

Interpretation of 'Alienation' and 'Expatriate Treatment' in Kamala Markandaya's  
*Nectar in a Sieve*

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**Abstract**

Kamala Markandaya has incorporated the treatment of alienation and expatriate sensibility in all her important books. In this endeavour, we see the delineation of these facts in her debut novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, that is full of the ethos of Indian soil, and it provides us a dismal picture of the harsh realities of the Indian villagers. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a very realistic picture of human life and its predicaments in differing unfavourable situations and conditions show the reality. The central characters, Rukmani and Nathan play the roles of Markandaya's vision, and the treatment of alienation and expatriate feeling has really been projected quite differently.

**Key Words:** alienation, expatriate, industrialisation, tannery, village, marriage

Among the pioneering spirits in the world of Indian English Fiction, the name of Kamala Markandaya has been seen with great reverence. She is one of the most talented authors of Indian diaspora depicting a very true picture of Indian as well as expatriate sensibility throughout her literary pearls. It is true that accepting a foreign land is a major factor behind the depiction of expatriate sensibility in her major books, but it is also true that her Indian consciousness is also appreciable in this regard. She is regarded as a strong voice in the delineation of various themes incorporating in her popular books. She is such a gifted artist that her creations are acclaimed of presenting everything like a speaking picture in a very natural way. She delves deep into the various positions of men and women in various circumstances, and tries to portray the different layers of struggling human beings of the modern day. She paints the pictures of East-West encounter, economic aspects of modern

life, expatriate sensibility, and such other things in her books.

"In all her novels, Kamala Markandaya has treated the theme of the East-West confrontation more comprehensively than any other Indian English novelist... the views the difference in the traditions and values of India and the West as a neutral observer and portrays different situations and characters objectively."(Raizada, 126).

Before putting forward our views regarding alienation in her books, we must have a brief idea of the term 'Alienation'. When we consult a dictionary, we come to see that 'alienation' means 'a state of being alienated or estranged from something or somebody'. Actually, the term comes from the Latin word 'Alienato' which implies 'to make a thing for others, to snatch to avoid or remove.' Defining it, it may be said that alienation is an unnatural stage of feeling of being estranged from others.

Her expatriate sensibility is unswervingly related to the basis of East-West encounter. If we think profoundly, we come to the point that really somewhere these two things are inter-related to a greater degree. *Nectar in a Sieve* is the first novel produced by Kamala Markandaya. It has got herself into limelight with her debut novel, and it is a great literary success. It is always said that India is a land of villages and villagers. This novel tries to show how rural life gets tarnished with industrialisation and urbanisation. The machines of industrial development smashed the purity and clarity of rural environment with rural life that is symbolical of mirthfulness and contentment. Moreover, the central character of the present novel quite successfully clarifies the aim of inner expatriate treatment of Kamala Markandaya.

“It is a fact that Kamala Markandaya is an expatriate who has been living in England for several years. For this reason, unlike K.S. Venkatramani, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, she has an outlook of a writer seeing village life India from a different angle.”(Purbey, 54)

As we commence the book, we come to know that it is going to be the story of Rukmani and her spouse Nathan. The novel starts with the depiction of an ordinary life, but as we travel more inside the book, we get deeper implementations and deeper level of meanings. Rukmani who is protagonist of the book is also the narrator of the whole chain of incidents, of different happenings and mishaps. At times she appears to be a general Indian woman, but at times she is also a very strong personality, full of hope and

wisdom even in adverse circumstances. After her marriage to Nathan, she becomes to mother of Ira, her daughter. But in rural India a daughter is not welcomed and the family wants sons only. Daughters are considered to be only burdens whereas sons are treated as bread-earners. If a family possesses more sons, there is the chance of more earning. People do not think of matters like family-planning or such things. All these things have been discussed quite obviously in the book. It is matter of great thought that sons would be necessary for running a family. After the birth of her daughter, she becomes the mother of six sons. The six sons are Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvam, Raja and Kuti.

In an atmosphere of inner expatriates, Kamala Markandaya shows the various ways of living in our country. As it is considered before some time that India is known only by villages, there is a hint of making our country industrialised and urbanised in this book. It talks of simple village of South-Indian state. The village is a typical Indian village having the sights of agricultural backgrounds, poverty, and illiteracy, superstitious way of living, ill effects of caste and class system, and more over strangled by the curse Zamindari System. Since Monsoon has become the fate of Indian farmers, the villagers live a life of hoping against hope for so many times.

