

# Struggle for Survival in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in A Sieve

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## Abstract

*Kamala Markandaya is a renowned women novelist in Indian writing in English. The Nectar in a Sieve is her first literary novel. Rukmani is the heroine and the narrator. Rukmani's father was a village headman. She had three elder sisters: Shanta, Padmini and Thangam. They were married well with a lot of dowries which provided by their parents. For Rukmani, her parents are not in a position to marriage with a rich man in the same village. Due to Rukmani's family's situation she was married to a peasant. Also he is very poor too. In the very beginning she feels that a marriage life would be very happy for her. After a couple of years her life is full of anguish.*

**Keywords:** *Ideology, Structure of feeling, Inequality, Hegemony, Hierarchy*

## Introduction

This chapter studies the meanings, values or the content in the novel, Nectar in a Sieve. It studies the surface meaning as well as the hidden values in the discourse. Further, the chapter analyzes the lived experience of people in the social context of the narrative. It includes the social period, social class structure and the structure of feeling expressed by the novel. The social structure includes the causes acting together as ideologies, socio-economic material forces, the hegemony and the oppressive social order. As Nageswara Rao rightly says about the subtitle.

The Novel deals with the peasants their activities, problems and anxieties, hopes and expectations, and Joys and sorrows. It is therefore natural to find in it an emphasis on rural ethos and rural value systems. In this value system the productivity of the land, the fecundity of men, the fertility of women or the fruitfulness of the plants is of great importance. (Nageswara Rao 7).

The structure of feeling expressed by the novel is profound. The novelist uses simple, clear language and in a voice that is pacifist in nature. She does not employ dramatic or rhetorical device to be openly evocative but uses a day to day speech form and idioms that happen in the life of Rukmani. Sorrow and pity is exceeded by anger because the underlying causes are man-made. It reveals the socio-economic material forces and the ideology working together as hegemony to brutalize the life of the common folk. These common people are not lazy cheats or greedy of pelf of

power. They only seek food, shelter and work to do. Their desires are the common joys of social life in the place where they live.

The structure of feeling is similar in everyone whether they are rural people or city-bred or whether they are rich or poor, educated or uneducated. Emotionally their responses are same when affected by oppressive situations. Everyone is stricken by the sense of guilt when they have done something unloving to their fellow men. Kunthi is in labour pain. There is no one around to help her that day. Rukmani is the only one beside her bed and Rukmani too is in the family way. “Kunthi cried out that she did not want me”, says Rukmani. “You must go” she kept entreating. .... No, no please go I do not want you here”. (P. 12). Kunthi is carrying Rukmani’s husband’s child in a clandestine affair. Rukmani does not know it but Kunthi feels both the pain of labour as well as the guilt that troubles her conscience. And without a midwife, it was Rukmani who saw to it that Kunthi delivered a son who took a long time to be born. And when Rukmani comes home late, her husband is angry with her for being so late and told her not to forget that she herself was pregnant. He was not anxious about their child in her womb but he was suffering from a hidden guilt of being betrayed his wife.

Rukmani’s first child was a girl. Rukmani’s reactions are provoked by a social order that is male-centred and male dominated. “I turned away and despite myself, the tears came, tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what women wants a girl for her first born?” (p.16). This false consciousness is a social construct. This plays spoilsport against real human relationship and honour between men and women. Their daughter is named Ira waddy and in short they call her Ira. She was fair looking, “Lovely and dimpled, with soft gleaming hair” (P. 17). Everyone around said that she was a child of matchless brilliance born to plain looking farmers. Ira’s life when she becomes an adult is full of adversity. Ira’s story is very poignantly told. The structure of feeling it signifies points to the fault line in the socio-cultural system. The old Dominant social order is oppressive against woman and even ordinary necessities and joys are denied to them. The society compels them to beget and give birth only to lusty sons. Women are considered a little lower than men in every way. The tragic situations faced by Ira is man-made. Nature or god has no part in it. Ira’s husband brings her back to her parents and leaves her at her parental home because she was childless and he had waited for five years.

