

# Social concerns in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice*, and *A Silence of Desire*

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**Abstract:** Kamala Markandaya is a humanistic novelist who believes in improving humanity in general and social concerns in particular. She does not approve of the philosophy of 'art for art's sake. She has a firm conviction that literature must be played a significant role in the betterment of society. Markandaya's novels are a part "of literature of concerns." or "socio literature." Markandaya defines literature as more effective than any other media. In her novels, she depicts many social problems that are relevant in the present time. Through her novels, Markandaya has raised many social concerns like poverty, hunger, unemployment, immigration, exploitation, husband-wife relationship, psychological maladjustment, etc. In this paper, an attempt has been made to find some concerns in the novels of Kamala Markandaya that are a barrier to the development of humanity.

**Keywords:** Hunger, Poverty, Exploitation, Migration

## Introduction

Kamala Markandaya has a prominent place as a novelist in Indian English literature. she won name and fame not only in India but all over the world with the publication of her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. She gifted an extraordinary vision of life. As a novelist, she has a particular sense of life in rural and urban areas. Initially, she lived in south Indian villages and closely observed the rustic life to get basic awareness of Indian village life. Her novels depict villages, cities, husband-wife relationships, social conflicts, and attraction toward modernism.

Kamala Markandaya's strength lies in the powerful social realism that she analyses through the various interpersonal relationships of her characters, particularly when these are more acutely conscious of their problems and attempting to group towards some more independent existence. She is a genuine novelist who has a gift for fixing the individuality of the character within the given social milieu in a reasonably convincing social context. She has been most successful in dealing with the problems of the educated middle class. She has a gift in particular for delineating the self-imposed laceration of the dissatisfied, which is a direct extension of social realism and part of their mental complex.

Kamala Markandaya has settled in England, but her novels bear an indelible print of Indianness. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, a writer who has been abroad, are: Made aware of their Indianness as well as of the difference in two systems of values; one rather acquired the inherited and taken for granted. (67)

She was keen to know more about rural India. She lived in a south Indian village. This gave her first-hand knowledge of rural India, its poverty, its poor farmer's dependence on rain, its people's faith in God and saints, rural rituals, and customs; all these facts show Kamala Markandaya as a social realistic. All novels of Kamala Markandaya reveal the changing social-political India and her skillful use of the English language for the required purpose of her novels.

## Poverty, Hunger, and Exploitation

Kamala Markandaya's chief concern in writing novels is to reveal the miseries of society in rural and urban areas. Through her novels, she highlighted poverty, hunger, and exploitation. Her novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice* portray the starving, exploited people who struggle desperately for bare subsistence in rural and urban areas. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a story of poor rural tenant farmer Nathan and his wife Rukmani, the novel's narrator.

They represent the thousands of uprooted peasants under the pressure of industrialism and landlordism. In the beginning, his family was happy, but after the birth of every child, their starvation grew. As Rukmani states, "Ira had been fed up well on milk and butter and rice; Arjun too, for he was the first boy. But those came after, there was less and less." (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 26)

With the failure of crops due to the inclement weather, Nathan cannot feed his enlarged family of six children. Rukmani blames the tannery, which invades the fertile cultivable land. The market price has been raised sky-high. With the establishment of the tannery, the peace of village life has been swept away. Rukmani made a complaint against the tannery establishment. She says: "No sugar or dhal or ghee have- we tasted since they came, and should have had none, so long as they remained." (*Nectar in a sieve*, 32)

## Dowry System

Rukmani, in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, is the youngest of the four daughters of her father. Once a prosperous village headman, her father married Rukmani to a tenant farmer. All her three sisters married in a prosperous family with a grand wedding ceremony and gifts. But when Rukmani's turn came, only Thangam, as relatives, came to the wedding and no one came from the surrounding districts as they had done before. She said:

“Santha first, a big wedding which lasted for many days, plenty of gifts and feasts, diamond earrings, a gold necklace, as befitted the village headman's daughter. Padmini next, and she too made a good match and married fittingly, taking jewels and dowry with her; but when it came to me, Thangam, the only relation 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.” (*Nectar in a sieve*, 7)

Her mother tells Rukmani that "four dowries are too much for a man to bear." (8) When she asks her mother shall I have a grand wedding, her mother laughs and loses her look from worry. Her brother says, “Don't speak like a fool; the headman is no longer of consequence. There is the collector, who comes to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, and to those he appoints, not to the headman.” (8) That is why her parents could not find a rich husband for her and married her to a tenant farmer Nathan who was poor in everything in front of her family. Here Rukmani became the victim of the dowry system.

