



# Existential despair in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*: A study

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Received: 30 Jul 2022; Received in revised form: 22 Aug 2022; Accepted: 27 Aug 2022; Available online: 31 Aug 2022  
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**Abstract**— Among the diasporic novelists of India, Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) occupies a prominent place as being one of the founding figures of the tradition. When she started writing novels in the 1950s, the theme of hunger and degradation, East- West encounter, colonial politics and its effects on human relationships, rootlessness and alienation had already been dealt with by some Indian English Novelists, but her uniqueness lies in the fact that she provides an original approach, intimacy and poignancy to these issues. In all her novels, spanning three decades, the readers are impressed by her realistic presentation of life. It would not be wrong to say that as a sensitive person and an astute artist she was ahead of her times and wrote about issues, which the next generation of novelists took up later.

**Keywords**— *Diaspora, alienation, social realism.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As India nears its seventy-fifth year of independence, the diasporic tradition of Indian writing has carved an inimitable legacy of its own, establishing itself as a serious contender in literary studies that envision the role of nation making, imaginations of home and contesting representations of identity and belonging. The Diasporic novel, especially, has been instrumental in cementing this legacy as it seeks to investigate and represent “the dynamics of caste, culture, gender, multiple identities, etc...that helps the reader in understanding the ambivalent relationship of the diasporic Indians with their ancestral homeland, on the one hand, and with 'Indians', on the other.” (Karmakar, 2015, p. 78).

Among these diasporic novelists, Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) occupies a prominent place as being one of the founding figures of the tradition. When she started writing novels in the 1950s, the theme of hunger and degradation, East- West encounter, colonial politics and its effects on human relationships, rootlessness and alienation had already been dealt with by some Indian English Novelists, but her uniqueness lies in the fact that she provides an original approach, intimacy and poignancy to these issues. In all her novels, spanning three decades, the

readers are impressed by her realistic presentation of life. It would not be wrong to say that as a sensitive person and an astute artist she was ahead of her times and wrote about issues, which the next generation of novelists took up later.

## II. SOCIAL REALISM AND LITERARY DEPICTION

Markandaya's early experiences of Indian life and rumination over the forces that have changed its complexion before and after independence have made her a social realist. Her vision of life, as revealed in her novels, emerges from the limits of family and sociopolitical society, at large, including economics, religion, morality and culture, and thus based on reality as well as imagination. The real and the ideal are bound together in a way that does not exclude any aspect of Indian life. Hence Markandaya's vision, being graphic and chequered, is circumscribed by the various aspects of life (domestic, social, political, economic, religious, ethical and cultural) and it is necessary to evaluate the nature of her vision in the light of these aspects. It is significant to note that these aspects of her vision are found in all her novels. For example, the profile of social, economic and religious life in *Nectar in a Sieve* is different from that in *Some Inner*

*Fury, Possession, A Handful of Rice, The Coffin Dams and The Nowhere Man* etc. Her complete vision of life emerges from different shades and nuances of life depicted in her novels. A V Krishna Rao observes in this respect that "It has been shown that the literature of concern flows from the tragic vision that generates anguish over human tribulations. The same may be said about Kamala Markandaya. Like Orwell, she may be called the conscience of her generation. Committed to the belief that wrongs must be righted, she has a moral aim that validates her work. The purposive direction of her creative sensibility endows her novels with a certain representative character that marks them out as significant entity in Indo-English fiction" (Rao, 1972)

Markandaya adopts a novel method of showing the tension between the East and the West. She brings Englishmen to India who are looked at with curiosity and contempt by the Indians, for example, Caroline, Clinton, European ladies, while their counterparts are taken to England to achieve the same goal, for example, Srinivas, Valmiki, Swamy in England have to suffer. Through the theme of human relationships, Markandaya stresses the need for universal brotherhood. The theme of human relationships is not just a peripheral interest in her fiction; it is central to its main concerns, and often it manifests itself through the motif of existential angst. This angst is a consequence of the tumult of living and choosing that the subject experiences as the self is forced to confront uncertainties and conflicts that sometimes lead to deep psychological and spiritual wounds. The self, with its desires, instincts and dreams, encounters a world of reality governed by social, economic and cultural forces. This encounter leads to a crisis of identity to a state of being nothing. This paper seeks, therefore, to explore this paradox of human condition in terms of conflict between self and society and between free will and necessity, through a study of a wide spectrum of characters in Markandaya's novels. The characters inevitably find themselves in places, situations and relationships that reflect their agony and anguish as they negotiate with the challenges and complexities of existence.