According to Ghorpade, Ira was a victim of a dominant social system and she says:

While socio-religious forces create problems of acceptability and respectability for the childless woman, lack of money for survival drives her to prostitution, as it happens in the

case of Ira. .... “Ira’s husband deserts her because she is barren. Hence the husband in the rural area has the social sanction to discard his barren wife”. (Pradnya Vijay Ghorpadel P.8)

The concomitant changes were the new social formation, a new power structure, a new economic order and hierarchy brought in by the industry. The close-knit organic society was slowly withering away. The new social formation is symbolized by the words, dressed in a short and trousers and had a hat on his head. The workers were lion cloths and turbans while a few had a shirts on” (P. 28). The villagers witnessed new play of authority in the guise of the overseer. He spoke in loud tones and directing the workers with gestures. And above the overseer there was the white man who owned the industry. He had a few associates who were imitations of the white man in attire. They wore shorts and shirts and had a white topee on their heads. The overseer was submissive to the orders of the owner and associates. The new power structure even spills over to the native villagers. Under the orders of the whiteman, the overseer telling the villagers to go away and not disturb the men on the work. The villagers sense the act as repressive. In the place of the Zamindar, a new centre of power is seen planted amidst them. Some of the villagers do not forget to resent the new power. Kannan the cobbler resented the tannery taking away his livelihood. He felt the new men acted as if they owned the villagers.

The tannery brought in new social formation with new sets of house structures and families that are not linked by blood but by labour. The new society was full of din and noise, were unruly and had little moral scruples. The structure of feeling shown by Rukmani is signified in these words: “They have invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played and made the bazar prices too high”. (P.30). The village folk were never used to the smell of their liquors and the brew. They consider the new comers as invasion and occupation of their lands. To Rukmani something dangerous and cynical was taking place among them. The new social formation establishes its own base while the infrastructure of the industry as a centre of power is on its way to formulate the superstructure in the future.

The paddy lies completely destroyed. The rice would be scarce until the next harvesting. Nature does provide a plenty with edible roots and leaves, prickly pear fruit. Nature’s alternative food supply included fish in the flooded fields and low lying areas. Nathan says “the fields were full of fish that would feed us for many a days” (P. 46) The situation did offer Rukmani dreams of growing more vegetables and more money while she also says, “such dreams delightful, orderly

satisfying but of the stuff of dreams, wraithlike” (P.47) One can’t really blame nature for the ills of mankind. Nature remains neutral in human affair. It neither sympathizes with him nor carries any vengeance. It does not interfere in the joy’s or sorrows of human beings. The positive or negatives ideas about nature is the construct of the human psyche. The unconscious human mind considers nature sometimes as a God and some other time as devil. These constructs only keep away man’s mind from real perceptions and the reality of the prevailing inequalities that has brought division and disorders of every kind. The novel has plenty to say on these man-made calamities causing pain sorrow due to poverty, famines and tragic death.

The tannery also brought in social and moral disruptions in the culture and the social life of the native peasants. Arjun her first son wants to join work at the tannery. Rukmani tries to dissuade him because she thinks that only caste of tanners should do that work. Moreover she is afraid of her relations might say something against his decision. On the contrary Arjun feels the need of some income to feed the large family. He frankly says, “I am tired of hunger and I am tired of seeing my brothers hungry. There is never enough, especially since Ira came to live with us” (P. 53). He did not really grudge his own sister Ira but was concerned that there was very little. The harvests had been very poor, shop prices were higher. Rukmani resented Arjun being helped by Kunthi’s son. She suggests that she would ask Kenny to help him get the job as she thought the whitemen had powers. Arjun turns sarcastic and says, “Indeed they have ... over men and events and especially over women” (P.54). It was not proper for Arjun of teenage to say such things to his mother. Arjun joins the tannery and soon his brother Thambi too joins him at work. The peasantry as a traditional work of thousands of generations is disrupted and Nathan’s son says, “If it were your land, or mine ... I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return? Far better to turn away from such injustice” (P.54).

Nathan and Rukmani’s livelihood turns more and more difficult with increasing scarcity. Trouble begets trouble. One problem brings in newer ones. Kunthi is able to bully Rukmani and blackmail her to share the little rice she had for the family. Kunthi is also able to cheat and threaten Nathan to steal the hidden rice left by Rukmani and hand it to Kunthi. These incidents make Rukmani both angry and terribly disheartened. And to add to these tragic events, the family also is shocked by Ira’s secret ventures in the night out of home as a sex worker. They are both culturally shocked while they also had to accept it as a social necessity. It was, for Ira, a transgressive subversion of the oppressive socio-economic system. Later, Nathan confesses to Rukmani of his

clandestine affair with Kunthi and that he was the father of Kunthi's two sons. The turn of events point out the hypocritical moral stance of men their lies, deceit and concealments.