### Immigration from Villages to Cities

*Nectar in a Sieve* is a story of the village poor. *A Handful of Rice* is a story of the urban poor. In both novels, Kamala Markandaya deals with the story of migration from rural areas to urban areas. There is a perceptible shift of socio-economic activity from land to factory and village to city. In *Nectar in a sieve*, the village shopkeeper cannot compete with the shopkeepers who hail from the town. So, they are bound to close shop. The grownup generation, Kunti's son and Rukmani's sons, Arjun and Thambi, join the factory. They leave their paternal profession of tilling the land for better financial prospects. Thambi stands to his father, “If it were your land or mine, I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labor for another and get so little in return? Far better to turn away for such injustice.” (*Nectar in a sieve*, 124)

The younger starts work in a tannery with a hope of a handsome amount. But when the younger's demands were not fulfilled by the tannery, they started for Ceylon to work in the tea plantation. Rukmani's third son is killed with a charge of theft. Rukmani and Nathan go to the city hoping to meet their son Murugan, but they don't find him; as Rukmani's son shifts to the city, Ravi, in *A Handful of Rice*, also goes to the city as the village has nothing to offer him. However, the city, too, has nothing great to offer him. He reflects: “It is the drag round the streets and the searching and the wait and the frustration and the bearing the pinpricks that the haughty rich always had in plenty for food which he had not been able to endure.”

For his survival in the city, Ravi meets a gang of anti-socials led by Damodar. When he steals from a tailor's shop, he is caught, held up, and punished by the tailor, Apu and Jayamma, but they take pity on him and offer him an apprentice job in his shop. Later he got married to Apu's daughter and became a part of Apu's family. After the death of Apu, he assumed the dignified position of the head of the family. But he can't bear the burden of the whole family, and the situation forces him into heavy debt. He expresses his condition: “The city was so crowded, rents high, that even men with decent incomes searched for years, squashing themselves and their families onto whichever relative has managed to secure a foothold in some house. It was easier for a single man, but even sharing a room would cost ten or twelve rupees a month, too big a slice to take out of twenty he earned (48).”

Maintaining the large family of his laws, the financial position is deteriorating daily. Besides these, Ravi was so tense that he could not sleep at night thinking about the rich-class ladies who scolded him using insulting and abusive words. When Ravi feels helpless, worried, and depressed, he thinks about Damodar with the hope that he will help him in disaster. But Damodar advised him, “Go back to your village. It is more your size; you are not fit for anything else” (214).

Due to poverty, Ravi shows anger toward his wife. His frustration is reflected in his anger against society. His incest behavior with his mother-in-law is only a psychological result of his frustrated rage against society, the theme of social injustice highlighted in several ways. At first, Ravi wants to earn his livelihood by fair means. However, the attempts failed.

### Patriarchal System

The patriarchal system is another social concern in the novels of Kamala Markandaya. In a male-dominated society, a woman always suffers for those faults which she has not of her parts. When a woman was born, she became the target of criticism for being a girl. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a vital example of the patriarchal system. When Ira, the daughter of Rukmani and Nathan, was abandoned by her husband. Ira's husband says, “You gave me your daughter in marriage; I have brought her back to you. She is a barren lady (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 54).” Even her father, Nathan, justified the act of her husband. Nathan says: “I don't blame him. He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 54) Not only did Nathan justify her husband's act, but society also justified it. She says to her mother, “there are others, neighbors, women, and I a failure, a woman who cannot even bear a child.” (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 54)

Rejection of her husband and society leads Ira to degradation in her character. In *A Handful of Rice*, Ravi dominates his wife, Nalini. He shows anger toward his wife for his failure to maintain a large family. In frustration, he beat her mercilessly. He starts finding fault with Nalini in everything. Even the slightest provocation raises his violent anger. The black stone in the rice makes him rebuke Nalini. Even during Raju's illness, when Nalini wants to call the doctor, Ravi answers angrily:

“A doctor, he cried, ‘what are we men sahibs or something to send for a doctor for every pain and ache? Will you pay his bill? Five rupees before he even steps out of his house.’” (*A handful of Rice*, 124)

Raju dies pathetically as he does not get the proper medicine and treatment. His act of ravishing his mother-in-law is a result of psychological frustration.