Markandaya's impulse to write is born out of her deep concern with the poverty and squalor, torturous human conflicts and suffering, dreams and aspirations of the oppressed sections of society. It is interesting to note that unlike some writers like the African novelists Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka or Indo-Anglian writer V S Naipaul, who reflect a deep sense of frustration at the disintegration of old order and at the loss of the traditional values, Kamala Markandaya shows her firm belief in the unflinching spirit of the Indian social order to sustain itself through the worst of trials and tribulations.

### III. PORTRAYAL OF ISSUES IN NECTAR IN A SIEVE

Her first book *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is one such story as it portrays some of the problems faced by the Indians as they dealt with the changing times. Written around India's independence, this novel is a vivid record of the hungry rural peasantry whose life is afflicted by the existing social rituals and institutions such as child marriage, widowhood and negligence of the female child, slavery, landlessness, homelessness, casteism, illiteracy and superstition. The novel centers around the acutely suffering poor tenant farmer, Nathan and his wife Rukmani, the narrator of the tale. The story is a first-person narrative as told by Rukmani who begins her story with her marriage to Nathan when she is only twelve. Rukmani, being the fourth daughter brings very little dowry, so her best match is a poor rice farmer, Nathan. They represent thousands of uprooted peasants under the pressure of industrialization and landlordism. Among the rural folk there is a clear dichotomy between the upper class, the landlords and the money lenders on the one hand and the poor tenant farmers and the labouring class on the other. Rukmani gives a graphic picture of the farmer's life of hardships, of fear and of hunger:

This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know: that sometimes we eat and sometime we starve. We live by our labours from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children, and if bad times are prolonged, we know we must see the weak surrender their lives and this fact, too, is within our experience. In our life there is no margin for misfortune (Markandaya, 1954, p. 136). Though Rukmani and Nathan were poor, yet their domestic life was blessed with peace and quiet. The early part of their married life was untouched by worries and cares; love and affection crowned their domestic bliss. Rukmani is faithfully devoted to her husband and according to Indian traditions, does not call him by his name but addresses him only as "husband". Her husband Nathan, like her, is "a gentle and docile soul" who "endures his lot without any thought of rebellion or redress" (Chandrasekharan 73). The concept of happiness for the rural people is very simple. They live their life on the elemental level with bare necessities, consisting largely of food, clothes and shelter. Rukmani ponders on such a vision of happiness:

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and if you have a good store of grain laid away

for hard times, a roof on you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for (qtd in Pathania: 57-58)

Along with simple inhabitants of the villages Markandaya also depicts the idyllic beauty of the countryside that was being bulldozed by India's technological progress. She has given a description of the village not at the height of its glory but at its transitional period, affected particularly by the setting up of the tannery which starts expanding by acquiring cultivable lands of the village. It disturbs the apparently calm and peaceful life of the village. In addition to this man-made menace, nature acts as a hostile force in the form of draught and floods, resulting in failure of crops. Hundreds of tenant farmers like Nathan are forced into starvation. To add to their woes are the ruthless and merciless money lenders. As a result, they are evicted from their beloved land.

