

## EAST-WEST ENCOUNTER IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NECTAR IN A SIEVE: A CRITICAL STUDY

Feroj Alam<sup>1</sup>✉

**Article Ref. No.:**

18112603N1EYFM

**Article History:**

Submitted on 26 Nov 2018

Accepted on 18 Feb 2019

Published online on 26 Feb 2019

**Keywords:**

Culture, Reflection, Social, Indian,  
Western, Custom, Tradition,  
Handicraft

**Abstract:**

Kamala Markandaya is one of the prominent women writers who has very well examined and developed Indian reality through her novels. *Nectar in a Sieve* is one of the best novels written by Kamala Markandaya in the annals of Indian fiction. Her grasp of Indian life cycle is unique and she has properly and effectively narrated industrial Indian village life based on poverty and exploitation of human resources. These social and cultural aspects of Indian village towards the industrial revolution are carefully noted in *Nectar in a Sieve* by Markandaya. As a writer she has very well painted the cross section of the changing Indian village. These facts are realistic and objective enough. Kamala Markandaya had deep understanding of Indian as well as Western social and cultural life. The study of cultural aspects in Indian women novelists is immensely significant because these works became vehicle of cultural transformation through various forms of narrative themes. Kamala Markandaya as a writer is not an exception to this phenomenon. The cultural understanding of Kamala Markandaya keeps her on the top. Further it has been observed that it is only when Markandaya subjects her theme to a far deeper probing that she is able to create living characters in meaningful dilemmas. Her characters in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* touch grass root realities based on perfect cultural understanding.

Culture has been defined as the sum total of customs, traditions, behaviour and art crafts as well as habits of people. The relevance of understanding cultural life in a literary

<sup>1</sup> [First Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Guest Lecturer in English, Dr. Meghnad Saha College, Itanagar, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, INDIA; Email: ferojalam9@gmail.com

fiction is highly significant because it reveals the objective picture of the contemporary society observed by the writer. The novels of Kamala Markandaya are no exception to this phenomenon. The modern literary criticism has evolved round men-women relations, gender equality and fight against patriarchy but in this wind of progressive thinking the culture life has remained neglected. Here in these work aspects of culture life have been explained properly. Kamala Markandaya is one of the prominent Indian women writers who has very well examined and developed Indian reality through her novels. *Nectar in a Sieve* is one of the best novels of Kamala Markandaya (1954) in the annals of Indian fiction. Her grasp of Indian life cycle is unique and she has properly and effectively narrated problems of Indian villages in the post-industrial era. *Nectar in a Sieve* is an illustrated story of Indian village life which is based on poverty and exploitation of human resources. It has been pointed out in one sense; "Kamala Markandaya's novels reflect a general preoccupation with class consciousness represented in almost all major modern Indian novels in English" (Misra, 2001, p.103). Further it has been noted that "Kamala Markandaya's fictional world is peopled by men and women of all classes whose self is wounded in the seemingly interminable process of tension and conflict between freedom and necessity, between individual and society" (Misra, 2001, p. 103). Cultural aspects and class consciousness described here are part of this process.

The East-West encounter is an important aspect of the novels of Kamala Markandaya and these aspects are very significantly depicted by the author through her narrative theme and characters' ideas. She has represented Indian way of life effectively. Nathan and Rukmani try more but in vain. Rukmani and Nathan accept it as a matter of fate. "We are all in God's hands and he is merciful" (Markandaya, 1954, p. 50). In this way Nathan expresses helplessness before nature.

*Nectar in a Sieve* is a story of faceless peasant, effect of Indian agrarian bankruptcy. This novel deals with industrialization and its impact on rural life. The novel deals with themes like hunger, degradation, illiteracy, beggary, superstitions, lack of family planning, unemployment, prostitution, industrialization, Zamindari system, dowry system, poverty, and evils of early marriage system, and these are very neatly depicted by Kamala Markandaya. Effect of such problems on rural life is very realistically sketched by the novelist Kamala Markandaya. Number systems in rural India remain unchanged for years and years. As a result of this a particular class enjoyed the power and remaining was crushed, consequently rich became richer and poor became poorer. She sketches rural life of barter system and the arrival of Industries. Here we can see the conflict between tradition and modernity which is given very picturesquely.

Arora (2006, p. 12) has rightly observed that "Kamala Markandaya's remarkable quality that sets her off from other Indian-English novelists is her realistic approach to literature. She presents veritable replica of hunger before her readers and makes them feel of the afflictions of the villagers as an independent observed". This shows that she is insider outsider. Setting and characters of novel take readers to the new world.

