

## **FOOD INSECURITY IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NECTAR IN A SIEVE**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Kamala Markandaya, an Indian expatriate novelist and journalist wrote the novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' which is a tale of suffering and turmoil of the rural villagers. Subtitled as 'A Novel of Rural India', it was her third novel and the first one to be published. This work depicts rural India and the people's daily activities. Kamala Markandaya's voluntary stay in the village for a few weeks was the inspiration for this novel. She picturizes the rural society who are affected by social evils like poverty, hunger, starvation, illiteracy etc. The major threat that the characters face in this novel is food insecurity which is responsible for most of the actions and decisions of the characters. Known for highlighting the clash between Indian urban and rural culture, she focuses on demoralizations and deaths caused by hunger and poverty. This paper focuses on the food insecurity faced by the villagers and their combat against the social evil.

**Key words:** Hunger;Poverty;Starvation;Food insecurity.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Kamala Markandaya is unquestionably one of the most outstanding women writers who has been enriching Indian fiction in English. Having her roots in India, she settled in England after her marriage with Bertrale Taylor, an English journalist. Her novels are notable for their narrative style as she weaves intricate incidents to the lives of characters through her imagination which makes them lively and realistic. Her novels are mostly semi-autobiographical that paints a vivid picture of India, dealing with post-colonial themes, plight of rural India, dilemma of people, industrialization, etc. Out of her ten novels, her first one Nectar in a sieve which was published in 1954 was widely recognized and is still a part of prescribed syllabus throughout the world. As an international best-seller, it was translated into seventeen other languages. She portrays the rustic life of rural India who suffer due to various reasons like foreign invasion, industrialization, poverty, food insecurity, etc.

Nectar in a Sieve is set in an undesignated village in pre independent India. It deals with the life of a peasant family who encounter invincible hurdles throughout their life. It centers around the life of Rukmani, the protagonist. This book highlights Rukmani's struggle to protect her family from storms of hunger, poverty and other social evils that could potentially degrade her family. The main concern that is focused by Kamala Markandaya in this novel is the issue of food insecurity encountered by rural population of India.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

- i. To examine the issue of food insecurity;
- ii. To analyze the impact of social evils on the pastoral community;
- iii. To emphasize the significance of hope and resilience in overcoming obstacles.

Rukmani's family is an example of Indian families who suffer under the vagaries of nature and harsh socio-economic problems. Rukmani who belongs to a prosperous family tries to adapt to the lifestyle of her poor husband Nathan in the village. In the beginning, she compares her life in her parents' home with her current one where there is a lack of economic security and stability. Though Nathan did not own a piece of land, he worked hard to ensure that his family was fed well. Nathan's hard work and commitment gave a relief to Rukmani and a hope for the future. But as her family grew in size, this hope

and financial security started to diminish. For the first six years of marriage, Rukmani led a sophisticated life where they were fed lavishly with rice, vegetables, milk, ghee and other dairy products.

" We owned our own ploughing bullocks; we kept a goat. From each harvest we saved, and had gunnysacks full of husked rice and stored away in our small stone-lined granary. There was food in plate for two people and we ate well; rice for morning and evening meals; dhal; sometimes coconut grated fine and cooked in milk and sugar; sometimes a wheat cake, fried in butter and melting in mouth". (9)

After giving birth to six sons, the family started suffering from hunger and poverty. As the size of the family increased, their misery also increased. Nature also had a key role in threatening the family's food security. Farmers like Nathan who depend on rain for the prosperity of their harvests were let down when rains fail to show up or there is an excessive downpour. The floods and droughts caused by irregular weather patterns caused a menace and resulted in hunger and poverty. As a result of this havoc, the price of food and other essential commodities hiked and the rural families were not able to afford them. Their survival entirely depended on the plants and other organisms in nature.

"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 breaking the hearth hard until at last it split and great irregular fissures gaped in the land."(79)

"The paddy was completely destroyed; there would be no rice until the next harvesting. Meanwhile, we lived on what remained of our salted fish, roots and leaves, the fruit of the prickly pear, and on the plantains from our tree. "(46)

Rukmani managed to provide the grains that they stored for the next harvest to her family and subdued their burning hunger. But Kunthi, the neighbor threatened both Rukmani and Nathan that she would reveal their secrets if they fail to give her the grains. Both Rukmani and Nathan were forced to give up the bare minimum of food that they had preserved hoping to feed their family for weeks. This forced them to rely on decayed vegetables and fishes from stagnant water. They also started digging up the grains that they had been sowed in the ground. They had to walk for several miles to bring home a few liters of water. This shows the extent of the suffering and starvation the rural population were facing. There are numerous external factors like predators (Kunthi who snatches their opportunity to survive), nature, fate, etc. that determines their meal of the day. The most affected person by this starvation was their youngest son Kuti. To ensure his survival, Irawaddy, Rukmani's daughter turned to prostitution. When the family condemned her, she said that she would sell her body than seeing her loved ones suffer from starvation. "“Tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long as there is need. I will not hunger anymore.”" (102)

In spite of her efforts, Kuti passed away. This shows how social evils force people to choose path of disintegration and moral degradation. Kunthi and Ira chose prostitution to protect themselves from the harshness of starvation and the third son Raja indulges in theft and loses his life. The family views death not as a suffering, but as a relief from starvation .

## **CONCLUSION:**

Till the end of this novel, the characters fight for their mere survival. Their fight for food is never ending. In the course of their fight, they lose their dignity. They indulge in degenerating, immoral activities that turn them into beastly creatures. This proves that hunger is the main driving force that is responsible for all instinctual activities of human beings. In order to protect themselves from the harshness of hunger and poverty, the characters of the novel like Kunthi and Irawaddy resort to immoral activities. The native people who were living off the land were abandoned by nature due to its uncertainty. This forced them to abandon the lands instead and move to the city, hoping for a better future. But the fight for food in the city is worse when compared to the village. When Rukmani and

Nathan leave to the city with the hope of finding their son Murugan, they are exposed to the harsh reality of the urban side. The people in the city were also been hit hard by hunger and starvation. Rukmani encountered the scenes where people were quarreling among themselves for the free food that was served in the village. Children in the streets also involved in beastly activities while they were searching for food. This comparison of the urban and rural side portrays the dark sides of both the city and the village.

The characters' struggle is never ending. They cling on to a string of hope, believing that they'll be ensured of their food security. Rukmani is seen as an epitome of hope and hard work. In a stereotypical society where the men are expected to be the bread winners, Rukmani breaks the stereotype and takes the lead role and endures all sufferings to ensure the food security of her family. The only solution to the plight of people who suffer from socio economic problems is their hope for a better and secure life. It is with that hope that Rukmani returns to village from the city after her husband's death. She also brings Puli, an orphan with her. Though she is not able to feed her own family, she adopts Puli and feeds him. Thus Nectar in a sieve is a tale of how the characters survive the social evils like hunger and starvation with hope and find a means of living.

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