Meanwhile, Rukmani gives birth to her first child, a daughter. Though literate, she is not free from the prejudice against the girl child. Her reaction at the sight of the first born is, 'what woman wants a girl for her first born' (Markandaya, 1954, p. 19). Eventually, as the years pass, she is worried as she has no other children. Just before her mother passes away, Rukmani meets the man caring for her mother—a Western doctor named Kennington who treats her temporary infertility. Seven years after the birth of her daughter, Ira, a son is born to Rukmani and four more sons in quick succession (Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja and Selvam). Both Rukmani and Nathan preserve love, though they are heading towards penury. Misfortune seems to have a tight foothold in Rukmani and Nathan's lives. The monsoon submerges the rice paddies where they worked for the survival of a household of eight. The vagaries of weather offer no respite for the poor farmers, for no sooner are the monsoons over than a drought damages the harvest.

As Rukmani's children grow, her husband's financial condition worsens. The marriage of their daughter Ira is a further blow to their poverty. Ira resorts to prostitution to earn money to feed her husband. As if this were not tragic enough, her little brother dies soon after. Later, Ira becomes pregnant out of wedlock and the baby born to her is an albino; Ira would have to raise a son all by herself, who is the subject of ridicule and fear and she will probably never marry again. Whereas the two elder sons work in Ceylon, their story is sad for they never see their families again. Murugan has taken a job as a servant in a doctor's house in the city. Owing to filial and familial attachment the now old couple go to their children to quench their emotional thirst. But there is no respite yet from their hardships. They fail to locate their son,

Murugan, in the city and also lose their luggage and belongings. Completely alienated from their sons, ultimate misfortune befalls them when Nathan dies in the city before they begin their journey to home and Rukmani is left a widow. From here onwards, life is a constant struggle and worry about her children. Rukmani's fourth son, Raju, is beaten to death when he attempts to steal from the tannery. The fifth son, Selvam, takes a job as Dr Kenny's assistant at the new hospital in the village. Rukmani had taught all the children to read and write and they could have found opportunities for better lives but he is the only one who takes advantage of this. Selvam's jobs pay very little, it seems as if he is being punished by fate for his decision to join Dr Kenny as the construction of the hospital takes seven long years to complete. Thus, each one of her children's lives are coloured by the poverty and hopelessness of their situation. The most heart wrenching words are spoken by Rukmani when she says:

Hunger is a curious thing; at first it is with you all the time, working and sleeping and in your dreams and there is a gnawing pain as if your very vitals are being devoured. Then the pain is no longer sharp, but dull and this too is with you always and because you know this, you try to avoid the thought but cannot—it is with you. (Markandaya, 1954, p. 81)

The irony is that after Nathan's death, it is Puli, the adopted orphan boy who finds and takes Rukmani from the city to her village where her daughter, Ira and only surviving son Selvam still reside. Her own sons could not support Rukmani in her hour of need and it was Puli, who reciprocated filial feelings. Most of the characters in the novel are typically rural. Besides Rukmani, Nathan and their children there is Janaki, Kali, Kunthi, old granny and many more nameless characters whose bearings are typically rural and their ways, attitudes and manners belong to the countryside.

In any case, Markandaya's portrayal of the other villagers offers little hope that their futures will be any brighter than Nathan and Rukmani's lot. Kunthi, a neighbour's wife, loses her husband when he learns that she has cuckolded him by prostituting herself to the tannery-workers. She loses her virtue, her reputation, her beauty and her friends, and has to resort to blackmail to get Rukmani and Nathan to give her food. Kali, another neighbour's wife, is a good friend of Rukmani when they are young. She is faithful, kind and comforting to Rukmani in times of uncertainty and fear. In the later years, however, she seems to have become insensitive and thoughtless. She makes rude inappropriate remarks about Ira's albino baby and is no longer the compassionate friend. The years of trial and

poverty have changed her underlying good nature. Old granny is an endearing character who sells fruits and peanuts to scrape out a meagre living. She has no home and is forced to live on the street, but remains friendly and as generous as she is able to be. In the end, she dies of starvation on the street.