In *A Silence of Desire* there is a glimpse of the patriarchal system. Dandekar wants to dominate his wife, Sarojini. In this novel, Dandekar is influenced by western beliefs and does not accept the reality of faith healing Swamy. He spent fifteen years of his married life happily. But when his wife Sarojini started to visit Swamy, the faith healer, he suspected her character. He thinks that Sarojini loves some other man. Here Dandekar shows a traditional Indian outlook towards her wife to go anywhere freely.

## Psychological Maladjustment

Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire* is a novel about the psychological maladjustment of a married couple in an urban middle-class family. According to Longfellow:

"Three silences there are: first of speech  
Second of desire, and third of thought" (1)

In this novel, Kamala Markandaya shows the relationship between the husband and wife that is badly affected by a huge gap between their beliefs- spiritual versus rational. The novel is based on a middle-class family with a husband, a wife, and three children. At the novel's beginning, there is harmony between the husband and wife. Dandekar remarks at the beginning of the novel, "She was a good wife, Sarojini: good with children and excellent cook, an efficient manager of his household." (*Silence for Desire*, 4)

But suddenly, after fifteen years of marriage, Dandekar begins to doubt Sarojini's fidelity. The reason for his doubts is that she has started visiting a swami, a faith healer. She begins to go to Swami because she has a growth in her womb, therefore she hopes that Swami will cure her of it. At first, she hides her visit to Swami from her husband. At this act of Sarojini, Dandekar suspects her faithfulness and thinks that someone else now has her affection. He spies on her movement, and one day he catches her sitting before the Swami:

"She was sitting cross-legged, on the man's (the Swami's) right. His hand on her bowed head, and he was murmuring to her, his voice sometimes failing to whisper, a soft stream of indistinguishable words. In a rough circle about them sat a small group of men and women, listening -so engrossed that no one turned as he (Dandekar) burst in." (*Silence for Desire*, 61)

Disharmony in their relationship results from two different views of Dandekar and Sarojini. Sarojini has deep faith in Swami's healing power, and Dandekar has an extremely rational belief. Edwin Thumboo has rightly said; Markandaya is too mature to give a 'bold disquisition' on the conflict between faith and reason." (2)

Here Markandaya shows the need for understanding and harmony in the husband-wife relationship. Suspicion without proof is the greatest enemy of conjugal harmony. Suspicion takes place in the mind of Dandekar with Sarojini's faith in Swamy. He thought, 'the pattern of his life has been twisted out of shape.' Now in this matter, he is in dire need of advice from the bosom colleague Sastri. His efforts to talk some sense into Sarojini's head and his pleading with Swamy to dissuade her from visiting end in a fiasco. Here Markandaya shows a psychological distinction between Dandekar and Sarojini. On the one hand, Sarojini feels better at every visit to Swami. However, she is well aware that the pain is still there, but it does not touch her in the presence of Swamy. Sarojini is happy in her pain, while Dandekar is tortured. Sarojini behaves like a woman who is carrying on a passionate illusion. In her continuous visit to Swamy, she starts to neglect her three children and her husband. As a result, Dandekar does not put his heart and soul into his work and runs into heavy arrears. The family is on the verge of collapse. In a seer frustration, Dandekar starts visiting prostitutes.

Dandekar tries to wrest Sarojini back from Swamy's orbit of influence. In this matter, he has taken his boss, Chari's help. He says, "I didn't know what I was doing and 'I wanted – so little. My wife- I wanted her back that was all. This changing attitude of Dandekar came back Sarojini from the influence of Swamy. Both return to the sense of responsibility towards the family and to the realization of the rights of others.

To conclude, it can be said that social evils are a barrier to the development of society. The social evils are mostly a result of the customs and oppressive living system. Human development in rural and urban areas is in lousy condition by these social evils. The prevalence of these social evils leads to a considerable migration of people, the dislocation of families, and the disintegration of joint families in rural areas. All these factors affected rural land and nature, life, death, tradition, and modernity. As the novelist is aware of the harsh reality of the lower stratum of society, all her novels fight against despair, and evils are defeated with the acceptance, tolerance, optimism, and encouragement the modern thoughts. Accepting modernity will eradicate the social evils and inequality that are spared in society.

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