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ISSN:2278-9529

# GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue - V September 2014



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## Cultural Awareness in *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Kamala Markandaya was born in southern Indian city of Bangalore in 1924. Although she was city born, she came to know the villages and rural areas, where the great majority of India's people live. In 1948 at the age of twenty-four, she moved to England. Later she married an Englishman and settled there. Although Markandaya has lived in England her entire adult life, she has visited India frequently. There, she gathers background information and other material for her novel. Sometimes she has been criticized for losing her touch with her roots by country. Nevertheless, Markandaya disagrees. She claims that her long residence in England and self chosen as an outsider give her more objectivity and allow her to examine without prejudice the society, customs and characters of her native land.

*Nectar in a Sieve* was the first of her novels to be published. The novel was greeted as a masterful picture of life in the unfamiliar world of India's village. It became a worldwide bestseller and was translated into seventeen languages. Elena J. Kalinnikova remarks about the novel:

“The first novel of Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* could be called “Struggle for Rice”, and it has been translated into 17 Language,

including Russian in 1958 (by M.Bekkar under the editorship of M.lorie) and it has brought her world wide fame.”<sup>1</sup>

Kamala Markandaya presents a beautiful picture of Indian culture in her novels. In her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, we get the glimpse of Indian culture in the very beginning when Rukmani the narrator of the novel describes about her poor match with her husband because of lack of dowry she says

“My three sisters were married long before I was Shanta first, a big wedding which lasted for many days, plenty of gifts and feasts, diamond earrings, a gold necklace, as befitted the daughter of the village headman, Padmani next, and she too made a good match and was married fittingly taking jewels and dowry with her; but when it came to Thangam, only relations from our own village came to the wedding and not from the surrounding districts as they had done before, and the only jewel she had was a diamond nose screw.”(P.2)

And when Rukmani came to womanhood her father becomes poor and he was no more village head man also. She says:

“I had to acknowledge that his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband, and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care for me.”(P.2)

Another example of dowry system can be noticed when Rukmani saves and collects the thing for her daughter Ira’s marriage. She tells Nathan:

Had I not saved from the day of her birth so that she should marry well? Now I brought out the stores I had put by month after month—rice and dhal and ghee, jars of oil, betel leaf, areca nuts, chewing tobacco and copra. (37)

India is considered great for its culture’s greatness and for some great soft traditions. It is only India where the wife gives the respect to her husband just like god. She honours her, through Rukmani Kamala Markandaya depicts the Indian culture when she (Rukmani) says:

“It was my husband who woke me my husband, whom I will call here Nathan, for that was his name, although in all the years of our marriage I never called him that, for it is not meet for a woman to address her husband except as ‘husband’.(4)

Markandaya explains the local customs, rites and traditions at length which shows that she writes for a non-Indian audience. Rites and rituals and offerings are made during the harvest season for a bumper and good agricultural crop. Rukmani narrates “we took our seed to our Goddess and placed it at her feet to receive her blessing, and then we bore it away and made our sowing. (79)

Usually the birth of girl child is not welcomed in Indian family. The tendency of having son is preferred. In *Nectar in a Sieve* this tendency is also cleared when Ira was born. At the birth of girl child Rukmani was disappointed “I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment: for what woman wants a girl for her first born?”(14)

Nathan was not happy also with the birth of girl child: “he had wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pining infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind”.(15-16)

When Rukmani gives birth to her first son, Nathan is not only happy but celebrates also the occasion by hosting a grand feast to the whole village:

“My husband was over-joyed at the arrival of son”, not less so, my father... “Your mother would have been glad”, he said she was always praying for you.”

“She knew”, I told him; She said I would have many sons”.

As for Nathan, nothing would do but that the whole village would know—as if they didn’t already. On the tenth day from the birth he invited everybody to feast and rejoice with us in our good fortune. (20-21)

The novel also depicts the contempt with which a barren woman is treated in India. Ira Rukmani's daughter is rejected by her husband because she is barren and only wife is blamed. Ira's husband returns her to her parents saying:

"Mother in law" he said, "I intend no discourtesy, but this is no ordinary visit. You give me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you. She is a barren woman."(49-50)

Rukmani tried to hold the situation, "you have not been married long," I said with dry lips, She may be as I was, she may yet conceive."(50)

But Ira's husband clears his determined decision, "I have waited five years, he replied, "she has not born in her first blooming, who can say she will conceive later? I need sons."(50)

When Nathan comes to know he does not object for this rejection in his views Ira's husband was right. "I do not blame him", Nathan said. "He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient."(50)

Kamala Markandaya depicts the Indian culture of "Aatithi Dvo Bhava". Guests get a cordial reception in Indian families. Indian people tried to reception their guest to their best capacity. When Dr. Kenny comes to Rukmani's home, she welcomes him:

"I spread a mat and he sat down while we grouped ourselves about him, but I could see he was not accustomed to sitting cross-lagged on the floor, for his Knees instead of resting on the mat sprang up aslant like the horns of a bull, and I was uncomfortable for him, and distressed that I had nothing else to offer."(32)

It is also the Indian-custom that when guests come to any body home. He offers sometimes it is unaffordable but almost everybody takes it as his prestigious issue.

