

## Hunger and Degradation in Kamala Markandaya's selected novels

D. Suganya <sup>1</sup>, Dr. N. P. Kalaivani <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Scholar, Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), Erode.

<sup>2</sup>Head of the Department of English, Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), Erode.

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**Abstract:** Kamala Markandaya was an Indo-Anglian novelist with an international reputation commanding a vast concourse of readers both at home and abroad. She was not only the earliest Indian woman novelist of repute but also the most gifted and one of the most outstanding writers in the galaxy of Indo-Anglian novelist of today. She wrote ten novels. Markandaya uses fiction as a vehicle for communicating her vision of life. When she started writing novels, the theme of Hunger and Degradation, East-West encounter, Rootlessness, Policies and Human Relationship had already been dealt by a number of Indian-English novelists, but Kamala Markandaya has provided variety and vividness to these themes.

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### I. Introduction

Kamala Markandaya was genuinely concerned with the problems of rural India before independence. Among many ailments, hunger and degradation were the most torturing and disgusting. References to human degradation could be found in almost all her novels, especially in *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice* and *Two Virgins*. Her tragic vision found its best expression in her novels which she filled with her social concerns.

In the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* Kamala Markandaya spot lights the despair of the farmers realistically. They are desperate because of the rampant hunger, vagaries of natural calamities, ruthless machines and heartless men. Kamala's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* was a fervent cry of protest against social injustice, hunger and degradation which were the common factors of countless villages in India before independence. The novel was a powerful presentation of patience in the face of suffering. It was also a glaring example of labour when there was no hope. The narrator Rukmani was married to Nathan at the age of twelve; he was a tenant farmer rich in nothing except in love. Despite their poverty, they lived happily in their small mud-hut by and their small paddy-field. They ate well and were contented with their lot. But then misfortunes come upon them in quick succession, so that they are no longer able to eat. The available supply of food had to be shared by so many hungry mouths; there was not enough left for each of them. Then their daughter Ira was returned to them by her husband, for she was barren and he wanted a male-child. He had waited for five years and could wait no more. It was a great tragedy, but they bore it silently for, "it was to be", and they can do nothing about it. They sold their utensils, saris and other domestic things and suffered patiently. The problem of starvation sprang up when their children grew and there was not enough land to accommodate all. An English man established tannery in the village which ruined the peaceful atmosphere of the village in the name of progress and advancement. "Destructive in its side effects it indicates a new way of life" (2). The tannery was growing up as a token of industrialization and mechanization, but for the villagers it was symbol of disaster and destruction.

Hunger had its degrading effect on people; it drove Ira to prostitution and made Nathan as thin and dry as a hollow bamboo stick. It took away poor Kuti's life and remained insatiated even after Nathan and Rukmani left the village. They went to the city and sought Murugan in vail and worked pathetically in the stone quarry. In this novel Markandaya had firmly said that poverty, hunger and starvation could lead to the disintegration of family with a number of misfortunes and problems. The younger generation, the sons of Nathan and Rukmani, getting fed up with hunger and degradation wanted to revolt against them. But when their parents showed a passive acceptance of their children left home thinking that their attitude would never change. They were impatient at injustice; they wanted to improve their fortunes. Thus, there was disintegration of family; actually, it was brought about by hunger and degradation.

Selvam became angry when his father was evicted. He angrily asked: "You have made no protests". (6) The managers of the tannery managed to break the strike. Arjun was angry: Rukmani did not understand what it was to learn. She went to Kenny who satisfied her: "I have told you before – you must cry out, if you want help. It is no use to suffer in silence. Who will succor the drowning man if he does not clamour for his life?" (9) Rukmani felt that it was a sign of weakness if one cried out one must rise above one's misfortunes. Kenny further asked Rukmani will spiritual powers come to solve their problems of hunger and degradation. At this she

replied: "Yet our priest 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" (10).