Urmila Sharma (2005, p. 126) has rightly observed that "Kamala Markandaya has been constantly preoccupied with the imaginative portrayal of the intercultural relationship of which she hereby is a living example". These cultural aspects are significant enough to study them in a microscopic manner. These can be very well examined here. These facts have a cultural base which can be explained here.

The deep faith in God is an important aspect of Indian culture, which has been rightly portrayed by Kamala Markandaya in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*.

After arrival of industries the cultural changes are significant and they affected in various forms of changed relationships. All these aspects can be very well observed here. Uma Parmeswaran (2000, p. 73) has rightly observed that, "The phrase *Nectar in a Sieve* says exactly what the author wants to say about the Indian condition, and her novels are about the drops of divine nectar that are given to us not about the sieve that makes it

impossible to hold the nectar". It is true that realistic portrayal of cultural life is the essence of the novels of Kamala Markandaya.

Kamala Markandaya has reflected social and cultural aspects of Indian village towards the industrial revolution. These aspects are carefully noted by Kamala Markandaya in this novel. As a writer she has very well painted the cross section of the changing Indian village. These facts are realistic and objective enough. Louis R. Barbato(1991, p. 7) says "Kamala Markandaya structured her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* around the conflict of cultures. A commonplace criticism of the novelist identifies these conflicting cultures in the largest terms, such as between Indian fatalism and British rationalism, or between encroachments of Industrialization as represented by a hated tannery and the peaceful rural life of tenant farmers".

Cultural clash and struggle for survival is largely discussed. Inter-cultural and intra-cultural encounter is also discussed. About cultural experiences M.K. Bhatnagar(2002, p.2) has noted that "Markandaya's work seeks to balance these two seemingly play facets of her life. Her fiction evinces a much broader range and offers a greater variety of settings, characters and effects, despite the fact that quintessentially her themes boil down to intercultural encounters and capturing of women in diverse life roles". Along with cultural conflicts Kamala Markandaya has also reflected the socio-economic problems of Indian village life in the post industrial age. The villages have been facing many problems in the age of transformation. These aspects have been carefully observed and noted here in this work. These facts are very much realistic and objective. Tremendous increases in prices become serious problem before villagers. Rukmani says, "No sugar or dhal or ghee have we tasted since they came and should have had none, so long as they remained" (See Markandaya, 1954, p. 28). Rukmani dislikes industrialization as she accepts traditional way of life. Nathan accepts the industrialization as it was established in their village. He says to Rukmani "There is no going back. Bend like the grass that you do not break" (See Markandaya, 1954, p. 28).

The contention between tradition and modernity is the quintessence of the creations of Kamala Markandaya. Kunthi was very happy, she asks Rukmani: "Are you not glad that our village is no longer a clump of huts but a small town? Soon there will be shops and tea stalls and even a bioscope, such as I have been to before I was married" (See Markandaya, 1954, p. 29). Some of villagers accept it but few like Rukmani are not bending or adjusting themselves. Kamala Markandaya has very well depicted the different aspects of village life which include both social and economic disparities in clear manner. Here conflict between tradition and modernity starts. She believes in traditional affairs only.

Rukmani and Nathan noticed that Ira is maturing as she has completed thirteen. Rukmani approached old granny for marriage of Ira. Rukmani was very serious about marriage of Ira. After search of one week they found a young man, who could fulfil their requirements. Dowry of one hundred rupees was decided and all the preliminaries completed in one month. Ira accepted as it is a tradition. The study of tradition and ceremonies is an important positive side of Kamala Markandaya's successful description of village life. She has described marriages in Indian village effectively.

The bitter reality is very well narrated by the author in interesting manner. She has drawn different aspects of village cultural life which are still prevailing. The exploration of rural poor in Indian village is very well depicted in this part of the novel. Nathan was sure that he can earn more from tannery. When Rukmani and Nathan returned home, Dr. Kenny goes to see them. He noticed that the family of Rukmani is also facing the problem of starvation. He becomes irritated and makes them aware about their right. It is said that, "Times 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 or do something? There is nothing in this country, oh God there is nothing" (See Markandaya, 1954, p. 63). Here

Kamala shows the problematic face of village life. The paddy field was completely destroyed and they have to wait till next harvesting. Meanwhile they managed to live on fish, roots, leaves, and fruits. In the hope of new crop they start living. Here the struggle of Rukmani for survival can be seen where she is not pessimistic but very hopeful about new harvest.

