

Ostacising the Plebeian: An Analysis of Kamala Markandaya's Novels Nectar in a Sieve and Handful of Rice

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve and A Handful of Rice, to see if the analysis could yield insights into the subaltern culture in rural areas of India in terms of marginality, power relations, subjectivity, hegemony, transculturation, and so on. Kamala Markandaya is undoubtedly a distinguished novelist on the contemporary literary scene who zoom in to the real life of Indian people, their sufferings, miseries, troublesome life, exploitation, their domestic bliss. The 'educated' people exploits the marginalised people. The city life attracts the poor village folks with all its luxury and comforts. Thus, the poor rustic people leaves their land and reaches the city in search of green pastures. But they are actually trapped in the web of ignorance.

Key Words: exploitation, subordination, suffering, subaltern, hegemony



We are living in a society where particular groups of people are being pulled by the society, it's the so-called 'status' that prevent them from becoming one with them. They are deprived of happiness of life. Under the pretence of being 'uncouth' or 'uneducated', the underprivileged people are thrown out of the scenario. Their voice for existence remains unheard. They have to live in their own premises without any contact with the contemporary world. This has been programmed by the so-called 'cultured' people of the society. Thus they become 'marginals'. The cultured ones regard themselves as superior and consider others as inferior to them, when compared to their status, money, lifestyle and so on. They create a distinction in the society between the upper class and the lower class. The lower classes are being deprived of their basic rights including the right to live. They are being oppressed and exploited in many ways. But all that remains as "unheard melodies" of pain. The underprivileged class have their own soul and it is not given any

recognition by the upper class. They are not treated as 'savages'. They are human and they have desires, dreams, aspirations but it remains unfulfilled throughout their lives. They suffer but it remains undocumented.

Nectar in a Sieve is a moving saga of peasant life in India. It gives incomparably vivid mental picture of Indian life and manners and exposits the dilemma of people with conflicting Eastern and Western values. There is always a clear distinction made between the poor rustic life and the urban life. The urban people considers themselves as highly sophisticated and place all the village people in the category of latent, half-baked. They are not concerned about the sufferings miseries of those 'unprogressive' group of people. All they do is that they simply regarded the rustic ones as 'inexperienced'. But the actual truth is much more ironical. Those who called the village people as 'untaught', are the real epitome of 'unprogressive' kind of people. They themselves claim that they are educated, progressive³ then why are they regarding their fellow beings as 'marginalised ones'? One can see life as a conglomeration in the afore mentioned novels. In the novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani and Nathan are suffering from extreme poverty, they have to toil to earn a living but everything goes in vain. Whether it is in city or village, poverty is poverty. Everybody wants to fill their stomach. Whether it is urban or rural, the problem faced by the poor is common.

Starvation forces people to do things which they are not really want to do. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani and Nathan leaves their land and in *A Handful of Rice*, Ravi leaves his village and moves to city with the hope of better prospectives. But they have to sacrifice their own life for that. Poverty, a despot ruling the world with very high taxes and unjust laws, has been pushing each and everyone in to a pitfall out of which it is not easy to come out for people. The result of such miserable situation is suffering, death, and misfortune.

The 'educated' people exploits the marginalised people. The city life attracts the poor village folks with all its luxury and comforts. Thus the poor rustic people leaves their land and reaches the city in search of green pastures. But they are actually trapped in the web of ignorance. They have no contact with the real world and their innocence being exploited in many ways. At the same time they are denied of the justice. "Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organised conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe" (Douglass). The village people are considered as primitive and they are deprived of their own rights. Their consciousness has been liquidated. Thus the city life becomes a nightmare for those poor villages who dreams of a better life.