In the great epics, some hostile supernatural force, some demon or giant worked against the hero and was the cause of tragedy and suffering. Here, it was nature which works against Nathan and Rukmani and despite their heroic struggle against the forces of destruction, first kills Kuti (he dies of starvation) and ultimately drove Nathan to his doom. Whatever saving they had spent in paying the dues to the landlord, hunger is dominant. The novelist painted a very tragic picture of hunger: "Thereafter we fed on whatever we could find: the soft ripe fruit of the prickly pear; a sweet potato or two, blackened and half-rotten, thrown away by some more prosperous hand; sometimes a crab that Nathan managed to catch near the river" (45). Sometimes they were forced to eat grass to satisfy their hunger. Their struggle has been universalized and imparted epical grandeur and dignity. The village where they lived had not been given any name and its locale had been kept vague and indistinct. This was so because it symbolizes rural India and Nathan and Rukmani symbolize the Indian farmer and their tragedy was the tragedy of rural India. The novelists had imparted epical dimensions and epical significance to the tragedy of a poor tenant-farmer and his family.

Hunger, not only killed, it also degraded and de-humanized. It drove Kunthi to prostitution and later on she resorted to blackmail Rukmani and Nathan during their most difficult days when they were themselves starving. It obliged Ira to take to prostitution in a heroic attempt to save the life of Kuti, her child-brother, who was ill and dying. Raja stole in the tannery and was killed. "Poverty is the worst of crimes and the root cause of all other crime and disease", said Bernard Shaw and the truth were illustrated by the story of Nathan and Rukmani.

Nathan's sons left him one by one; two went to Ceylon and one to the city, lured by the prospects of higher wages there. Thus the theme of exodus to the city and rootlessness was also brought in. Rukmani and Nathan themselves had to leave their village and went to the city and country side. Poverty was the same everywhere and yet it was also different. In this way, the urban-rural theme was also suggested.

Beggary was widespread, but there were also the amateurs and those who beg without calling themselves beggars. Rukmani and Nathan themselves stayed in a temple for sometimes and lived on charity like other beggars. It was all a harrowing hair-raising account of poverty both urban and rural which in itself was a great evil and the root causes of all other evils. One's hearts were touched and felt the sorrows of Rukmani and Nathan as them. The intensity of the suffering of the poor had been realistically and graphically conveyed.

In the other novels also there were equally moving and vivid accounts of poverty, hunger and starvation. In *Some Inner Fury*, a crowd of beggars surrounded a car which had broken down, pressing their demands with increasing vigour. *A Silence of Desire* mentions the large number of beggars who throng the roads and who depended upon Swamy's kindness for their food. No observer of the Indian scene could afford to forget the horror of a railway journey in this country, particularly by third class.

India was a land of glaring contrasts, with prosperity and poverty existing side by side. The novelist described in *Some Inner Fury* the house of an upper-class family with plenty of food left over after meals and outside, the hunger children waiting to pounce on any crumb which may be had. So they waited, watchful even while they played, brown wily urchins with the warped bodies, perpetual hunger and the bright uncomplaining eyes of children who somehow contrive to ignore it.

Poverty and hunger whether urban or rural moves the heart of the novelist and its tragedy and pathos were fully brought out with rare art and skill. The poor suffered whether in the village or the city whether at home or on a journey. Migration was often forced upon them, as on Rukmani and Nathan and it served to intensify their suffering.

The coming of industrialization does in no way ameliorate their lot; rather it laid them open to the cruellest forms of exploitation. The construction of the tannery brought nothing but misery to the poor like Rukmani and Nathan. It resulted in the death of their son Raja, in two of their son's going away to Ceylon and their eviction from their land. It resulted in migration and exodus to city.

In *Two Virgins*, Markandaya had presented another aspect of degradation – that was moral degradation. It was not the result of hunger and starvation; it was a part of modern society which claimed to be advanced. Mr. Gupta, the film director symbolized a corrupt modern man of society who easily exploited innocent girls for their sexual purposes. Laithan under the impact of the Western civilization fell a victim to the temptations of Gupta and ultimately became pregnant. The entire family fell into the greatest degradation. Miss. Mendoza and Mr. Gupta were intended to symbolize the corrupting influence of the Western culture on India. Both were instrumental in taking Laitha away from her family. They tempted Laitha to fall into her ultimate degradation. She was charmed by the glamour shown by Mr. Gupta.

