

## Presentation Of Cross-Cultural Encounter In Kamala Markandaya's Nectar In A Sieve: A Thematic Study

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### **Abstract**

*Kamala Markandaya is undoubtedly a distinguished novelist on the contemporary commonwealth literary scene. She has continuously written on the cross-cultural interaction and delineated a picture of expatriates who struggle against this cross-cultural encounter. As a novelist, she honestly inter-relates the feelings of expatriates who become a prey to the conflict between the cultures of the East and of the West. In almost every novel of hers, we come across characters, both men and women, who struggle against the traps of this cross-cultural confrontation. In her epic novel Nectar in a Sieve, Kamala Markandaya describes the tension which is created between the people of the East and of the West just because of the clash between tradition and modernity in the backdrop of cross-cultural encounters. The life of the people becomes full of trials and tribulations.*

### **Keywords**

*Distinguished, expatriates, dexterously, resignation, enlightened, fatalist.*

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## **Introduction**

Kamala Markandaya is undoubtedly a distinguished novelist on the contemporary commonwealth literary scene and ranks with such eminent Indian English novelists as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Babhani Bhattacharya, Nayantara Sehgal, etc. Kamala Markandaya occupies a prominent place among Indian English novelists. She portrays the world of Indian married women as she sees it. Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, she has expressed her concern on the disturbing question of the existence of women. In an era of rapid social changes, she has played a vital role in defining female selfhood.

Kamala Markandaya has continuously written on the cross-cultural interaction and delineated a picture of expatriates who struggle against this cross-cultural encounter. As she herself is a living example, she very dexterously deals with the interaction of expatriate codes and convictions. She quite successfully depicts the impact of this conflict which is created by the West against the Indian mind during the period of British rule. And this is the reason that this cross-cultural encounter gets fuller treatment in her novels. In almost every novel of hers, she presents a character, says the protagonist who struggles against this cultural clash in his or her life. This cross-cultural confrontation arises from the clash between the West and the East. This cross-cultural confrontation has been expressed by the novelist in mainly three spheres: cultural, political and social. According to M. K. Bhatnagar:

Markandaya's presentation of the pitting together of the eastern and the western ways of life goes beyond the clichéd stereotypes. There is shown a direct relationship in multiple nuances between the Indian and the British characters. Besides the impact of the modern urban culture brought in by the British rule on traditional Indian life has been dealt with equally authentically. (Kamala Markandaya: the Insider-Outsider 2)

In her novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya has written on the theme of cross-cultural encounters in detail. This is an epic novel about the lives of Indian villagers. The novelist reveals a rich gamut of human experience. Along with the themes of the havoc of hunger and the evils of industrialization, Kamala Markandaya deals with the tension between tradition and modernity in the backdrop of cross-cultural encounters in this novel. It is a tragic story of a couple that smarts with trials and tribulations in village life. Nathan and Rukmani come in contact with the English missionary Kenny and the confrontation of viewpoints of the persons belonging to the soil begins to take its toll on them. Nathan and Rukmani endure their miseries with calm resignation while having conflicts with the enlightened British idealism of liberalism. Gajendra Kumar remarks:

There is a clash or conflict between the scientific spirit and the basic human values in, *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel is overcharged with references to the conventional customs, beliefs and superstitions. Nathan is a tenant farmer who wakes with the Sun rises and keeps himself busy during the time of sowing and harvesting. Nathan's gradual impoverishment reminds one of Hori Ram, an illiterate tenant farmer in Prem Chand's '*Godan*'. Hori Ram Mahto is a symbol of simplicity and usefulness. In the pattern of a typical Indian peasant, he too is a fatalist believing in age-old customs and superstitions. Hori Ram, a man of older, traditional morality fails to comprehend the changing circumstances. Nathan too in *Nectar in a Sieve* is a traditional tenant farmer who desires his sons to work in the fields but that does not interest them. Nathan's aspirations are shunned and shattered...(Nectar in a Sieve: A Saga of an All-out Human Effort and Enterprise 56)

*Nectar in a Sieve* is a comment on the process of modernization of Indian villages in which the cross-cultural conflicts become the root cause of the miseries of noble souls like Nathan and Rukmani. Markandaya very beautifully depicts the difference between the Eastern and the Western philosophies through the juxtaposed attitude to the life of Rukmani and Dr. Kenny. In the following dialogue between Rukmani and Dr. Kenny Rukmani says:

Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons on earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that, which has always been and cannot change... (Nectar in a Sieve 113)

At this remark of Rukmani, Dr. Kenny admonishes her and says:

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 clamor for his life?... There is no grandeur in want or in endurance...(Nectar in a Sieve 113)

Still, Rukmani is not ready to accept any counsel from Dr. Kenny and says: Yet our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishment and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence, and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed. (Nectar in a Sieve 114)

Dr. Kenny, being a man of western rational bend up of mind, becomes surprised at Rukmani's philosophically resigned attitude, and comments:

Acquiescent imbeciles, do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering? What thoughts have you when your belly is empty or your body is sick? (Nectar in a Sieve 114)

It can be mentioned here that the theme of East-West encounters becomes the main cause of cross-cultural conflicts here. Markandaya is aware of this conflict between the Eastern and Western attitudes to suffering. No doubt she has been trained by her religion to orthodox principles, yet her exposure to western philosophy has taught her to see the possibility of fighting evil.

