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Social Issues In The Selected Novels Of Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya was really concerned with the plight of rural India before independence. Amid several afflictions, starvation and humiliation are the most distressing and repugnant preoccupations, according to her perspective. These afflictions also reflect societal issues in India before independence. In her many works, she has addressed various struggles pertaining to aspects of Indian society, such as social and political issues. The novels depicted below exemplify the deterioration of characters, leading them into a horrific predicament after all else has transpired.

Keywords: starvation, humiliation, distressing, horrific, deterioration

This study examines several books that illustrate how the selected characters detach from their homelands and families to fulfil their needs. The characters listed below expose their unbeatable obstacles to readers as they undergo disintegration. The two main protagonists of *Nectar in a Sieve*, Arjun and Thambi, set out with a specific goal in mind. The elder Arjun occupies himself with writing, either on scraps of paper he finds lying around or, when that fails, by scribbling on the bare earth. This brings his mother, Rukmani, great joy, as she recognises a reflection of her late father in him. Nathan, Arjun's father, worries that his son isn't taking an interest in the family farm, which grows their staple foods, including rice, beans, sweet potatoes, and chillies. Nathan and Rukmani begin to view Arjun differently, but their hearts are broken when he expresses his desire to work in a tannery.

Initially, Arjun distanced himself from the tannery; nevertheless, due to a need of sustenance, he contemplates joining the caste of tanners, which would encourage his fellow villagers to engage in spinning yarn. However, without disturbing them or considering their conversation, he exclaims "I do not know,"... "I do not care. The important thing is to eat" (53). To elucidate his parents more clearly, he states "I am tired of hunger, and I am tired of seeing my brothers hungry. There is never enough, especially since Ira came to live with us" (53). Upon reflecting on his statements, Rukmani concedes and states "he is right, of course. The harvests had been very poor, shop prices were higher than ever" (53).

She lets him work at the tannery despite her concerns as a mother. Apart from Arjun, Thambi, his brother, is also involved in the tannery industry, a situation that deeply disturbs Nathan. Nathan eagerly anticipates the day when his boys will labour on their land, cultivating it for fertile development rather than toiling in the westernised tannery. However, Thambi, the second son, has a trace of despondency in his eyes that "If it were your land, or mine,"... "I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return? Far better to turn away from such injustice" (54).

Consequently, Arjun and Thambi wish to go from the hamlet and become part of the tannery. In accordance with their desire, they enlisted; nevertheless, a series of fortuitous events allowed them to leave the tannery and settle down in Ceylon, where they could earn a bit more money and live a little more comfortably. In this passage, Kamala Markandaya informs her readers that the characters she employs are planning their migration because they cannot settle down in their homeland. Speculation prevented them from taking their family to the stars, even though they're leaving for the better.

Due to severe drought, hunger sometimes arises, leading to intolerable conditions, compelling individuals to consume whatever is available: prickly pear, a sweet potato, charred and partially decayed, discarded by the affluent. Occasionally, Nathan catches a crab along the river. Their sons linger in the countryside throughout the day, returning with a handful of bamboo shoots, a piece of sugar cane abandoned in desolate fields, and various coconut remnants collected from the town's channel. They continued to consume grass, which ultimately led to severe abdominal pain and intense vomiting. Among us, Kuti, the youngest boy, endured significant hardship and was perpetually unwell.

