

## Social evils in Kamala Markandaya's *nectar in a sieve*

P Jagadeeswari

Research Scholar, ERK Arts and Science College, Periyar University, Erumiyampatti, Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, India

### Abstract

Kamala Markandaya, in her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* narrated the suffering of rural women in south India. Rural India is embedded with traditional system wherein the women had to face many obstacles to sustain their life. She had critiqued the peasant women to overcome the obstacles. Her novel "*Nectar in a Sieve*" had depicted some of the social evils for women's identity in rural areas. The social evils are viz., patriarchal system, alien population, castes, prostitution, poverty, inequalities, education, dowry system, unemployment, barren women, disability, zamindari system, tenant farmers and money lending. The most advanced stage of these evils led to hunger, starvation, degradation, migration and disintegration of joint families. It ultimately drove the rural women to hopeless in life. Kamala Markandaya observed that Indian women in the pre independent era are desperate to search for their identity. It ended up with futile as many obstacles in line. Although some of the evils had started manifesting themselves in certain parts of south India for long back, these evils had assumed a serious dimension during pre-independence period. In this paper, an attempt has been made to find out some the barriers of the women's identity and its relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Kamala Markandaya narrated that Rukmani, a woman character who had overcome the hurdles through acceptance, tolerance optimism and modernity. The modernity welcomed to eradicate the social evils in some extent.

**Keywords:** social evils, women's identity, social barriers, modernity, rural problems

### Introduction

Kamala Markandaya is writing novels when India was simply at the beginning of newly won freedom. The struggle for women emancipation in rural areas is essential to assert their identity. As women are evolved to create a multiple identities in the society, there is a need to study the threats and evils or barriers faced by them. It is well known that women in India are high levels of involvement in social, cultural, economic, environmental and political aspects of the life. Among the stream of identity, some of the sociological factors which vehemently stopped the women's identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These sociological barriers are viz., patriarchal system, alien population, castes, prostitution, poverty, inequalities, illiteracy, dowry system, unemployment, barren women, disability, zamindari system, tenant farmers and money lender. Most of these evils are very much relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century inspite of India contribution in science and technology in all spears.

Women's empowerment, women's participation and women's identity are some of the buzz words today to reflect the women in globalized era. Globally, women play an important role in agriculture, industry, political system, emissaries and cultural exchanges. It is therefore a compulsion for every woman to find the ways and means to establish their identity in their walk of life. Kamala Markandaya in her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, critiques the tale and misfortunes of a peasant couple, Nathan and Rukmani of a South Indian Village. The dissertation on the novel "*Nectar in a Sieve*" revealed that women's involvement in the society is very much important for economic growth and prosperity of rural areas. As a tenant farmer, Rukmani vividly works hard in agriculture to establish her identity. She comes across many obstacles in rural areas which re-enforced migration and disintegration of joint families in rural areas.

The flow of life in an Indian village has been realistically discussed with sympathy and skillful writings. Though the novelist Mrs. Kamala Markandaya had western outlook for many things, she vividly portrayed the social barriers for self-realization of women in rural areas. The self-identity can be developed by social values, cultural values, economical values, environmental values and political system. These are the key elements of the identities in rural women. Many of the struggles for recognition begin with land and agriculture, which takes on multiple meanings. As the society is one of the materialists for the empowerment of women, it plays a vital role for establishing a women's identity.

The most prominent manifestation of social evils led to migration of people in search of jobs, hunger, poverty, illegal activities, starvation, degradation of nature and human life, death and disintegration of families. In this dissertation work, an attempt was made to find out and critically analyze, interpret the nature and causes of social evils in rural areas. It was also attempted to elucidate the role of modernity and its influence on the social evils for self-realization of women in south India.

### Results and discussion

Kamala Markandaya in her novel "*Nectar in a Sieve*" had narrated that there are many problems associated with the rural areas in south India. These problems or evils are more of social aspect of life. Self-realizations of rural women were dependent on their social values earned. These social values are responsible for the identity, integrity and stability of the families in rural India. The author had depicted the reality of social values and tyranny of customs in rural areas which hindered the rise of women in modern world. Customs are the manners and rules of the society, but they don't change with time and circumstances. Mrs. Kamala Markandaya has

portrayed, in her novel such customs are the cause for the miseries of her women characters. Some of the social evils drawn in the novel of *Nectar in a Sieve* are given below.