Thus, *Nectar in a Sieve* contains symbolic portraits of the starving millions, the exploited working class who struggle desperately for bare subsistence in the rural as well as the urban areas. But Kamala Markandaya shows her firm, unflinching confidence in the indomitable spirit of the Indian social order to sustain itself through the mighty vicissitudes of life. As, the famous critic Uma Parameshwaran rightly observes:

It is easy to wring tears of pity for the plight of the peas-ant, underfed, uneducated, exploited and easier still to rouse anger and contempt for the superstitious and slow-moving masses. They stand there vulnerable and open to every attack, be it indifference, contempt or emasculating charity. But to evoke admiration, even envy, for the simple faith and unswerving tenacity they hold, needs sympathy and skill. Kamala Markandaya has both.” (qtd in Parvati, 2001, p2)

This observation is significant if we take into account that this novel, although an Indian story, is written in English for Western readers. But also because of the pervasive hopelessness and note of despair that runs throughout, the novel has a potential to overshadow the novelist's attempt to create a story about the triumph of the human spirit. Markandaya's portrayal of rural Indian life, though accurate and genuine, nevertheless is so bleak and has such negativity that it tends to eclipse the author's otherwise positive message. For the Western experience, both in literature and in life, it is an unacceptable reality that a person despite great endurance, courage and perseverance, is still trapped in a devastating situation. The capitalist West staunchly believes that being born to poverty does not mean, necessarily, dying in poverty. The Western nations, rich in natural resources and capital, enjoying political and economic freedom are vivid examples that how many of those willing to work as hard as Markandaya's characters, will have access to many routes to material comforts and a fulfilling life. But in this novel, the message seems to many Westerners that life, lived in dire poverty, is the only life possible to these unfortunate people and therefore a life in which no effort is worthwhile and no victories are possible.

This concept is confusing to the Western readers, who have known opportunity in abundance and they find it difficult to understand and accept the kind of destitution

experienced by the characters in the novel; a destitution that is not diminished even by their heroic endurance and effort. Nevertheless, the reader has to try and grasp that there is a positive message in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The message of the indomitable spirit of the Easterners that survives in the face of mind-boggling hardships and mishaps. This positive message is grounded in the Eastern idea of an internal overcoming. Easterners are not accustomed to the ever-expanding material opportunities bestowed on Westerners. They are all too aware of the picture of grinding poverty of life as is faced by Markandaya's characters. They know that being born to poverty does not mean, necessarily, dying in poverty. The Western nations, rich in natural resources and capital, enjoying political and economic freedom are a vivid example that how many of those willing to work as hard as Markandaya's characters, will have access to many routes to material comforts and a fulfilling life. But in this novel, the message seems to many Westerners that life, lived in dire poverty is the only life possible to these unfortunate people and therefore a life in which no effort is worthwhile and no victories are possible.

This positive message is grounded in the Eastern idea of an internal overcoming. Easterners are not accustomed to the ever-expanding material opportunities bestowed on Westerners. They are all too aware of the picture of grinding poverty of life as is faced by Markandaya's characters. They know that, for some, the only ground on which victory is possible is the interior land- scape of the mind, heart and the spirit. A victory that is won, by remaining, as Rukmani does, sane, loving, gentle, compassionate and even hopeful in the face of every reason to be otherwise. Let us now, keeping this context in mind, analyse the major characters and their feelings of angst in the novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Markandaya draws the reader's attention to the fortitude and courage of the characters, their uncomplaining acceptance of good and evil alike and their extreme attachment to the land. Nathan and Rukmani experience happiness and suffer calamity together. During their abject penury, Nathan feels grateful to her, saying that he was fortunate to have her as his wife. Together, after a brief period of conjugal bliss, they suffer misfortunes—the loss of their sons, land and home, humiliations and disillusionment in the town, the grievance of their daughter and the final separation in Nathan's death. During all these situations Rukmani exhibits her tremendous power of tolerance and patience when she speaks the last words to the dying husband, “if I grieve, I said, it is not for you, but for myself beloved, for how shall I endure to live without you, who are my love and my life?” (Markandaya, 1954, p. 87). After losing her husband she returns home with the

leper boy Puli with the hope of curing him in Dr Kenny's hospital in the village. In the village she joins her only son left with her, Selvam and her daughter Ira, with a renewed desire to survive. What she convinces her surviving children is given in the Coleridge's famous quotation which forms the title of the novel, "Work without hope draws Nectar in a Sieve/and hope without object cannot live".

