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Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve: A Story of Rukmini's Misfortune

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ABSTRACT:

In Indian English writers Kamala Markandaya has occupied an extrusive place. She won name and fame all over the world with the publication of her very first novel Nectar in a Sieve, in 1954. The present paper aims at studying the novel Nectar in a Sieve, which deals with poverty, hunger and exploitation as the major theme. It is a first person narrative written in a reminiscent mood. Rukmani is the heroine-narrator of the story. Rukmani recollects her tale in a tranquil reverie. The novel is a poignant illustration of the courage and fortitude of a simple peasant woman Rukmani. Rukmani has returned home after her wanderings during which she had lost almost her everything.

Introduction:

The novel Nectar in a Sieve brought name and fame for Kamala Markandaya. It was her first novel which has often been compared with Pearl Buck's The Good Earth. The novel takes us to the heart of a south Indian village. Rukmani, who is also the narrator of the story and several other miserable characters like Nathan, Ira, Kennigton, Ammu etc. The novel deals with the peasants, their activities, their problems and anxieties, hopes and expectations. The emphasis is on rural ethos and rural value system. Industry and modern technology invade the village in the shape of a tannery which ultimately changes its complexion and cause irreparable damage to the villagers who depended on the land made available to them by their landlords. Fear, hunger and despair are the characteristic feelings which dominate the village, and its people.

As Rukmani remarks hope and fear are twin forces that tugged the people first in one direction and then in other. In a sense the whole story is centered round Rukmani, the narrator-heroine. She is one who is destined to receive shocks one after another in her life. At the same time

we find her overcoming the misfortunes that follow her like a shadow. Infact she is the one who possesses a mighty will and it is exactly this will that helps her to find a way when she faces acute turbulences in her life. In the early pages of the novel we get enough indications about the kind of future that is in store for Rukmani. Her three sisters were married long before she was. Shanta, the first one had a big wedding which lasted for many days with plenty of precious gifts and feasts as befitted the daughter of the village headman. Padma, the next too made a good match taking jewels and dowry, but for Thangam relations were from village only and she only had a diamond nose pin with her in the name of jewels. But for Rukmani, the last born of the sisters it was an altogether different marriage. This was contrary to the wish she had expressed of having a grand wedding. The result was that she was married to a tenant farmer who was poor. She was only twelve years when she was married. That marks the beginning of a life of misery for her.

To begin with ,she is made to listen the comments of the people around her. They said that it was a poor the match. Rukmani's courage, determination, resourcefulness and her patient acceptance of her lot, were all displayed during the days of misfortune which soon followed. The next misfortune in the life of Rukmani came in the form of a girl child which he gave birth to. When the girl Irawady was seven, Arjun her first son was born and in the next four years on equal number of children –Thambi, Murugan, Raja and Selvam- were born to her. With six children to feed they could no longer feed them. Moreover, they no longer had milk in the house, except for the youngest child. Rukmani took the tannery as the death knell; whereas Kunthi, her neighbor was glad the rapid urbanization of the village; for Rukmani it was the most depressing thing. Rukmani had mixed feelings when the day of Ira's marriage came. She was happy that she had saved from the day of her birth so that she would marry her well. She enough stock of rice, dhal, ghee, jars of oil, betel leaf, chewing tobacco and copra. She had saved enough stock for the marriage but still she was not free from disappointment. Next it was the turn of nature to make the life of Rukmani miserable.

The year Ira had been given in marriage the monsoon broke early with an evil intensity. The rain destroyed everything. Consequently they ran short of grains and they had to swallow plain water for days together. The traders exploited the situation to their might. Rukmani had to suffer it silently. Rukmani had a major shock in her life when Ira came to her with her husband one day. It was not a normal visit her husband has stamped her as a barren woman for not bearing a child for five years and therefore there was no way out before him and thus Ira was back to her parents never to go back. Another shock was there in store for Rukmani when she went to summon Ira's husband back. Kenny, the doctor had promised her that he would do whatever he could to see that she was no more a barren woman. When she requested Ira's husband to take her back as there was nothing wrong with her and would bear her as many sons as he wanted she was shocked to have his reply that he had taken another woman and there's no place for Ira. This was something which one would find difficult to

bear. But still Rukmani somehow could reconcile herself to the whole tragedy. Arjun, her first son surprised rather pained her when he announced that he was going to work in a tannery. The simple argument was that he had to eat. This was only a beginning as Thambi, Rukmani's second son also joined the tannery soon.

The only consolation for Rukmani was that they gave a fair share of their earnings to their parents. It was tannery which brought the next disappointment to her. One day she and her husband Nathan got in the tannery to find the gates closed. There was trouble and workers were not allowed to go out and eat. The net result was that Nathan once again became the sole provider of his family. Rukmani's desperation saw no end. The next year the rain failed. The result was that they had nothing to reap when the harvesting time came. Then came the greatest shock of her life. Nathan admitted to her that he was the father of Kunthi's sons. Rukmani was dumb. Her last child, Kuti, also contributed in a non-trivial way to make her life far from happy. He had never been a healthy child and was constantly ailing. A major tragedy struck Rukmani and her family when Raja's body was brought to his home. Then came another unavoidable misfortune. Poverty made Ira to take prostitution. Rukmani was helpless witness to this. What made Rukmani further desperate was the death of Kuti. The next incident that Rukmani took to her heart was the death of Granny. Her death bore her especially hard on Rukmani because to begin with she and Granny had been friends since the former's marriage. A minor disappointment in Rukmani's life came when her son Selvan chose to work as an assistant to Kenny.

It was Nathan's rheumatism which started disturbing Rukmani after Murugan's marriage. Perhaps a blow that does not have many parallels came one day when Sivaji came and delivered a message which said that the land was to be sold. There was nothing to be done and they had to move from their house. It was at this time that Rukmani realized that the real damage is caused by the tannery. Rukmani had lost more than she had gained or could ever regain. The final and the more serious tragedies struck Rukmani through the death of Nathan. After returning from Murugan's house they spent about a year in temple. Rukmani did some odd jobs and she was preparing to return to her own place. One day she went to collect money after a day's work somebody told her that Nathan had a fall. He never recovered. Soon he breathed his last. Rukmani returned home.

To sum up, Nectar in a Sieve is Rukmani's story. All the other characters including Nathan, her husband are satellites revolving around her. Misfortunes chase Rukmani as a shadow one after the other but her sheer will power helps her overcome every time. She is the only one who possesses a mighty will that helps her to find her way out even when she faces acute turbulences in her life. This tragic story is presenting to us the themes of suffering, starvation and death, but the story ends on the positive note of quiet strength and resolution. In fact it is money which rules the world and a person without money will prove himself to be a misfit.

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