In the second part of the novel, Markandaya projects the plight of the couple struggling to accommodate themselves in the new city. Rukmani and Nathan, who are simple by nature and are industrious by habit, expect at every turn that the life will be far better if their fate does not desert them and foils their efforts of improving their fortune. The city in which they try their fate also rejects them because they are not able to fit themselves into the hectic life of that new city. Ultimately Nathan dies while returning to his village.

In the third part of the novel, Rukmani is shown starting with her calamities. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader has been aware of Rukmani's total surrender of her interests and freedom to her family members. She is left unsupported after Nathan's death however she struggles to survive without any break or weakness in her physique, mind or spirit. This comes from her inner strength in her spirituality. No doubt, she has to resort to extra-marital relationship with Dr. Kenny, in spite of the fact that she remains loyal to her husband in thought, word and deeds. A.V. Krishna Rao and K. Madhavi Menon comment:

Rukmani's acceptance is traditional but she does feel, at times, like questioning her fate, and the conflict between her sense of acceptance and her sense of defiance bobs to the surface. The absence of an explicit presentation of the conflict leads many critics to conclude that this is a harrowing tale of passive inert suffering. Rukmani's suffering is out of proportion to her deserts. She is passive in action, but there is nothing she can do to ameliorate her miserable living conditions. She cannot accept the tannery but she is forced to pay revenue for land that has not yielded. She is helpless in making her voice heard. When the inhumanity of the tannery confronts her and Nathan, Rukmani takes refuge in the native tradition of fatalistic resignation but not absolute stoicism. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels 1954-1982 19)

Rukmani and Kenny stand for different cultures of the East and the West. Rukmani stands for the culture of the East while Dr. Kenny represents the culture of the West; Rukmani blindly believes in her faith while Kenny has faith in rationality. No doubt, Kenny does not hesitate in helping the people having foolishness in them but often he becomes furious at them. He remarks to Rukmani:

I go when I am tired of your follies and stupidities, your external shameful poverty...I can only take you in small doses. (Nectar in a Sieve 71)

Kenny is also desirous of helping Rukmani whenever she faces any problem. However, Rukmani does not accede to his help and keeps her firm faith in the goodness of God. Her mother had gifted Rukmani a *lingam* at the time of her death; the *lingam* stands for fertility. She remarks:

I slunk away, frightened of I know not what; I placed even more faith in the charm my mother has given me, wearing it constantly between my breasts. (Nectar in a Sieve 20)

Thus it can be said that Rukmani represents the values of the culture of the East. Faith and medicine go hand in hand among conventional Indian people, especially among women. When Rukmani's faith does not give her desired results of getting rid of barrenness, she goes to Dr. Kenny to get the medicine. When she is cured of her curse of infertility within a year, she gives birth to her son. This shows that she is evolving in her character because gradual change in attitude is developing in her. But it does not mean that she has lost her faith in God; she still staunchly believes in the power of God. During the famine in the village, she speaks to Kenny, "We have a little rice, it will last us until times are better." (Nectar in a Sieve 430) At this remark of Rukmani, Dr. Kenny becomes irritated and loses his patience:

Times are better, time 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-do something? There is nothing in the country, oh God, there is nothing. (Nectar in a Sieve 43-44)

Thus we see that Rukmani is a typically traditional woman having the values of the culture of the East. She clashes with the western values in her encounter with the English doctor Kenny who represents the West and hence is absolutely against the fatalistic attitude of Rukmani and Nathan, who have intimacy with the soil.

Rukmani is representative of Indian womanhood representing through her fortitude and perseverance. She bears all the miseries with a calm mind and never loses her courage. Her personality has all the glorification and innate heroism in it and she bears all the calamities with fortitude. Dr. Kenny is also a man of pure heart he has love and respect for Rukmani's innocence and purity of mind. But at the same time he is ill at ease with Rukmani's and Nathan's docile temperament, their attitude though slow in changing, their personal hygiene and their lack of education and information which is responsible for various superstitions.

The culture of the East is, no doubt, spiritual but there is a blemish in it that it treats its women with contempt. All the widows, barren women etc. are treated cruelly. Harish Raizada remarks:

Social evils are caused by cruel customs – Ira, Rukmani's daughter is rejected by her husband because she is barren and in the village, the blame falls squarely on the wife. (East-West Confrontation in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya 508)

Rukmani and Nathan undergo hardships, representing the fortitude of the people of the East. According to ShyamAsnani:

Rukmani's indomitable spirit, drawing *Nectar in a Sieve*, justifies the title of the novel. (The Theme of Famine Hunger: Bhabhani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya 91)