Through these novels Kamala Markandaya presents the life in the comforts of city in India in contrast between the working class people or the subaltern class who live in crushing rural poverty and in the urban poverty. In the postcolonial context, 'subaltern' or 'underclass' occupies a prominent place which encompasses the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender or in any other way. The term was adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those working class people in Soviet Union who are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Hegemony is the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all. It is actually a mass deception but remain unnoticed among the powerless people. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers, and other groups denied access to hegemonic power. It is the subject position that defines subalternity. Deprivation, alienation and subordination, silence and neglect mark the lives of the subaltern and even when they resist and rise up, they feel bounded and defeated by their subject positions. They are not given any representation in the society. The privileged class think that the society is made for the people of their class and they will not allow other classes in to that space. The subaltern class has less access to the social institution and they are not even considered as a part of culture.

The concept of "subaltern" gained increased prominence with Gayatri Spivak's *Can a Subaltern Speak ?* (1985). The marginalised subject is denied of a space to speak

what they feel. Their silence becomes a weapon for their own destruction. It is a kind of self-imposed imprisonment that they created for themselves. The subaltern consciousness is a construction of the elite discourse and it is due to this discourse that their marginality is sustained.

The novels, *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice* are the representation of contemporary Indian society in contrast with poverty and wealth, subaltern and the privileged. Through these novels Kamala Markandaya brings out the poor and pathetic conditions of rustic life or the working class who are always an object of exploitation in the hands of dominating class. In the novel, *A Handful of Rice*, the central character Ravi is from a village and he becomes a true prototype of the class manifesting miseries of their life, humiliation, struggle, dreams and others. His ardent aspiration shows that the subaltern can also dream. He is 'educated' as far as he is concerned. It is only the basic standard of education. This education does not yield for any job. He believes that his 'education' would bring better hopes and his life would change. But all his calculations about life has lost. Ravi understands that life is more dangerous in city. He says, "Life is hazardous in all its respects and is to be reckoned more so here because the danger is blatant and obvious, than in village where it was hidden in duller" (33). Thus Ravi become a representative of the entire peasant or working class who hopes for better future in the city.

From the lack of education there emerged the problem of ignorance. Ravi is a product of village. When he is introduced in to the city, he is like 'fish out of water'. He is like a stranger to the new land. The city does not give any warm welcome to him that he had expected to do. He is being alienated in the big city. He has a very little education. He does not know anything about the outside world of village. He knows only the poverty, sufferings of village. It is his first encounter with the world beyond the village. Because of his ignorance he gets in to the circle of the underworld of struggles and bootleggers. He becomes a drunkard. Due to the bad influence of Damodar on Ravi, he join hands with Damodar who deals with smuggled and stolen goods. Because of ignorance a person can easily get in to troubles. Ravi's father, Ram says: "In a big town like this there are so many temptations. Temptations which fortunately do not come one's way in a village. There were indeed many pitfalls in a town, traps especially set to seduce our men away from right in to wrong"(56).

The people of city tries to seduce the poor peasants by offering things that they never seen in their life and opens the way of immorality and dishonesty. In this novel, Damodar, who belong to the immoralities of city life and he attracts Ravi towards his fold offering luxuries of life. Ravi becomes spell bound in his company also. It is the ignorance of the poor working class people to comprehend the actual reality. Because the upper class people succeeds in making them believe that it is 'real'. Thus their consciousness is structured in such a way that they can not discern reality from what it actually presents.

The chillness of poverty holds back the peasant life from achieving the heights. Lack of money is one of the sociological factors that lead to extreme poverty. In a contemporary society, money means power. Everything revolves around money. In this cultural framework, to par with the upper class will be a cumbersome task for the lower class or marginalised section of society. As a villager, Ravi does not have any job or yearning of his own. He hopes that the city life would bring him better prospects. Under this false assumption he step in to the 'dark' world outside the village.