"Ira strained the rice-water into wooden bowls for us-the rice itself we kept for our midday meal-but to one bowl she added a handful of the cooked rice and a little salt, which we could not offered for ourselves and this she handed to Kenny, stooping low and keeping her eyes down."(32)

Markandaya depicts the Indian culture of elders respect. In India youngsters shows respect by touching feet to elders. When Arjun and Thambi leave for Ceylon to work, we get the glimpse of this Indian Culture; They left at first day light...each before he went kissed Nathan feet, then mine. And now we laid our hands on them in blessing."(NS. 68)

Kamala Markandaya also expresses fortitude thinking of Indian people. There are so many examples of optimistic nature of characters in her novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. When Rukmani was upset for high prices, Nathan said, "There is no going back. Bend like the grass that you do not break."(28) When her barren daughter Ira is forsaken by her husband, she consoles her saying "we are all in God's hand and he is merciful."(140) She believes to hope for the best. When there is a famine in the village and there is nothing to eat, she tells Kenny: "we have a little rice it will last us until times are better."(43)

Nathan and Rukmani both are fatalistic. It is also one of the characteristics of Indian culture. When the rains fail and they do not get crop for the eating too, they show their blind faith in God.

“We threw ourselves on the Earth and we prayed. I took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to my Goddess, and I wept at her feet, I thought she looked at me with compassion and I went away comforted, but no rain came.”(72)

There are many such beliefs and superstitions linked together in Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, which contribute to emphasizing the Indian ness in her novels. When Rukmani went to visit her sick mother, her mother on her deathbed has given her a small stone lingam, a symbol of fertility and said, “Wear It”, she said, “You will yet bear many soNS. I see them and what the dying see will come to pass.... Be assured, this is no illusion”. (72)

There is no doubt that Markandaya has portrayed Indian culture minutely but after going through the novel of '*Nectar in a Sieve*' one feels that everything is not so realistic as it seems that Markandaya has described unknowingly. There are many examples in the novel, which presents the unawareness of Markandaya about Indian culture. She describes Deepavali saying:

“In the centre of the town the bonfire was beginning to smoulder. For many weeks children had been collecting firewood, rags, leaves and brushwood and the result was a huge pile like an enormous anthill, into which the flames ate fiercely, hissing and crackling and rearing up as they fed on the bits of camphor and oil soaked rags that people threw in (55-56)

The above description seems the description of Holi because the fire is lit on Holi not on Deepavali. The reference to the collection of fuel, the throng and merry making, the beating drums- all point unmistakably are indicating that Markandaya is writing about in the description of Holi

Another example of anawareness of Indian culture comes out when Rukmani beats Ira considering her Kunthi who comes in the dark after prostitution Ira's cries Nathan comes out. Rukmani says: “I saw he was quite naked and wondered at it, forgetting he had come straight from sleep.” (96)

Markandaya wants to say that Nathan did not have any cloth on his body when he comes out while it is not Indian culture. The village people usually are half-dressed or at least in their undergarments but no body can come out quite naked out of the room before his young daughter. It shows the absence of first hand knowledge of Markandaya about the rural people Markandays descres the naming ceremony of Sacrabani, Who was Ira's illegitimate child. Markandaya writes about the people after Sacrabani's birth:

“So they come: friends, neighbours, bringing sugarcane and frosted sugar and sticks of striped candy for the new body. Ira accepted them in his name, smiling graceful as ever, unperturbed (119)

These lines show the welcome event of a illegitimate child while it is not an acceptable thing in any part of India. A girl who births such type of child is not only looked down upon by the society but is considered out caste also.

Although the novel has some unawareness of culture, Markandaya is undoubtedly a great novelist. Every writer has some of his blind spots and so has Markandaya, Being a woman novelist a writer has to work facing some limitations and the main reason of her minor unawareness is that she writes about the country where she was not living in. She was outside but the inaccessibility of a place however does not bar her from portraying it and no doubt, her novel '*Nectar in a Sieve*' remains a masterpiece of work in the world of literature.

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