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya brings to light the cultural disturbances and brings home the point that Indian women suffer due to cross-cultural confrontation that mars their joys and ambitions. Against the backdrop of cultural confrontation, the novelist presents the character of Rukmani who is a mother figure and has strength of woman who has an innate quality of kindness and sacrifice. It may be a different thing that she does not possess the physical strength of a man, but her psyche is strong enough as a mother. Rukmani is not only a good mother but also a source of influence for Nathan who finds comfort, peace and love in her relationship. Rukmani is the center, the immovable, influential force upon whom all the other persons in the novel depend. She has no illusion in life; she is not disturbed by predicaments arising out of cultural conflicts. A. V. Krishna Rao remarks:

Rukmani's narrative is her fatalistic resignation and acceptance of duty as the only solace in life. Always generous and sacrificing, she cares for Nathan till his death, and after that, she can only remember his gentleness. In the end, she is fully fledged, with a stronger spirit of acceptance and endurance that gives her courage through many more days of economic difficulties. Her kindness and sympathy towards Puli are symbolic of her own rejuvenated self. Puli also becomes a symbol of Rukmani's responsibility. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels 21)

Rukmani becomes a victim of the tragic events caused by urbanization in her village. Her life is perturbed by the migration of Murugan to the city and her two sons leaving for Sri Lanka. Rukmani remarks about the tragic impact of urbanization on her:

None but these would have laid hands on her ... My sons had left because it frowned on them; one of them had been destroyed by its ruthlessness. (Nectar in a Sieve 134)

But she bears all the misfortunes courageously and continues to be very caring for her family members. Not only she faces these personal sorrows, she also becomes a victim of the cultural clashes which prove fatal for her in the city. A. V. Krishna Rao and K. MadhaviMenon remark:

We thus understand how much Rukmani is particularly a product of her environment and her culture more than anything else; how her peculiar set of circumstances have contributed to making her what she is. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels 21)

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya depicts the cultural dilemma which creates a huge gap in the thinking of women who follow stagnant traditions and consequently clash with ever-moving modernity. In this regard, Shiv K. Kumar aptly remarks:

The exodus from the villages here symbolizes the disinheritance of the human soul, its recantation of the age-old commitment to faith, peace, compassion and truth. Change is, therefore, the focal theme...in her fictional world. (Tradition and Change in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya 1)

Rukmani is worried about the fact that because of cultural clash, there happens transition which results in a change in the appearance of the village, as well as the lives of the people in the village, are affected "in a myriad ways." (Nectar in a Sieve 135) Rukmani suffers greatly just because of this change in her traditional life. When the tannery is planned to be established in her village, she bitterly opposes it because she believes that their children will give up tilling and adopt the job of barter. She is quite forceful in her rejection of the industrialization:

"Never, never," I cried "they (the owners of the tannery) may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one-day things will be as they were that we had done these things." (Nectar in a Sieve 28)

Rukmani, in fact, represents the ideology of conventionality and if anyone from her village accepts the change, she feels sad at heart. When other women like Kunti, and Janaki etc, show their acceptance of the tannery and the present, she says:

So they were reconciled and threw the past away with both hands so that they may be readier to grasp the present, while I stood in pain, envying such

easy reconciliation and clutching in my own two hands the memory of the past, and accounting it a treasure. (Nectar in a Sieve 29)

However, a time comes when Rukmani, to concede to the point of reconciliation with the establishment of the tannery as it has been joined by her two sons Arjuna and Thambi. Now she has come to realize the fact that the tannery is the symbol of change which is necessary for the growth of the country. Her following statement shows that she takes the tannery as the symbol of the growth of industrialization. She says:

It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, and another building appeared. Night and day the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw material in,, The official of the tannery had increased as well. Apart from the whiteman we had first seen who owned the tannery and lived by himself – there were some nine or ten Muslims under him. They formed a little colony of their own...they were a queer lot, and their way of life was quite different from ours. (Nectar in a Sieve 47)

While Rukmani represents the culture of the East, it is Kenny who is the voice of the culture of the West. In fact, he represents not only the people of the West but also the educated Westernized Indians who are supposed to be intellectuals. He tries his level best to live up to the conventional presupposition of the people of the East. However, he is surprised at the obsequious surrender of the villagers before the economic system. Virtually is the voice of disapproval of the Western culture which puts the life of peasants in jeopardy because their voice is crushed and their individualism is negated. He says:

Acquiescent imbeciles, 'do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering? What thoughts have you when your belly is empty or your body is sick? Tell me they are noble ones and I will call you a liar... Yet our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments, and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence, and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed. (Nectar in a Sieve 114)

To sum up, it can be said that Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* besides dealing with the themes of marriage, rural peasant life and being a tale of invincible courage which defeats poverty and limitless sufferings, is primarily a novel about the confrontations between conventional agrarian culture and an expanding machinery culture being forced on the simple rural people. Kamala Markandaya while taking up the issue pertaining to rural society, she highlights the significance of cultural activities based on traditional exercises and declares that



people are reluctant to accept the change in their culture. In this novel, in the backdrop of industrialization, Kamala Markandaya deals with the tension between tradition and modernity, resulting in the cross-cultural encounters in the life of peasants.

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