The draught and the increasing scarcity of food pushes the family to a situation when they try eating grass like cattles, as well as try alternate food like crabs, fruits of prickly pear and left overs thrown out by the rich, bamboo shoots or coconuts that go floating. The agony of pain and sorrow is increased when the guards at the tannery had Raja killed accusing him of having attempted to steal a few pieces of processed leather. The officials reach Rukmani's home to both bully or use sly arguments to convince her that there wasn't any fault on their side but on the mis-adventure of Raja. They use her innocence to make her accept their view that it does not call for any compensation. The industry forces its will on the poor peasants to accept their terms and order. It brings a new power structure more brutal and inhuman than the old system. The incident shows the beginning of terrible human-right violations and injustice. Though Ira tries to save the life of Kuti her brother by braving herself of the ignominy of a sex worker, Kuti dies of dissipation by hunger. The gathering darkness in the life Nathan and Rukmani did not end very soon – but continued to expand but slowly swallowing them up little by little.

The character of Kenny is a signifying apparatus of political intervention representing the novelist. How Kenny responds to the lived experiences of these poor peasants represents the moral stance the novelist takes on behalf of the oppressed people. The voice of subversion are clear when Kenny says, "I have told you before, ... I will repeat it again: You must cry out if you want help. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will succor the drowning man if he does not clamour for his life?". The admonitions call for a voice against the dominant social system, a minimal voice of resentment to begin with. He finds the victims voiceless, mute because the ideological base has already made them subalterns. Rukmani's private thoughts show it. She says, "As for our wants, They are many and unfulfilled, for who is so rich or compassionate as to supply them? Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons or the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and can not change?" (P. 115).

The novel portrays the inequalities the tenant farmer continued to be kept in by the few landed gentry. They intermittently experienced times of hardship, of fear and of starvation. Their existence is mere survival and represented a weak surrender to the whims of the landlord. They always forced the risk of losing the land on which their survival depended. The system, that

governed their lives, have defeated the rules of economy falsified real business and transaction as well as human relationship. The labour can not make rules of business or alter them if they needed. The capitalist have no provisions in their system to make payment to the labour when crops fail. It is always the labour who was compelled to pay. Their only way is to raise their voice of resentment and organized opposition. Kenny was trying to make them see this point but very mildly and subtly. Selvam seizes upon the idea and says, “You have accepted it? You have made no protest?” (P. 138). So Nathan and Rukmani had to leave the village in great uncertainty and deep sorrow to reach Murugan their son in a far away city. Selvam, Ira and their grandson stay back in the village.

The exodus of Nathan and Rukmani is much more tragic than before. It is symbolic of the loss of their roots, their sense of belonging and their identities and purpose of existence. They do try to survive against the terrible odds in their search for Murugan who was no where to be found. The trails lead no where. They had to survive by charity meals served at the temple and shelter under the roof of the temple precincts. The protagonist are heroic in their incessant and brave effort to survive even if they are incompetent to work they are not trained for. They are people with human sensibilities because they consider anyone as an opponent or any enemy. There is no hate or hurt feelings against any fellow human beings. Their poverty is not a defeat but a fall while braving the battle.

The only saving grace of the story is that the broken Rukmani returns to the village with Puli as her endearing adopted son in place of Murugan who disappeared without information. Puli is an example for a social transformation brought out by the single peasant woman Rukmani without any preaching or propaganda. She is an example of a person fulfilling a social responsibility. It is superior to the modern of idea of corporate social responsibility which uses material support which at the most are social allurements and mostly infrastructure related services.

The whole week they did the same. Nathan did not stop and his will and ego drove him into a frenzied action. It seemed as if he drove himself into a final take off from life. He says, “I have only to stretch out my hand ... to feel the coldness of death. Would you hold me when my time is come? I am at peace. Do not grieve” (P. 191) He died as a peaceful man; there was no anxiety or animosity. He did not curse mankind or the elements of nature “and so his gentle spirit withdrew and the light went out in his eyes”.

The family of Rukmani and Nathan had nothing to moor their hopes or life. Even the religion and culture as sustainer of living got untethered and lost. Kenny tried to offer hope on crying out their resentments and to consider actions of transgression against the repressive and dominant social system. The people were too innocent and ignorant to see the truth. And so there wasn't any liberating truth to see them free of the prevailing inequalities and the hegemony.

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