According to the Eastern concept of life, people had to suffer from hunger and degradation and other problems like social injustice calmly. Rukmani told Kenny: "Do not concern yourself – we are on God's hand"

(11). This was the basic cause of peasant's hunger and degradation. These people had a traditional resignation to Fate, God and even the vagaries of climate and nature. They had developed the mentality of passive acceptance.

In another novel *A Handful of Rice* Kamala presented the other facets of poverty and starvation. It was hunger which compelled people to commit crimes. Ravi, the hero entered Jayamma's house forcefully as a thief because he was over-powered by hunger. The conversation which took place was reflective of the whole situation: "What do you want? Food, I told you, he said impatiently. And be quick"(12).

Ravi did not face only economic insecurity but also moral degradation. He was in a constant predicament that honesty and prosperity would not go together. Leaving the penury and apathy of the village, he came to the city – Madras to make a better living. But he could not get anything else than unemployment, frustration and encounter with the police. His meager education had made him useless to work by his hands and other jobs he could not get. Damodar, another young man told him about the profits of the underworld.

One night Ravi was heavily drunk in prohibition time to get rid of his hunger and frustration. A police man ran after him, he forced his way into the house of a tailor Apu in order to get food as well as to escape from the police man. Kamala depicted the condition of Ravi's starving: Ravi was choosy in his choice of food, he told Damodar: "All I want is a meal- a nice, hot, home-cooked meal not bazaar muck" (14).

The next morning, the house-wife gave him a thorough beating, the husband scolded and advised him to behave decently as a decent boy like him ought to do. Ravi was transformed into a decent boy, he went back to replace the bars he had broken. He married Nalini and joined Apu as his apprentice. However, he wanted to improve himself, he wished to offer more to his wife. He was dissatisfied with the resigned acceptance of the old man Apu. He again went to Damodar to improve his sources of prosperity. Damodar promised him work, but it put Ravi in a tension between Damodar's values and Nalini's. The novel was based on this conflict of conscience. Being tortured by the dilemma of conscience, Ravi started behaving with his wife Nalini in a very cruel manner.

That afternoon Ravi joined a mob in looting a granary. Kannan advised him against such an action 'the rice is for all, this way is wrong, this way the innocent suffer' (15). But he went and was beaten by the police. Ravi was a young man symbolizing thousands of unemployed young men who intended to lead a respectable and honorable life.

Hunger always forced people to leave their lands, Rukmani and Nathan left their land in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Ravi left village in *A Handful of Rice* for the city. He thought of himself. Poverty and hunger brought all sorts of sufferings to him including the disintegration of his family. Ravi was so much degraded by poverty, hunger and starvation that he used to beat his wife badly and even had sexual intercourse with his mother-in-law. Ravi's son Raju became a victim of poverty when Nalini requested him to call a doctor, Ravi burst out. It did not mean that Ravi did not love his son, but he was helpless by his poverty. He was broken by his son's death and went to Damodar and cried out. But Damodar refused him. At last, he joined a group of young people to loot grains, but again he lost his courage as he was thoroughly broken by his son's death.

Kamala presented a problem of hunger and degradation in villages; she also gave a solution that by following the Western methods one could improve one's standards. Even tannery was good because it was reflection of modern mechanical revolution, Dr.Kenny's establishment of the hospital was also a unique thing for the poor and the sick. Kamala Markandaya's description of hunger and pain were very poignant and impressive. Kamala Markandaya must have observed hungry people in order to give such impressive descriptions. They were also journalistic and generalized. As she had stayed in England, she had not seen the harrowing scenes of hunger which affected Bhattacharya.

## II. Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya justified the title by making her readers realize the true meaning of hunger and starvation. Unlike other Indian – English novelists, she presented things authentically on the basis of her experiences. Actually, hunger and starvation led people to degradation.

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