Thus, Rukmani is portrayed not only as a devoted wife but also as a loving, caring and sensible mother who had been a rock-like support to her husband and is now the rock for her children to lean against. She is portrayed as a considerate mother-in-law, a loyal friend, a helping neighbour, model housewife and an embodiment of the traditional Indian values of chastity and devotion, endurance and stoic acceptance. Though Rukmani is aware of and pained by her husband's adultery with Kunthi, even then she does not betray feelings of jealousy hurt and anger. Her faith and reliance on her husband remain unabated and unflinching. She silently endures her husband's extra-marital adventures. As K S Narayan Rao remarks:

Markandaya's novels deal with contemporary Indian society in a state of flux and change, and reveal a spectrum of moral attitudes on the part of the characters. Although her woman characters are never relegated to the background and are, in fact, better drawn than their male counterparts, it is usually the men who get away with their delinquent sexual conduct (Rao, 1973, p 69-70)

Rukmani accepts the blows and moves on in life. She survives. Her goodness and inner strength prevent her from becoming hard and bitter. No pain or injustice can cause her to rebel or seek revenge. Significantly, the only time Rukmani is shown as having a sense of rebellion is at the setting of tannery, which she vehemently criticizes. She blames the tannery which invades the fertile cultivable land and which has also invaded the children's playground. The market price has been raised high and the din and bustle of the tannery has swept away the beauty, the peace and the calm of the village. The price hike has also affected the farmers' wives—Kali, Kunthi, Janaki. Their common grief of starvation and struggle is expressed by Rukmani when she complains, "No sugar or dhal or ghee have we tasted since they came, and should have none, so long as they remained" (Markandaya, 1954, p. 32)

It is as if Rukmani has an intuition about the bad luck that the tannery would bring the village in general and her family in particular, for soon their land is sold to the tannery to pay the debts that they have incurred. It is this loss of their land, to which these people are greatly—even sentimentally attached that creates a void and

emptiness in their lives and with this event, their misfortunes keep multiplying. The despair of a thousand such dispossessed families is echoed in Rukmani's words when she says, "While there was land, there was hope. Nothing now, nothing whatever" (Markandaya, 1954, p. 135)

This general submissiveness in the principal characters (Nathan and Rukmani) has the danger of appearing as a weakness in them. Yet, taken from another viewpoint, it shows incredible strength. What characterises the Easterners, particularly the rural people is their fatalistic attitude to life in which the blame or the credit for one's deeds is attributed to some impersonal power of God. Their unshakable faith in such a power keeps them happy and contented. If Nathan and Rukmani, even after a series of sufferings, continue to have hope, it is because of their intrinsic faith in God and religion which sustains them in their hours of adversity. Their faith blunts the sharp edges of their misfortunes while time applies a healing balm. It is this attitude of reconciliation to whatever happens, that makes the rural people persons in a state of equanimity in which one becomes afflicted neither by joys nor by sorrows.

It would be interesting and at this point it would provide an insight into the psyche of the characters if we endeavour to view Rukmani and Nathan in the light of Hindu tradition and religion which is so much an integral component of their existence. Indians, generally have a 'passive' and 'less differentiated ego' in contrast with the 'synthesizing and integrating activity' attributed to it in the West. As the most acute observation of Mittapalli reveals, when he comments:

In the Hindu scheme of things, ego reality (expressed in the West in terms of various ego functions such as a sense of reality, reality testing and adaptation to the environment) is of marginal importance. The whole of worldly experience is treated as a cosmic reality (Rollason and Mittapalli 189)

As against the classical psychoanalytical view of reality as tragic and ironic, the Hindu and more precisely the yogic vision of reality is, in the words of Sudhir Kakar:

