriage of his first daughter. But the change that the tannery brings in the village is all too sudden, "in the twinkling of an eye."(39)

Industrialisation affects family, the very basic institution of a society. A.V. Krishna Rao remarks :

"Industrialisation with its main emphasis on urban development and the mechanisation of the means of production and distribution necessarily result in the social dislocation of the family."6

Nathan, a landless farmer, has to live on the mercy of the Zamindar. He has suffered a lot under this Zamindari system. Whether the harvests are good or not, he has to

pay the dues. He sells the utensils, clothes, whatever grains that were left and even bullocks to clear the dues, with a hope that today or tomorrow he will own the land. But when the tannery owners pay good price, the Zamindar seizes all his lands and Nathan and many more like him have to go landless. They have to vacate their huts, which they had built with their own hands and in which they had spent their lives. A.V. Krishna Rao, who thinks the cardinal idea of this novel is social, remarks: "Rukmani and Nathan, the peasant couple in South Indian village, are victims of two evils; Zamindari system and the industrial economy." ⁷ Meena Shirwadkar remarks that in this novel, Kamala Markandaya gives:

"... a harrowing picture of the cancer of urbanisation spoiling the age-old structure, nature adding to the ruthlessness of man and a girl wife growing while trying to keep the members of the family safe from famine, sin, corruption, disease and death." ⁸

Ecological factors viz., drought, excess rains etc., play yet another important role in bringing up a social change.

The peasants, whose future is always uncertain, are put into great troubles due to drought or excess rains or untimely rains. Due to heavy rains, Nathan's hut is much damaged. Their corn field is lost. The "paddy field lay beneath a placid lake." (59) Several people



homeless. One can see nothing but destruction in the village. Whereas the workers' huts are demolished, the tannery stood, its bricks and cement had held it together despite the raging winds. "(60) In a way it suggests the triumph of urbanisation over nature and the destruction of the fragile roots of rural lot, the worshippers of nature, by the axe of nature itself. Scarcity for the merchant class, is a god-sent season for profit making. Biswas asks: "Is this not a time of scarcity? Can you buy rice anywhere else? Am I not entitled to charge more for that?" (62-63) Markandaya portrays very realistically the drought that the villagers face the next year :

"The drought continued until we lost count of the time. Day after day the pitiless sun blazed down, scorching whatever still struggled to grow and baking the earth hard until at last it spilt and great irregular fissures gaped in the land. Plants died and the grasses rotted, cattle and sheep crept to the river that was no more and perished there for lack of water, lizards and squirrels lay prone and gasping in the blistering sunlight." (108)

Though the drought is over and the rains pour, it means waiting for an year for the harvests. Till then they have

to pull on with the foodgrains stock of the previous year.

But there is nothing much left to fall back upon, as :

"Long before the paddy ripened we came to the end of our dried-fish stocks. There was no money left-every pie had gone to pay the land dues. Nothing left to sell. Nothing to be had from my efforts, for the vines and vegetables had withered in the long weeks of drought."(110-111)

Women have a habit of secretly keeping away money and foodgrains for use in emergency. Rukmani has kept aside secretly a small stock of rice, which she has divided into twenty-four portions; one portion for each day. But they are able to pull on only for eight days on that as Kunthi takes away ration of seven days by blackmailing Rukmani and also the rest by blackmailing Nathan. The tragic picture of hunger that is painted by Markandeya can hardly be believed by those who are unknown to hunger and poverty:

"Thereafter we fed on whatever we could find: the soft ripe fruit of the prickly pear; a sweet potato or two, blackened and half-rotten, thrown away by some more prosperous hand; sometimes a crab that Nathan managed

to catch near the river. Early and late my sons roamed the countryside, returning with a few bamboo shoots, a stick of sugar cane left in some deserted field, or a piece of coconut picked from the gutter in the town. For these they must have ranged widely for other farmers and families, in like plight to ourselves, were also out searching for food; and for every edible plant or root there was a struggle—a desperate competition that made enemies of friends and put an end to humanity." (121)

Sometimes they are even forced to eat grass.

