

HUNGER AND DEGRADATION IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NECTAR IN

A SIEVE

S.N.SUGANYA¹, S. KOWSALYA ², A. BHUVANESHWARI³, S. MIRUNALINI ⁴

ASSISTANT PROFESSORS

DHANALAKSHMI SRINIVASAN COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE FOR WOMEN

AUTONOMOUS

PERAMBALUR

ABSTRACT

Agriculture in India is entirely dependent on the vagaries of nature and the Indian farmers suffer when the nature deceives them. Indians are mystical by temperament, and believe in magic and miracles. 'Nectar in a sieve' is a study of Indian rural life, and the quality of the author following Indian tradition and culture is seen in various ways. First, there is a grim picture of hunger, poverty and starvation both in the city and the village. Various sections of rural society and various village occupations are presented through the characters.

Various social customs like the customary celebration to mark a marriage, a birth or a funeral are important parts of Indian social life and they find due representation in the novel. The rural folk are illiterate and ignorant, and hence also superstitious. A number of Indian superstitions have been mentioned by the novelist. It is a great work of art, and hence a number of themes and ideas stand out of it. Hunger and starvation is the main theme of many Indo-Anglican novels, particularly post-independence novel, and it is also the theme of Nectar in a Sieve.

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya's first novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' appeals to all sections of the society is a minor classic of the Indo-Anglican fiction and its many merits are being increasingly recognized. It refers to the fact that it is as impossible for the Indian farmer to enjoy the nectar of happiness for any length of time, as it is to hold nectar in a sieve which has so many holes through which the nectar flows out within no time. The sub-title 'A Novel of Rural India' reveals that the novel deals with the life of poverty, hunger and suffering lived by the poor tenant- farmers in countless Indian villages. Kamala Markandaya had a first- hand, intimate knowledge of the life of the rural poor, and hence her delineation of its remarkable for its realism and penetration.

In this way, she has revealed the soul of Indian not only to the west, but also to the educated elite of Indian living comfortable lives in the cities. The novel is the story of the life and suffering of Rukmani and Nathan, a faceless peasant couple. Nathan and Rukmani are larger than life figures, symbolic of rural-dwellers all over the country. Their tragedy has been imparted epical dimension, for it is the tragedy of rural India as a whole. The story of the agony and travail becomes symbolic of the agony of the poor living in the countryside, and suffering hunger and starvation.

It finds a more comprehensive, more realistic, and more pathetic treatment anywhere else. The struggle is between man and an over-powering hunger, in the face of which honour, God, Religion and morality count for little. Since it is an Indian novel, there is a constant sense of an over-hanging destiny playing cruel jokes with puny, passively suffering mortal, and driving them to their doom.

HUNGER AND STARVATION IN NECTAR IN A SIEVE

Some of the best Indo-Anglican novels written after independence have hunger, starvation, and the degradation which hunger causes, as their theme. Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve is a powerful novel which has poverty and hunger as its theme. The theme is here studied in a rural setting and hunger and starvation here are caused by the operation

of natural forces- excessive rains or utter drought. The theme of hunger has been realistically depicted, and the heroic struggle of Nathan and Rukmani, the central figures, against heavy odds raises the novel to the lofty heights of an epic. It is a novel of epical dimensions and it records vividly the poverty- stricken, heart breaking existence of the poor tenant-farmers of Madras. In its particular theme the story of Rukmani, her husband and children- there is a universality of love and loyalty that will appeal to readers all over the world.”

They have to face drought. Whatever savings they have, are spent in paying the dues to the landlord and then hunger, and nothing but hunger, is dominant. The novelist paints a very tragic picture of hunger: they fed on whatever they 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; sometime a crab that Nathan managed to catch near the river. Early and late their sons roamed by the countryside, came back with a few bamboo shoots, a stick of sugarcane left in some deserted field, or a piece of coconut picked from the gutter in the town. For every edible plant or root there was a struggle - a desperate competition that made enemies of friends and put an end to humanity. Sometimes they are forced to eat grass to satisfy their hunger.

It is all a grim-heroic struggle for survival. The hero in an epic wages a heroic war against his enemy; here Nathan and Rukmani wage, a heroic and relentless war against hunger and starvation. Their struggle is no less heroic, and much more poignant and heart-rending. Their heroic response to the forces of destruction- hunger, starvation and death- makes the novel an epic of rural India, in which heroic rural characters- Nathan and Rukmani- struggle patiently, heroically; persistently and relentlessly against heavy odds. Their struggle has been universalized, and imparted epical grandeur and dignity. The village where they live has not been given any name, and its locale has been kept vague and indistinct. This is so because it symbolizes rural India, and Nathan and Rukmani symbolize the Indian farmer, and their tragedy is the tragedy of rural India. Thus the novelist has imparted epical dimensions and

epical significance to the tragedy of a poor tenant- farmer and his family.

Because of the successive natural calamities, Nathan is not able to pay his landlord, the tannery needs his land, and so he is evicted from the field which he had cultivated and irrigated with his blood for so many long years. Nathan was deeply rooted in his land, and his eviction shakes him to the core, though outwardly he bears the tragedy with the same heroic endurance as had always characterized him. Nathan and Rukmani are compelled to migrate to the city to seek shelter with their son Murugan. Their journey to the city to search for Murugan, their son have been described in detail. It is like the descent of the epic-hero, or some other epic personage, into the underworld. The city is a hell, and here they come across poverty, hunger, disease and wickedness, in its most naked, stark and horrible form. The whereabouts of Murugan are not known and they are compelled to resort to begging, live with thieves and beggars in a temple, work as stone-breakers for sometimes, and ultimately Nathan dies.

Hunger, not only kills, it also degrades and de-humanises. It drives Kunthi to prostitution, and later on she resorts to blackmail Rukmani and Nathan during their most difficult days, when they are themselves starving. It obliges Ira to take to prostitution, in an heroic attempt to save the life of Kuti, her child-brother, who is ill and dying. Raja steals in the tannery and is killed. "Poverty is the worst of crimes and the root cause of all other crime and disease," said Bernard Shaw, and the truth is illustrated by the story of Nathan, and Rukmani.

CONCLUSION

Thus the central theme of the novel is 'hunger and starvation' has been studied in a rural setting through the many vicissitudes of Nathan and Rukmani. They are larger than life-characters, and their heroic response to hunger imparts epical dimension and grandeur to the novel. The travail of Nathan and Rukmani is the travail of Mother India.

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