Ira, the eldest daughter of Nathan and Rukmani, consistently exhibits gentleness towards Kuti, cradling him in her slender arms and providing him with the majority of what she receives. He perceives that nothing offers more relief than his sister Ira, whose warmth alleviates his lamentation. Subsequently, her other brother, Raja, encounters difficulties when he is apprehended for the theft of calfskin and subjected to severe punishment. He exerted considerable effort and consumed minimal sustenance, resulting in significant weakness before his abrupt demise. Subsequently, the focus shifted to the issue of compensation, which unfortunately proved to be even more distressing than Raja's death itself. The causes portray Ira as a significant character in this tale. With her income, she may purchase rice and milk for the child; nonetheless, Nathan disapproves of her demeanour and struggles to articulate his thoughts, faltering somewhat in his speech, "I will not have it said- I will not have parading at night but without any bothering she answered him, Tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long as there is need. I will not hunger anymore" (102). Concerning the researcher's title, Anil Kumar Bhatnagar also notes:

Hunger compels people to leave the land of their birth and near dear ones. This a part of general lot of the poor people. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani and Nathan are forced to leave their village. Likewise, in *A Handful of Rice*, Ravi has to leave his village because his village cannot provide him bread, not to speak of a career. Thousands of poor people of the villages, who cannot be sustained by the land of their birth, have to migrate from one place to another in search of employment and bread. (24)

Thus, each designated character endured and faltered for another necessary character. However, each character has selected a distinct path, facing the same challenges of famine as they continue their individual journeys. When readers engage in unconventional thinking, they may conclude that the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is enveloped in the poignant themes of drought, famine, and poverty.

A further conceptual fiction by Kamala Markandaya *A Handful of Rice* effectively portrays famine through the character of Ravi, who elicits sympathy and empathy from readers throughout the narrative. Kamala Markandaya crafted this story skilfully, compelling readers to contemplate its content with each page. This tale starts with Ravi, who is intoxicated not just for enjoyment but also because of his insatiable appetite; he could consume an entire horse. Subsequently, Ravi's voice becomes more sombre as he articulates, 'Drunk, am I, he said distinctly. I'm not only drunk, but I'm also starving, I tell you' (Markandaya 6).

Ravi, somebody from a rural town seeking a joyful and comfortable existence, arrives in the city and becomes subjugated by Damodar, who is adept at thriving in urban life. Through an unintended act of transgression, Ravi gradually becomes acquainted with tailor Apu and his family. Apu's daughter, Nalini, emerges victorious, capturing his heart and leading him from the streets to her vibrant household. Initially, Ravi served as Apu's apprentice and later became his son-in-law. The author reconstructs the lives of the respected yet impoverished individuals in a credible manner.

In summary, people view a man without food and employment as a lesser creature and deem him unworthy. Ravi reflects "If there had been a job, he thought, it might have been different: but there was no job" (Markandaya 26). Furthermore, the term "jobless" is simple to articulate; however, when it manifests, it confines an individual within an empty vessel, so intertwining the concept of joblessness with the notion of hunger, which permeates the whole narrative. Poverty, hunger, and malnutrition significantly impact one's life. Likewise, Ravi's existence also engenders misery and culminates in the fragmentation of his family. Markandaya articulates:

His mother was dead. His brothers and sisters, who with their progeny would have provided the cohorts, were gone, forced out by the relentless pressure of their existence, in the upsurge of revolt that had begun to dismantle the old pattern of family life first in one village, then in another. (57)

Ravi continuously confronts challenging situations, despite initially entering a hopeful marriage and having a wife at the beginning of the narrative. He aspires to lead a lavish lifestyle akin to that of the affluent but is lacking sufficient funds. He is a man who frequently constructs fanciful illusions. In response, his wife, Nalini, is astonished and articulates her opinions towards him, "Putting yourself on a level with high-class folk. How can we ever be like them? Why can't you be content with what we have?" (75).

Therefore, they engaged in a profound discourse; however, to some degree, both experienced a return to the first phase of ecstasy. He does not wish to dominate her with his painful wrath; rather, his transgressions result in a negative perception. Nalini is increasingly concerned and contemplates what is troubling him, questioning why it is tough to ascertain this, leading her to reflect on it. His mother-in-law refers to him openly and candidly as a wanderer. Thus, Kamala Markandaya illustrates how poverty fractures an individual from their cohesive identity to a harrowing reality. To satisfy their demands, they have adopted the behaviours.

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