Ravi's son Raju is also a victim of utmost poverty. He surrenders before poverty by sacrificing his own life in a very young age. Ravi's father-in-law also dies without getting treatment on time. Here one can see a group of poor helpless people who witnesses the death of their dear ones. They are not able to provide better treatment because their poverty stricken condition does not allow them to do so. Thus they become mere spectators. This is one of the worst side of poverty. People who are marginalised have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them. This results in making them handicapped in delving contribution to society.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Nathan, Rukmani and their children's life are totally depend on agriculture. Nathan is a good and enthusiastic farmer who hopes to purchase his own land someday. The possibility is ruled out gradually as calamities follow one after another. The novel highlights the rural peasant's problem. Rain acquires the status of immoral nectar in the mortal life of peasants. Rice is produced by consistent labour. But they are unable to retain it. Rice slips down through the palms of peasants and gradually disappears in the hand of landlords and money lenders. Monsoon rain plays an important role in Indian agrarian economy. Without getting enough rain they lose the production. Nature, which becomes friend of the farmer now become a foe of them. The Nature also turned against the poor village folk. They are unable to do anything except simply looking at their fields and make heavy sighs.

As there is no work left on farm, the youth in village move over to urban area in search of jobs. Without specialised skills or education they find it difficult to get jobs. They come to the city with great aspiration in them. But they are not received in a very nice manner. Their dream shatters and they trapped in the unscrupulous and licentiousness of city life. City life makes them forget their values and more than not, they fall a prey to bad habits like drinking, gambling and others. In the village, they upheld the dictum of purity and serenity. But in the midst of these they lead a contempt life. But now the scene has changed. They are no more fragile. The attraction in the city makes them acutely aware of their poor condition and in an attempt to earn quick and easy money, they commit crimes. They lose their sense of responsibility towards their family. They cannot recognise their purpose of coming in the city.

In the novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, the characters are being discriminated in several layers. In their own village Nathan and Rukmani experience alienation and favouritism. The English bosses buy the village field for a high price and so there is price hike for every village product and even vegetables. It is a very difficult situation when the peasants are considered. Actually they are struggling to meet the two ends. So in that circumstances, it is like a sudden hit on them. Discrimination is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age or sex. Firstly, the peasants are being secluded because they are the peasants of village by violating their basic right to live.

The term marginalisation describes the exclusion or removal of some people by the overt actions or tendencies of human societies. Some people get marginalised from the prevalent system of main stream without desire. These people get less opportunity to survive. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "marginalisation means to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group". The effects of marginalisation in a society are especially those by which the marginalised groups are secluded from the main stream practices. The marginalised people generally becomes the victims of identity crisis. It keeps these groups away from decision making abilities and power. In *A Handful of Rice*, Ravi is also excluded from taking decision regarding job and household. Marginalisation usually talks about social inequality. Social inequality is measured with regard to hierarchal positions. Power is the primary concern of social inequality. Power deals with dominance and subordination.

The discrimination is made between castes too. Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, is a conservative character, she opposed her sons, Arjun's and Thambi's joining the tannery because they belong to the lower strata of society. When the outsiders comes to the village and establishes the tannery, they are belonging to the higher strata of society and the poor peasants are belong to the lower strata of society. Thus emerges a class conflict. There is an imbalance of power. Here the power is only distributed among the city people and they enjoy all the privileges of life through operating power over the powerless. The poor villagers become mere workers to the upper class people. They have nothing to exhibit except their labour. Thus they made to act like puppets. It is easy to cheat the ordinary folk, because they are so pure and serene.

Using power as a weapon they make the villagers to come under their influence. The peasants are not aware of the fact that they are being drained and exploited. Because they lack the knowledge to comprehend what is happening between them and the city people. Their conscience is structured in such a way that they are inferior to the powerful people before them. Thus the city people instills the false notion that they are superior over them. Thus creates an inferiority-superiority complex among them. Due to this construction of mind, they are being silenced and oppressed. Following the logic of Spivak's argument, Kamala Visweswaran challenges 'the equation of speech with agency' and suggests that the silence of the subaltern could be interpreted as a refusal to speak in the dominant terms of political representation.