- Patriarchal system
- Zamindari system
- Dowry system
- Alien population
- Money lender
- Castes
- Poverty and Unemployment
- Prostitution
- Illiteracy
- Inequalities
- Barren women
- Disabled

### **Patriarchal system**

As woman is always a sufferer for no fault of her, always victims of male dominated society. She has to play different role in her life. When she is born, she has to become the target of criticism of her being a girl. In her childhood she has to depend on the father. Woman depends on husband after the marriage, and her old age she depends on the son for her subsistence. As a mother she has to obey her sons, as a wife she has to obey her husband and as a daughter she has to obey her father. Despite her great sacrifices, she faces several male-dominated sufferings. The personality of the typical woman was overwhelmingly swamped by the male dominated attitudes against the backdrop of an exclusively male-dominated culture. An Indian husband, even educated, does not treat his wife as a companion, but as a subordinate. After their marriage, Indian women have to lose their identity and wait for the mode of their husbands. Even they cannot suggest anything without the orders of their husbands. But sometimes their sacrifice for their husband does not touch the pitiless heart of man, and they have to bear the neglect, or if their husband dies, they have to face degradation. In a 'Nectar in a Sieve' Ira, the daughter of Rukmani neglected by her husband and suppressed like anything. It led to degrading her life and the society approved the act of husband, even her father Nathan, justified. Hemangi and Ghosal (2016) <sup>[6]</sup> also stated Gender inequality is a deep rooted malice practiced in India in many forms from yester years. Addressing the malice of gender discrimination, women empowerment in India is a long drawn battle against the powerful structural forces of the society which are against women's growth and development, while analyzing the Anita Desai's novel 'Cry the Peacock'.

### **Zamindari system**

Kamala Markandaya in her novel depicts that Zamindari system, is a curse for the development of the rural society as most of the tenant farmers are forced to pay their dues imposed upon them. The novelist describes atrocities of Zamindar towards the tenant farmer as "Harassment by the Zamindar who demands his rent from the tenant farmers. Sivaji came to collect master's dues and his face fell when he saw the cruel sky, calm tenant farmers. When Sivaji asked Nathan to pay his dues, Nathan replied that the crop had died due to the vagarious nature. At last Nathan and Rukmani had to sell a few earthen pots, two brass vessels and the tin Trunk that Rukmani had brought with her as bride, two shirts of his sons and ollocks of dhall. The drought continued until the farmer's condition became more pathetic. Even though the farmer's life was ruined by the unforeseen natural calamities, the Zamindar had forced to pay the tenant dues. Rukmani's comments about Shivaji:

"In all the years of our tenancy we never saw the Zamindar who owned our land. Sivaji acted for him, and being a kindly, humane man we counted ourselves lucky. Unlike some, he

did not extract payment in kind to the last grain; he allowed us to keep the gleanings; he did not demand from us bribes of food or money; nor did he claim.....there was no bad blood between us. (22) "

### **Dowry system**

Customs are the manner and code of society, but when they don't change with time, they become tyrants. The tyranny of customs poses several problems to the people. The dowry system is one of the customs which is bane of the society. In her first novel, "*Nectar in a Sieve*", Rukmani has to pay hundred rupees in dowry for the marriage of her daughter, Ira. The dowry system ruins the parents and cause for miseries in the society. Mrs. Kamala Markandaya stated in her novel that "How a girl is unwelcome in the family and explores the reason behind the traditional views", i.e., the dowry system. Rukmani closes her eyes when she hears that she has given a birth to a girl child because she knows that husband wants son. The idea that becomes her worry is "who will want a daughter for a first born? This attitude arises partly out of rigorous of dowry system....." "They will expect a large dowry", I said regretfully. "One hundred rupees will not win such a husband, we have no more" (26).