As we move further in the book, we find that all the events in the novel are directly or indirectly related to Rukmani. Apart from the other characters of the book, she is literate and she possesses the knowledge and potential or reading and writing. This is the reason that she always tries to make her children educated and perfect. She teaches her children at her own because

she does not possess the amount of money needed for a school. But all her education does not provide any positive or concrete things to her seven children. She is the daughter of a village headman, and she does not make any protest against her marriage to a landless farmer. Since she is the youngest sister, her father's wealth has been finished in the form of dowry for her elder sisters. Being dowry less, she has not any other option. Like a good daughter and good wife, she always makes her father and her husband happy. She has nothing to do with any further imagination from her husband. She has been shown satisfied with her marriage, and therefore, she utters,

“We owned our own ploughing bullocks; we kept a milch goat. From each harvest we saved, and had gunny-sacks full of the husked stored away in our small stone-lined granary. There was food in plenty for two people and we ate well; rice for morning and evening meals; dhal; sometimes a coconut granted fine and cooked in milk and sugar; sometimes a wheatcake fried in butter and melting in the mouth.”(Markandaya, 07).

The life of Rukmani is a true picture of an expatriate, because in her heart of hearts she feels something like being alienated. Kamala Markandaya makes this objective quite clear in the successive pages of the book. The village that has been discussed in the book is a typical Indian village showing all the essential practices and malpractices of a village life. As we read the novel, we see that everything goes on very smoothly in the accepted sense of the way for a village life. But to present the adverse effects of modernisation and

industrialisation, Kamala Markandaya introduces the set-up of a tannery in the village. This tannery brings a lot of changes in the whole incidents of the book. In fact, it has adulterated the whole course of the lives of the villagers; and the condition of the village gets bad to worse.

Kamala Markandaya puts before her readers the very true picture of the mixed opinions of the people's reaction. Some people consider it as the opening of a new era in the village. Such persons are of the view that the tannery would be able to elevate the lives of the villagers. It would enhance the job opportunities for the simple, poor villagers. Moreover it has the capacity to bring about the facilities of town to the village. But the family that is of chief concern for us in the novel has been really smashed by the tannery in the long run. The tannery has added money to the villagers, but it has degraded the value of money. As it is known that the atmosphere of a village is clean and pure, but the tannery has brought air pollution, sound pollution and noise in the village. Moreover, it has usurped the open space of the village where children used to play. It has made the clean environment of the village dirty and harmful. This situation is a reminiscent of the statement made by D.H. Lawrence, quoted by Leavis and Thompson,

“Now, though perhaps nobody knew it, it was ugliness which really betrayed the spirit of man in the nineteenth century. The great crime which the moneyed classes and promoters of industry committed in the Palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness, ugliness, ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly

surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly clothes, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationships between workers and employers. The human soul needs actual beauty even more than bread.”(Leavis & Thompson, 95).

The village life gets the feeling of choking environment. Rukmani and her husband are not seen pleased with the establishment of the tannery. But both of them are helpless. Two of her sons join it even after not having consent of their parents. One of the sons goes to city, and one of them gets seriously ill. The novel gets replete with the themes of hunger, starvation and touching details of life. The family has hoped for years for having the land as their own but it slips away from their hands by the Zamindar, and their condition gets more and more wretched. Rukmani's daughter Ira has been deserted by her husband as she is not able to provide him issues at that time, and consequently she returns her father's home to be a burden again. For eliminating so many traumatic conditions, she opts for being a prostitute and the condition get again bad to worse. Markandaya speaks the condition of such a girl in the following statements,

“But the man who finds a woman in the street, raises an eyebrow and snaps his fingers so that she follows him, throws a few coins that he may possess her...What cares such a man for the woman who is his for a brief moment? He has gained his relief, she her payment.”(Markandaya, 157-158).

The inner expatriate that has been seen in the life of Rukmani is always portrayed in the book. Owing to their wretched

condition, she along with her husband goes to the city. But here too she does not find any solace or comfort. She loses her husband in the city and gathering much strength, she returns again to her village.

If we consider the whole novel on a flat surface, we come to the conclusion that the setting up of the tannery is one of the most important and crucial events presented in the novel. It is the tannery that brings about dynamic changes in the life and life-style of the simple and unaffected villagers. The people of the village get themselves changed in all their walks of life. If we think more profoundly, the setting up of the tannery is the very token of making the villagers expatriates, because after the coming of this symbol of industrialisation and urbanisation, the villagers have been transformed to different creatures. They do not find themselves as they were earlier. Considering the ill-effects of the tannery, we come to the consequence that it has devastated the lives of the people. It is true that it provided something positive too, but its adverse outcomes are having worse effects in a permanent way. Regarding this book, Lokesh Kumar holds the following view,

“Her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), a tragedy engineered by economics, is a woeful tale of the trails and tribulations of the peasant couple, Nathan and Rukmani, of a South Indian Village.”(Kumar, 13).

Living in an alien land has not changed the thought and temperament of Kamala Markandaya, the person and author. The alienation that we discern throughout her series of novels is really her own felt alienation to some extent. Her own true

love and yearning for her own homeland and motherland has been reflected indirectly in these books. She cannot remain isolated from making her own life-felt experiences in her meaningful outputs. *Nectar in a Sieve* deals with the plight and

sufferings of poor people in the rural as well as in the urban surrounding on the one hand, on the other, her delineation of expatriate sensibility is felt everywhere in the novel.

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