Respect to elder is a part of Indian traditional cultures. Kunthi was silent and more reserved than any other woman. She was thin, slight and pretty. Kunthi spent lot of time making unnecessary journeys into town where with her good look and body she attracted number of young men. One morning Rukmani was busy in her household duties, she sees Ira and her husband approaching silently. Rukmani left her work and traced out a colam, a pattern in white rice flour to welcome. As a matter of a custom Ira touched the feet of Rukmani and Ira entered in. Rukmani's son-in-law instead of getting in, adds, "I intend no discourtesy, but this is no ordinary visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you. She is a barren woman" (See Markandaya, 1954, pp. 49-50) Kamala Markandaya has very well described realities of Indian village life.

Kamala Markandaya is a great successful writer who has efficiently portrayed the cultural life in Indian village. Uma Parmeswarn (2000, p. 73) has observed that "her novels about the drops of divine nectar that are given to us; not about the sieve that makes it impossible to hold back the impurities and purifies that which passes through". The fact of tradition versus modernity is discussed here.

The moral issues were very well tackled by Kamala Markandaya. The struggle of values between East and West is very well reflected by the author. Indian life is based on moral values and Western life is on materialistic values. This struggle is very well depicted by Kamala Markandaya and she has very well portrayed these realities in a very objective manner. She has focused on Indian values and morality effectively. Dr. Kenny represents those people who dedicate their lives for the cause of humanity. His love and sympathy for the villagers is an open secret. If necessary, he also gave them money for food and medicine.

Gajendra Kumar (2002, p. 58) has observed that "Rukmani's concern, commitment, immediacy, urgency and veracity that designed the novel a credible chronicle of the peasant's struggle and life at the time when social change was taking place and gives the novel an epic dimension". Rukmani, central character, fights throughout her life for her own identity by denying modernity.

The problems of hunger and its tragic end are narrated by writer here. Harmony is the essence of cultural writings of Kamala Markandaya and she has tackled basic values effectively through her writings. Kenny returns to village once again and declares that he will construct a hospital for villagers. Selvam, the last son of Rukmani, decides to join hospital instead of working in farm. The reaction of Selvam for leaving occupation is the same as of his brothers. Before him Arjun, Thambi and Murugan migrated and Raju died in Tannery. All accept the new way of life. Here is shifting of traditional Indian village to modern village where struggle is the only way before them.

This kind of helplessness is very well presented by the writer through her narrative theme effectively. All these aspects are effectively presented. Everything goes worse. Nathan and Rukmani plan to survive but they are not able to fulfil their basic needs. After the birth of their grandson, Sacrabani, Murugan, son of Rukmani, settled in town arranges marriage but they are not able to go for it. They were in financial crisis so cannot go by rail or hire a bullock-cart. In those days they struggle for food so they avoided the marriage of Murugan. The poverty thus affects their village life cycle and they had to avoid such marriage ceremonies. These examples in the narration very well explain the social and cultural reflection in an effective manner. Steady encroachment of tannery continues. Tannery starts acquiring more and more land. Its rapid expansion affected rural life. Poor

tenants are not paying regularly so Zamindar decides to sell the land to tannery. The author has depicted this problem of survival in a touching language.

Nathan does not blame the tannery but he thinks that it is matter of our fate that by God's mercy we tilled land for years and years. He knows that it was not theirs so should not think about it. Nathan knows that the land does not belong to them but natural calamities on land were because of them. Nathan thinks about all the life he spent to till the land. The social and cultural problems in the village agro based life have been very well narrated by the writer. The life in the hut and problems around them are described by author. Though landless, but still use to remain on land and all of a sudden everything changes. When they tilled the land, they were not happy all the time. Problem of hunger was the major problem before them. They were struggling to remain alive only. Here Nathan and Rukmani leave home to go to city in search of their son Murugan where they can get food and shelter. Arundhati Chattarjee (1987, p. 85) truly stated that "the embodiment of such a mother figure is found in Rukmani. The single force that unites the whole structure of the novel is the character of the narrator, Rukmani. She is a village girl, a loving and devoted wife and sacrificing Mother". Thus Kamala Markandaya is successful in depicting village life and its culture in a sharp manner and effective language.

Kamala Markandaya has tried to explore British Industrialists through her systematic ideas. She is successful in depicting the traditional life of Indian villagers who are suffering from poverty. In very eulogising words, Markandaya depicted various themes together. Though the novel looks simple but its plot and story enthral the reader. Neeraj Garg (2003, p. 58) rightly stated that "though Nectar in a Sieve is not a political novel, yet some situations in the novel show political life of the people, and these situations weave the fabric of Kamala Markandaya's vision of political life". Unemployment, illiteracy, hunger, degradation, displacement, industrialization, beggary, superstitions, and class conflict are depicted by Kamala Markandaya. The vicious circle of problems faced by Indian villagers is described by the author. She has also noted how their cultural life is destroyed by the new industrial system.