### **Alien population**

Rukmani as a woman rooted in tradition, does not like the construction of the tannery. She finds that the tannery causes ugliness, sordidness and meanness in the atmosphere of the village. She points out that, "It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew and flourished and spread. It was not a month but the entire year, a vast tract of agricultural land was swallowed. The pastures are replaced to construct the tannery and residential quarters. The native population was rooted out and foreigners were made to occupy the rural areas. The landscape features were changed due the change in demographic pattern in rural areas. Misra (2007) also made a similar observation in Kamala Markandaya's novels. Kamala Markandaya characters, belongs to the middle class or sometimes low class are class are seldom aware of the evils created by the alien population. Inhabitation of outsiders becomes scene of vice, social filth and moral debasement. The village traders make a trade with the tannery crowd and the prices go very high. Rukmani says "they had invaded our villages with clatter and din, had taken from us the maiden where our children played and had made the bazaar prices too high for us".

The novelist comments about the arrival of alien people to the village as

"Children were everywhere, dodging in and out of the crowd and crying out to each other in shrill excited voices. Startled pi-dogs added to the din. We formed a circle about the first arrivals, some fifteen men are so, who where uploading bricks from the bullock carts. They spoke in our language but with an intonation which made it difficult for us to understand them" (19).

### **Fallen women**

The fallen woman is those who are disowned by the husband, or parents or guardian. The rejection of a barren lady can pose a more serious problem both to the society and the individual. Mrs. Kamala Markandaya's presentation of barren ladies and their rejection by society is very vivid. Irawaddy, a daughter

of peasant woman (Rukmani) in “*Nectar in a sieve*” is rejected by her husband because she is barren. Her husband is condemned because he behaves in accordance with the traditional social norms. He says “I intend no discourtesy but this is an ordinary visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you (Nathan and Rukmani). She is a barren woman”.

As far as the minor women characters in the novel is concerned, Old Granny is a very pathetic character who faces poverty to the last breath. She starves but does not lose her faith in God. So is the cause of Ammu who is deserted by her husband (Murugan) to become a fallen woman since he has no source of money. Ammu doesn't lose her courage and patience. She supports her children in a splendid manner. When Rukmani went to city to search her son (Murugan), finds Ammu “was a very young girl, frail beyond most, deserted by her husband and doing her best to feed herself and her children. It is a vindication of rural women towards the acceptance and tolerance of sufferings. Indeed, the author's realism is purposeful and her intention is to awake the polite society to the real problems.

Irawaddy is the eldest daughter of Rukmani and Nathan. She is one of the main characters who are the victims of hunger, starvation and human degradation. She represents those fallen women who are not responsible for their tragedies but it is society which brings miseries to their lives. Besides, she is the symbol of sacrifice and love since she sells her body to feed her brother. Thus, she is not responsible for her miseries. Nicholson (1972) <sup>[4]</sup> remarked that Ira in *Nectar in a Sieves* (1954) is a sweet, obedient and hard working daughter of Rukmani and Nathan, - couple living by working at the fields. She is rejected by husband because she is childless. When the famine occurs, she turned her attention to her younger brother. She sells her body to the people of tannery to save her brother. “She flouts the moral value and disobeyed her mother who looks on helplessly, but her silent sacrifice exemplifies the extent to which a girl could go to help the members of her family”.

The problem of unmarried mother has attracted the novelist whom the stigma of ignominy, shame and dishonor is attached. This moral degradation led to the prostitution. She stakes sex as an essential thing in life. She believes in love that is full of sex. An illegitimate child is also a symbol of his mother's sin and shame, as shown in the Ira's child. The novelist lays emphasis on the uniformity of moral standards for men and women. Sujatha (2010) <sup>[7]</sup> revealed that more sympathy and honor for an unmarried mother on the part of the society and pleads for such a woman in Anita Desai's novels. She also advocated like Mrs Kamala Markandaya that an unmarried mother should be given social respect even without marriage. The illegitimate child should not continue to be a shame for her. A lady who is pregnant by someone before marriage, has only two options- one is death and other one is prostitution. The novelist has the view to rehabilitate the fallen women by offering better dowry. She quoted as saying “With a dowry it was perhaps possible she might marry again; without it no man would look at her, no longer a virgin and reputedly barren” (46).