But then they are not aware of their own rights and they does not even know if there is any. These lower caste people does not have resources to rely on and cope with upper caste people. The minority group of upper class people structured the societal world as per their notions and idea. Later, they make it mandatory as a customary law. Thus the lower castes are deliberately made and kept as outcastes and get marginalised by the upper class people.

Marginalisation is the theory of class and caste differentiation in society. Class has become a more powerful factor in the social canvas. Caste and class are viewed as the two most significant dimensions of social stratification. The class become a paradigm of everything in the society. The high class people receives special attention in very corner of society. On the contrary, the lower class people is sustained with specific scorn, hatred, underestimation and ill-treatment of public. The idea of purity and impurity postulate superiority and inferiority complex among the people. Thus 'pure', 'less pure', 'impure' have been determined by caste by the society. The problems of exploitation, domination, poverty, seclusion, injustice are the products of caste and class hierarchy. By discriminating the lower class people in the society, the elite class curtail the privileges of the poor submissive people. Privilege is also a kind of insularity which cuts off the privileged from certain kinds of "other" knowledge. Spivak objects to the sloppy use of the term 'subaltern'. "Subaltern", she insists, is not "just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who is not getting a piece of the pie" (132).

There exist a discrimination between village and city life. Indian cities are displaying numerous kind of social and economic inequalities. Many of these are noticeable from the abysmal living and livelihood conditions of low income communities. Social exclusion is a multidimensional process of progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normatively prescribed activities of the society. So the poor village folks accepts what is being standardised in the social set up.

The upper class are not considering the lower class as their fellow beings. They treat the low class marginalised people as meaningless entity who has no refined soul of their own. Thus they are actually questioning their existence of living. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. But these rights are being violated when it comes to the subaltern. They are also human beings and part of the society. But they are deprived of their basic rights. The marginalised section of the society being encroached by the right to live, to attain dignity, to equal opportunity, to have rights of decent employment, to education, to sexuality and to privacy.

Thus there is discrepancy between the rural life of the subaltern and the urban life of the upper class people. The lower class people strives to attain the equal status of the elite class and they constantly tussles. They are being pulled back by the society. The established framework of society does not allow them to fit in to that created structure. If they have their own dreams and goals, nothing is going to be fulfilled in a power based society. If they have enough power and authority then they will survive. The upper class people does not provide any assistance for the weaker section of the society and they simply labelled the others as the "marginalised". Thus the efforts of the poor peasants are futile and ineffectual.

The pervasive attitude of the upper class, their living conditions and the manifestation of power destroys the aspirations of the working class, who have little or no opportunities. The power relation plays a major role in the society. Every human beings are capable of producing their own identity. They also have the potential to become the producers of symbols. Nut these qualities and capabilities of the working class are being trapped in the society by the autocracy of the dominating class. The ruling class not only rule, they rule the marginalised class as producers of ideas and they manipulate the others through their power. They manifest their ideologies on the submissive class and they make them believe that their ideas are the paramount in the society.

Thus through misrepresentation of meanings and ideas the elite class exerts their influence on the working class. The false view of one's social condition has a coercive power over the subordinate class. This false consciousness hinders the development of the underprivileged people. The society precludes the efforts of lower class in attaining equal status with those of the elite people by providing them with unemployment, poor medical facilities, atrocities and so on. Thus one could see that society becomes diabolical when comes to the so-called marginalised people. To conclude, one could say that the dilemma of the lower class remains the same in spite of their efforts, probably owing to their lifestyles and economic discipline sans savings. This makes them poor throughout and are marginalised on various grounds.

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Biosketch



Akhila J S is an independent scholar belong to Trivandrum. Her area of interest includes subaltern studies and partition writings. She has presented papers in various national seminars and also worked as an editor of *Imprint*, which is the monthly newsletter and *Z for Apple*, literary anthology.