Thus the East-West cultural encounter is tackled by Kamala Markandaya in the background of Indian village life which has suffered after arrival of industrial revolution. Nectar in a Sieve is one of the greatest novels of Kamala Markandaya based on multidimensional social issues. About social realism in this novel Balan Banumathe (2013, p. 443) has observed that "Kamala Markandaya reflects her own experience through the awareness of her fictional characters. There is no doubt about the fact that Kamala Markandaya is on the side of human life and she is against exploitation of the weak against war and violence".

Among these characters Rukmani is the main character who is the symbol of Indian sufferings caused due to social and cultural system. Throughout the novel, Rukmani is confronted with struggle after struggle but she does not find out any lifeboat which can bear her to a secure shore. Every time Rukmani falls into desolate situation and she tolerates that situation quietly, holding on to the hope that the new sun will soon rise in the next morning and that sun will bring a peace of mind for her. She thinks that every person should have the stamina to overcome his/her sufferings because if sorrow comes, can happiness be far behind from him/her.

The aged Rukmani exposes her own feeling of endurance in Nectar in a Sieve. "A woman without beauty and dowry"(See Markandaya, 1954, p. 4) could get married to a tenant farmer named Nathan at the age of twelve and goes on to live with her husband. It is a source of shame for her because the well-bred daughter of a village headman getting married to a tenant farmer who is socially lower in status than her family. But it is the sincere love and concern of Nathan which provides a sense of comfort to Rukmani and this sincere care and love of Nathan for Rukmani, she gives birth to a beautiful daughter within a year.

Kamala Markandaya had deep understanding of Indian as well as Western social and cultural life. It has been observed that “Markandaya shows deep intimacy with the British as can be seen from her numerous detailed and vivid portraits” (Banumathe, p. 443). She has developed a character of Dr. Kenny, a village doctor, who is an Englishman. The presentation of the humane character named Dr. Kenington or Kenny, an English doctor, by Kamala Markandaya, is a very important character in the novel.

Although Rukmani’s necessarian posture towards hardship exacerbates him, he feels clemency for her and spreads his helping hand to her when he can. In the last portion of the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani leaving her abode goes to live with her youngest son, Selvam who is a doctor of a hospital which has been built by Dr. Kenny. The different shades of cultural life depicted by Kamala Markandaya, interestingly revealed various aspects of social and cultural life in the Indian village. The different dimensions of Kamala Markandaya’s novel *Nectar in a Sieve* revealed how she described all these aspects in a new angle. The East-West encounter in the post-independence life is also very well planned and described by the author. Her success lies in her able efforts to describe the positive and negative aspects of Indian village life in an effective manner. Kamala Markandaya must be credited for her all round serious efforts to depict East-West encounter effectively.

## REFERENCES

- Arora, S.K. (2006). *A Study of Kamala Markandaya’s Women*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
- Banumathe, Balan(2013). *Social Realism in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya with Special Reference to Nectar in a Sieve, Possession and a Handful of Rice*. International Journal of English and Literature, Vol. 4(9).
- Bhatnagar, M.K. (2002). *Kamala Markandaya*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
- Bhatnagar, M.K. (2002). *Kamala Markandaya, A Critical Spectrum*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
- Chhatterjee, Arundhati (1987). *Rukmani, The Mother Figure in Nectar in a Sieve*. Gulbarga: JIWE.
- Garg, Neerja (2003). *Kamala Markandaya’s Vision of Life*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons Publishers.
- Kumar, Gajendra (2002). *Nectar in a Sieve: A Saga of an all-out Human Effort and Enterprise*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
- Louis R. Barbato (1991). *The Arrow in the Circle: Time and Reconciliation of Cultures in Kamala Markandaya’s Nectar in a Sieve*. Ariel, Vol.22, No.4.
- Markandaya, Kamala (2003). *Nectar in a Sieve*. Mumbai: Jaico Publication.
- Misra, Pravati (2001). *Class Consciousness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
- Parneswaran, Uma (1968). *India for the Western Readers: A Study of Kamala Markandaya’s Novels*. Texas Quarterly, 11, Vol.II.
- Parneswaran, Uma (2000). *Kamala Markandaya*. Jaipur: Rawat Publishers.
- Sharma, Urmilas (2005). *Women Characters in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya*. Meerut: Shalabha Publication.