### Disabled

The problems of the disabled have also been nicely presented by Mrs. Kamala Markandaya. Several characters in her novels

are physically handicapped. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Ira gives a birth to an albino child. In the same novel Puli have no fingers but only stumps. The disease which has rotting his body has eaten away nail and flesh to the first knuckle. Despite their physical abnormalities, Mrs. Kamala Markandaya has described the disabled character in such way that society tried to avoid the dejection born out of such conditions. They are hard workers and pleasant; if these characters lose their heart, it is due to other problems. Thus, the novelist's disabled beings know how to fight with their fate. The novelist stated that the disabled Puli have contributed the safety of the Rukmani's belongings in spite of his physical abnormalities.

“Whatever we earned we entrusted to him; the theft of the money from my sari while I slept had undermined not only my confidence but Nathan's; besides, Puli was manifestly more capable of caring for it than we were” (132).

### Castes

Indian society is a caste-ridden society, and this makes Mrs. Markandaya's characters miserable. ShivKumar (1978) <sup>[3]</sup> remarks that “Tradition is too much with them, that is why they don't dare to break it. Sometimes the individual has to sacrifice himself for it”. Rukmani is a conservative character in “*Nectar in A Sieve*” she opposed the Arjun's and Thambi's joining the tannery because they do not belong to the caste of untouchables. The conflicts between the rich and poor find a good expression in the novelist. The clash between the rich and the poor is the result of the inequalities in societies. Kamala Markandaya depicted chief characters from both the classes. Some of the best heroes and heroines belong to the lower stratum of society. She tries to stress the fact that the poor should not be looked down upon.

### Poverty and unemployment

The poverty is common theme in Indo- Anglian novels. The people in the villages face the pangs of hunger and undergo several bitter experiences in the process. Almost all the Indo-Anglian novelists have tried to describe in varying degrees, the theme of hunger. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the novelist discusses the poverty of peasant farmers in south India. The poverty emanated from the misery of natural disaster and manmade evils like exploitation. It is the story of the life of Nathan and Rukmani, the peasant farmers. The poverty forces them to wander from place to place in search of food. Similarly, Arjun and Murugan leave for Ceylon to get jobs. As a result of the poverty and unemployment, rural life is degraded due to migration and immoral livings.

### Inequalities

Tannery swallows the land of the farmers by purchasing it at a high cost. They are evicted from their land and their mud huts. The peasants are uprooted in this way and they migrated to the city. Eventually the family disintegrated and this disintegration of a single family is a symbol of the disintegration of the India agricultural way of life under the impact of westernization. Land acquisition, disintegration and displacement created an unequal income group in the villages. As a result of the emergence of rich and poor divide in the society, there were innumerable clashes between them which brought about the calamities to both the classes.

Inequalities in the rural areas were responsible for the various sufferings and problems.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude it can be said that women's identity in India was hindered by a range of social evils in the pre-independence period. There is a widespread perception that the "social evils" are more or less an outcome of tyranny of customs and oppressive system of living. Self-realization of women was defeated in rural areas due to the social evils. The most threatening social evils of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were viz., patriarchal system, alien population, castes, prostitution, poverty, inequalities, illiteracy, dowry system, unemployment, barren women, disability, zamindari system, tenant farmers and money lending. The prevalence of these social evils led to a huge migration of people dislocation of families and disintegration of joint families in rural areas. These factors had a cascading effect on the rural land and nature, life and death and tradition and modernity. Since the novelist is much concerned with the harsh realities of the lower stratum of the society, the novel fight against despair and the evils are defeated with the acceptance, tolerance, optimistic and encouraging the modern thoughts. As India is one of the fastest growing economies in the globe and want to become a global power, need to warm with the invading modernity while preserving traditional values which does not obstruct the women's identity. The modernity has some power to eradicate the social evils and establish the women's identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This will make a road for dominance of India in the digital era.

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