A combination of the tragic and the romantic. Man is still buffeted by fate's vagaries and tragedy is still the warp and woof of life. But instead of ironic acceptance, the yogic vision offers a romantic quest. The new journey is a search and the seeker, if he withstands all the perils of the road, will be rewarded by exaltation beyond normal human experience (Kakar, 1981, p 6)

Let us go by the hypothesis that most Indians are religious, at least in theory. An offshoot of this religious outlook is fatalism, which appears to have given Indians the ego-strength to maintain equanimity even in the face of great hardships and ordeals. In the majority of works, even the rebellious protagonist is eventually reintegrated into Hindu society as is mostly true also of the novels of R K Narayan and Raja Rao.

Rukmani bears stoically the death of her son Kuti, due to starvation, death of her son Raju due to the tannery, prostitution of her daughter, Ira, due to the desperation of hunger, separation from other sons due to lack of money and the death of her husband evicted from their beloved land— enough to drive a person to desperation, madness or suicide, but Rukmani survives. This is the fortitude and attitude not only of Rukmani but also her husband, Nathan. Like her, Nathan is a gentle soul who endures his lot without any fight or rebellion.

Nathan is more a figure than a character in the true sense. He is the face of the millions of helpless peasants deprived of economic freedom. He is torn between his sense of responsibility to his family and to his land and the exploitation of the upper classes. In him is fully demonstrated the theme of rootedness. Nathan's roots are in his land and he is torn apart when divorced from the land. In the city he loses hold completely and deteriorates in physical and mental strength. He feels uprooted and can no longer survive.

In Markandaya's scheme, rootedness in one's traditions is the secret of survival in a fast changing society. This fact is evident in her other novels also. Helen, in *The Coffer Dams* is in search of her roots in an alien land. Valmiki, in *Possession*, finds true peace and happiness only when he returns to his roots. Srinivas, in *The Nowhere Man*, loses the will to live when he is alienated from his roots. Similarly, the greatest sorrow of Nathan is his eviction from his land which is the real cause of his tragic death. As a rural farmer, he builds his house himself with his own hands and takes pride in it. He is simple, hardworking and naive. He is bewildered and disillusioned in the city when he goes to meet his son, Murugan and tells his wife, "This is not my home, and I can never live here" (Markandaya, 1954, p. 187). The concept of happiness of the rural people, as genuinely portrayed by Markandaya, is very simple. They live their life on the elemental level with bare necessities consisting largely of food, clothes and shelter. Critics have lavishly praised these characters and their stature. An Indian-American writer, Indira Ganesan, writes of *Nectar in a Sieve*:

This is a very Short book but don't let that fool you. There is so much packed into this novel that

if you blink, you miss something. In some ways it is a very hard read in the fact that it is so realistic... At its core is Rukmani, a peasant Indian girl who marries her husband at the age of 12. This book is the mark of plight of the earlier times; India's struggle with modernity and the unbelievable acts of a woman for her family. The words were liquid poetry; the words penetrated my conscience and my heart. I can no longer eat a full meal without thinking about Rukmani, the main character, and her struggles to survive over a few American dollars. It was sad and slapped me in the face that this book may explain the many starving lives in other countries (qtd in Assisi, 2008)