"For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and there is a gnawing and a pain as if your very vitals are 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 is the pain 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 can not, it is with you. "(121)

Markandaya thus portrays hunger in its stark realism. Pointing out the existence of such poverty, Kai Nicholson aptly remarks :

"In India, the countryside too has been polluted, but not by the encroachment of industry. for it has not even shown its face. In the village the pollution comes from within; through starvation." 9

Such starvation leads to human degradation. Hunger makes Ira a prostitute. Hunger leads to the suspected theft of a calfskin by Raja and his subsequent death. Starvation forces Kuti's death. Human beings, who in the clutches of hunger, scavenge in the gutter and even eat grass do not fare better than the animals. P.P. Mehta rightly remarks :

"The struggle between man and overpowering hunger, before which honour, morality and even God do not count." 10

Rukmani does not blame the tannery for the misfortunes her family has suffered. She thinks: "Tannery or not, the land might have been taken from us ... And whatever extraneous influence the tannery may have exercised, the calamities of land belong to it alone." (181) Thus the ecological factors like drought and excess rains etc., also bring in a social change in the village, though with a slow pace. But they definitely help a lot towards the disorganisation of a family. In this connection Kai Nicholson queries :

"The tannery ruined the beautiful countryside and cost Rukmani and Nathan their two eldest sons and Ira. In so far as Mrs. Markandeya stresses this point, we can appreciate her affiliations with the thoughts of Ruskin and William Morris. But when the novelist strikes out at nature, what is she trying to imply? Is she criticising a government which has not realised that Gandhi's plan for rural recuperation is still necessary for India, or is this novel a reminder for the complacent urbanite that rural India despairs unheard?" **11**

Kai Nicholson provides an answer to this question himself.

when he says: "... undoubtedly her realism is purposeful and her intention is to awaken the polite society to the real problems." 12

Poverty, a major social problem, which has been so realistically depicted in this novel, is a result of many factors. The adverse physical conditions like drought, excess rains etc., make Nathan unable to pay his land revenue and hence the zamindari system which does not allow such lapses on the part of the tenants, throws him out of employment. Because Nathan knows nothing except agriculture, he is unable to find any other employment. The technological change, which provides employment to many, snatches away employment from rural artisans like Kannan, the cobbler. The trade union problems make protesting workers like Arjun and Thambi jobless. All these factors, which create unemployment, instantly force the affected to poverty. Murugan, who is after women and gambling, deserts his family. Due to the disorganisation of the family, resulted by this his wife Annu is driven to poverty. Puli has to face poverty and go on begging because he has none to support and care for. Lack of family planning in rural India also forces the rural families to poverty as in the case of Nathan's family. Markandaya not only deals with poverty but also presents the effects of poverty. Poverty and unemployment or under employment are the two faces of a coin. And both lead to many other social problems like prostitution, beggary and crime etc.

Unemployment is a result of supply of labour in excess of demand. As a result of the uncertain nature, the village youth are losing interest in agriculture and are turning to other secure employment opportunities. Nathan, a landless farmer, becomes unemployed when he is evicted from the land. Certain that a day like that would come, his sons Arjun and Thambi join the tannery. When both of them start the agitation against payment of low wages to the workers, Rukmani warns: "For every one of you who is out, there are three waiting to step into your place." (92) They both lose work and have to go to Ceylon, to work in a tea plantation. We can see that industrialisation both provides and snatches away employment. The tannery provides employment to many workers. But at the same time it pushes away people; like Nathan the landless farmer, whose land is bought by the tannery owners and also Kanna, the cobbler, who tanned his own skins, to the cruel clutches of unemployment, paving the way to poverty and hunger.

Prostitution is a major social problem today in both the urban and rural areas. Its cause has no longer remained only the biological necessity. An eminent sociologist G.R. Madan, while writing about the socio-economic factors leading to prostitution, remarks :

" . . . the most important being the poverty of the female who in the

absence of any other means to support for herself or for her children resorts to prostitution." 13

this is exactly the reason which forces Ira to prostitution. She wants to save her ailing brother. She is fed up of poverty and hunger. Kunthi also takes to prostitution. It is the question of demand and supply. The sexual urge of the men, who have money, creates the demand in the sex market and the poverty stricken women are forced to make the supply. Nathan calls Ira a 'harlot' and a 'common strumpet' (137) and never touches even a morsel of food that is bought out of Ira's earnings. He thinks it is better to die rather than live like a shameless man. But chastity and purity become mere hollow words when there is a big hollowness in the stomach. But what astonishes one is the silence of Rukamani, a traditional woman, even after coming to know the 'unpalatable truth.' She objects to Arjun's joining the tannery, saying what the relatives would think of them. But she never worries as to what the relatives would think now, of Ira's prostitution. She even feels 'grateful for the food' (138) bought by Ira. Markandaya portrays the fate of the prostitutes very realistically:

"But the man who finds a woman in the street, raises an eyebrow and snaps his fingers so that she follows him, throws a few coins that he may possess

her, holds her unresisting whatever he has paid for - what cares such a man for the woman who is his for a brief moment ? He has gained his relief, she her payment, he merges carelessly into the human throng, consigning her back into the shadows where she worked or to the gaudy streets where she loitered. "(157-158)

Prostitution leads to family disorganisation. Kunthi's husband deserts her. Nathan's family keeps Ira at home, either due to love and affection or due to the dire necessity of food which Ira provides out of her earnings. The children born out of such illegal relationships pose a greater problem. Ira, who fails to get any children by her husband, conceives when she takes to prostitution. Though such children, whose father is unknown, are not easily accepted by the society, the firm support of the family, who even conduct the naming ceremony of this child, shuts the mouths of the ever curious people.