The two views which represent conflicting Eastern and Western values, explicitly appear in the novel and the Western view is expressed in the character of Dr Kennington, the philanthropic, compassionate English missionary doctor. He expresses his disgust at the poor Indian peasant's passivity and meekness. The author has juxtaposed Rukmani and Dr Kennington as representatives of oriental and Western traditions, respectively. While Rukmani and Nathan stand for traditional Indian attitude of fatalism, resignation and suffering enshrined in contentment and complacency, Kennington represents Western ideals like liberalism, progressivism and protest. The Eastern apprehension of the universal and the eternal is challenged by the Western obsession with the material, the particular and the contemporary. Kenny's is the voice of the white man but of the educated, Westernised intellectual, like the author herself, who on the one hand, finds herself wishing to live up to the traditional expectation and on the other, finds her rational faculty questioning the peasant's abject surrender to the unfair economic system. Kenny's is the voice of protest and represents what the Westerner in general symbolises a dynamic force as opposed to the static. Often, the reader's pain is reflected in the character of Dr Kennington, who has witnessed the tragic incidents of Rukmani's life. Faced by such suffering, Kennington is often frustrated or angry with the family for their quiet endurance of injustice. At one point, Kennington meets Rukmani after the town has been wrecked by a terrible rainstorm and Markandaya's lucid language evokes the scene. Most poignantly she talks about uprooted trees, dead dogs, cats, and rats cluttering the road side and the general havoc brought about by the storm.

When after their gruesome description, Rukmani calmly tells Kenny that she has some rice to feed her family and that: "to those who live by the land, there must always come times of hardship, of fear and of hunger, even as

there are years of plenty” Kenny expresses his frustration and disgust at the peasants’ passivity and asks Rukmani: “Why do you keep ghastly silence? Why do you not demand- cry out for help-do something?” Kennington believes that there is no “grandeur in want...or endurance” In contrast Rukmani sees suffering as good for the spirit and endurance as a necessity because she cannot change her situation and replies passively “Want is our companion from birth to death” (Qtd in Misra, 2001, p4, p6)

As already discussed, Dr Kennington symbolises the West, with its rapid industrialisation and presents the contrast to the spiritualism of the East. He becomes the mouthpiece of Markan- daya, as he tries to ‘awaken’ the East by pleading with Rukmani to fight for their rights and to ‘rebel’ when others ‘trample’ them. Even when their prized possession — their land is taken away for establishing a tannery, they still remain patient and quiet. At the same time, it is interesting to note that in spite of himself, Dr Kennington admires Rukmani’s courage and fortitude. She stands as the epitome of the Indian woman whose sacrificing nature and fidelity towards her husband is most impressive. It is significant that Dr Kennington is the one who bonds with Rukmani and develops a friendship with her; both characters are intrinsically good, kind and benevolent in their own ways In fact, when Rukmani has to face the wrath of the moneylender, the threatening of the landlord for eviction from land, she discovers a consoling soul in the kind doctor. Dr Kennington stands as the symbol of civilised man’s generosity and broadmindedness. It is he who treats Rukmani and later, her daughter Irawaddy, for infertility. It is he, who out of compassion for the rural people establishes a hospital in the village. Dr Kenny, the voice of modernity tries to make the peasants aware of the limitations of their conventional beliefs and prejudices. He explains to them the value of family planning and the dangers implied in their faith that having a large family is a matter of honour and pride. Janaki, the wife of the village shopkeeper has seven children. Rukmani feels proud in giving birth to seven children. But as we have seen, subsequently, under heavy economic pressures, the large family disintegrates. The children move out to the city in search of work and adopt urban ways of life. In portraying Dr Kennington’s character, the author maintains that cultural and racial differences do not hinder positive interaction or understanding between individuals.

### CONCLUSION

Thus, by and large, Kamala Markandaya’s protagonists in *Nectar in a Sieve* are average men and women who are not obsessed with individuality and want to remain united in the face of hard- ships, poverty, social change or political

fanaticism In *Nectar in a Sieve*, human relationships develop, consolidate or disintegrate under the impact of economic hardships The external factors of their existence are so threatening that intimate filial ties assume crucial importance Rukmani and Nathan are pitted against the forces of industrialization, social evils and natural calamities. Despite the crushing weight of these forces, the tender bond between husband and wife never breaks. In their struggle for survival on the physical level, their emotional bonds become a source of strength. In their bid to raise their circumstances against unsurmountable odds, they assume heroic dimensions. Disillusionment and despair, disappointment and frustration abound in the life of her protagonists who are strong-willed and courageous and are simultaneously conformist who accept life and surrender themselves to its vagaries.

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