Beggary is recognised to be forced upon people due to poverty. Apart from the economic causes, social causes like family disorganisation also force beggary upon the children. In this novel, Puli is a perfect example of such child beggars, who have no parents. Puli has "no mother, poor or otherwise, ... There is no one to worry

about me and none to worry me either, which is a good thing. "(230) Markandava sketches a lengthy and realistic picture of the child beggars, their physical appearance, hunger and also the techniques of begging on pp.207-208. The child beggars are ready to commit petty crimes if need be. Puli says:

"We beg and work sometimes and filch from stalls when we can ... I and other boys ... I know every street and alley, "....." I have been chased often but have never been caught."(239)

The reason to resort to petty crimes may be due to the decreasing nature of charity among the people. Puli comments: "People gave at first but now they are used to me... It is a hard world. "(243) Whereas some people are indifferent to beggars, some still encourage it in the name of charity. An assured free food makes the people once in need to remain forever in need. Rukmani observes at the temple in the city, where free food is given to the poor, that many people who gathered there were known to each other and for them it was "evidently a nightly routine. "(197) Rukmani and Nathan too, the two simple and hardworking villagers, are forced to go for beggary, though called free food in the name of charity.

The elements of crime and delinquency, which are

generally accepted to be the offences committed at a matured age and the pre-matured age respectively, are totally absent in the self-sufficient and simple village life. But poverty, alongwith other social problems, gives birth to offences also. Nathan's son Raja is suspected to have stolen a clafskin from the tannery. He is beaten by the tannery people to the extent that he dies there iteself. When Raja's petty offence is highlighted, the greater offence committed by the tannery people, in killing him instead of taking any legal action, goes unnoticed. The crime rate is high in the city, where the thieves rob the belongings of Rukmani and Nathan, from the sacred temple itself. Child beggars like Puli engage themselves in petty crimes, when they fail to get any alms. Murugan engages himself in gambling and womanising. Nathan, out of physical need before his marriage, keeps illegal relationship with Kunthi and becomes father of her children. Taking advantage of this moral crime, Kunthi blackmails him at the time of drought and takes away the rice secretly stored by Rukmani. She even blackmails Rukmani.

Thus Kamala Markandaya has given a very descriptive and realistic picture of the rural India and its problems in this novel. But Ramesh K. Shrivastava finds some inaccuracies in the picture of rural life given by Markandaya. He objects, apart from other minor things, to Markandaya's lack of knowledge regarding the amount of land revenue to be paid by a landless farmer. He is

surprised that whereas two saris, two shirts and one dhoti of the poor farmer family fetched seventy five rupees; pots and pans, the food and the bullocks could fetch only fifty rupees. Eventhough the bullocks have been shown to cost less than the silver-wired saris, what surprises him more is that, the amount collected after selling all these things could come only to less than half the land revenue that Nathan has to pay. Shrivastava remarks :

"Markardaya, in order to show the financial difficulties of the farmer couple, has inflated the land revenue so much that it loses touch with the reality and exposes dark spots in her knowledge of rural life." 14

But however he accepts that, "minor drawbacks apart; NECTAR IN A SIEVE remains an authentic reconstruction of an age-old South Indian village in transition." 15
Discussing about the realism employed in this novel, S.Z.H.Abidi remarks :

"The social realism employed by Kamala Markandaya in this novel is very close to the observed conditions of life. The mode of realism gives a typical piquancy to the sociological content of the novel. One is fully justified in calling it documentary realism. It

however does not mean that NECTAR IN A SILVE is a documentary and not a novel. It is a novel social realism with a remarkable story." 16

Thus we can see that Kamala Markandaya not only succeeds in portraying the realistic picture of poverty, but also in the systematic and analytical presentation of the causes and effects of poverty in rural India. If some flaws, as pointed out by Shrivastava are set apart, this novel stands as an epic of social problems and social changes in rural India.

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