

Tragic & Moral Ending as Shown in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

Mrs. R. Malliga

Assistant Professor of English, A.V.C. College (Autonomous), Mannanpandal, Mayiladuthurai, India

**Abstract**

In every community there are acts that are enjoined and acts that are forbidden, acts that are applauded and acts that are reprobated. "When a man belongs to a larger community, the scope of his duties and possible aims become greater, and the consideration become more complex, but there is still a code to which he must conform on pain of public obloquy. "Kamala Markandaya, too, is conscious of moral codes and the circumstances which bring about changes in moral values and sanctions. Therefore, moral life of the East is different from that of the villages; and the moral life of one caste is different from that of other castes. Nevertheless, she tries to be general and objective in the treatment of moral life. For instances, Helen-bash am liaison in *The Coffer Dams* is not so unethical as Ravishanker's rape of his mother-in-law in *A Handful of Rice* the former is a sin against Hindu dispensation and family sanctity. But when we view the two incidents in the light of time and places. We come to the conclusion that both are the result of abnormal behavior or both are pardonable on the score of circumstances.

In every community there are acts that are enjoined and acts that are forbidden, acts that are applauded and acts that are reprobated. "When a man belongs to a larger community, the scope of his duties and possible aims become greater, and the consideration become more complex, but there is still a code to which he must conform on pain of public obloquy. "Kamala Markandaya, too, is conscious of moral codes and the circumstances which bring about changes in moral values and sanctions. Therefore, moral life of the East is different from that of the villages; and the moral life of one caste is different from that of other castes. Nevertheless, she tries to be general and objective in the treatment of moral life. For instances, Helen-bash am liaison in *The Coffer Dams* is not so unethical as Ravishanker's rape of his mother-in-law in *A Handful of Rice* the former is a sin against Hindu dispensation and family sanctity. But when we view the

two incidents in the light of time and places, we come to the conclusion that both are the result of abnormal behavior or both are pardonable on the score of circumstances. The novelist focuses attention on both what is good and what is bad in human conduct and actions.

Kamala Markandaya aims at unfolding the character, behavior and actions of her leading characters with her eye on their morality. In her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, she shows how Nathan and Rukmani's loyalty and spirit remains unbroken to the last. Despite want, poverty and hunger, they do not go beyond the famous teaching of the Gita: "Action is the duty, reward is not thy concern. Rukmani does not lose her hope of better days, but she is beset with fear too: hope and fear "tugged at the first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter (fear) we never spoke, but it was always

with us". Their fight against fear, hunger, and despair is indicative of their fortitude: the chain of misfortunes does not tie them to selfishness, possessiveness, vengeance, cowardice and unethical means and ends. Nathan's affair with Kunthi, though it appears to be immoral, is a means to show his faithfulness sincerity. When Rukmani comes to know about it, she does not accuse her husband of infidelity; on the contrary, she heaves a sigh on relief. She says,

"It seemed to me that a new peace came to us then, freed at last from the necessity for lies and concealment and deceit, with the fear of betrayal lifted from us, and with the power we ourselves had given her wrested finally from Kunthi. "Lies, concealment and deceit are the off shoots of immorality; whereas, truth, revelation, and honesty are the mother of morality.

Both Nathan and Rukmani go on the path of morality even when they have reached the point of beggary. Having lost their belonging in the town during their search for Murugan's place of stay, they fall back on the food distributed to beggars in the temple. But, unlike professional beggars they preserve their patience and perseverance. "I saw also that his (Nathan's) hands were empty. Still it was good to share what there was and eat, good to have food in the belly, good to feel the dizziness replaced by well-being. When we had finished we threw the empty leaves to the goats that had gathered, expectant but patient for their meal, and that too was satisfying thing, to see them eating leaves and cups, crunching them in their mouths with soft happy movements and looking at us with their mild being eyes". Similarly, Nathan and Rukmani's dealings with Puli the orphan without fingers, show how

affectionate and generous they were. They adopted him and loved him as their own son. Rukmani says, "From counting annas, as the days went by, we began to show excitement. There was the time when we worked so well - or the stones were so kind that we earned a rupee in single day. I handed them coin as usual to Puli, who trust it into the ragged pouch which covered his manhood. Where he transferred the money we gave him from there I do not know. It was his own business and he never told: certainly not one pie was ever lost". This kind of reliance on a stranger speaks of Nathan and Rukmani's belief that mutual understanding is necessary for winning over the forces of suffering and misery.

Nathan and Rukmani's sense of morality becomes quite clear when we take into account their relations and dealings with other characters. Not to speak of their cordial relations with Kenington, a white man, a foreigner, even men like Durgen, Hanman, Perumal, Shivaji, and Biswas, and women like Kali, Janaki, Kunthi and Granny could not find a chance to pick a quarrel with them. However, "Kunthi was different from the other women, quieter, more reserved, and for all that we tried to be at ease with her there was a barrier which we could not surmount. Especially high against me it stood, strange and forbidding, although why this should be I could not think, finally putting it down to my imagination. "Nathan's relations with Kunthi before his marriage with Rukmani shows, as he himself says, that "I was week she a skillful women. "But Rukmani patiently bore what any other women would not be able to bear: "Disbelief first, disillusionment; anger, reproach, pain. To find out, after so many years, in such a

cruel way, Kali's words: she has fire in her body, men burn before and after. My husband was of those men. He had known her not once but twice; he had gone back to give her a second son." The strength of Rukmani lies in forgiving her husband, and the strength and weakness Nathan lies in accepting what has been under certain circumstances. Rukmani recalls "What patience indeed my husband must have had, to put with me uncomplainingly during those early days of our married lives. 'Not one cross word or impatient look, and praises for whatever small success I achieved.'"

The moral life in *some Inner fury* is widely different from the one in *Nectar in Sieve*: the questions of national freedom ought to be preferred to filial duty and personal interests. Even love for one's country ought to stand above one's love for women. Govind was adopted by Kit and Mira's parents; as such, it was his duty to work for their happiness. But he put his duty to his country above his duty to his foster parents. He says to Mira "I have no wish to work for your father, I have no wish for myself. " It appears to be immoral on the part of Govind to speak so defiantly to his foster sister and foster mother. But we should not forget that he was interested in community work, and the meaning of this community work becomes clear when it is disclosed by Rooshan that "He's a member of the Independence Party. " With a view to achieving his object, Govind did not falter in setting fire to the school which had been a source of Kit, Govind's foster brother, was killed. He was tried for murder. But the fighters for freedom the members of the independence acted. I saw her mounting the dock in which Govind still stood, I heard her

shout; and then I saw the crowd change direction, swelling round towards her. The barrier in front of the dock splintered like matchwood before that advance; the sides of the dock caved in like an empty match box under a heel. Govind was free".

In order to indicate the contrariness of human life, writers use a literary device, known as irony. All the desires are not fulfilled in human life. Many times things happen in opposite direction and what we expect, takes place in opposite sense. Thus, the irony of life or circumstances may be defined as a situation which is the exact opposite of what has been expected and desired. It is expected that it is done by fate. It is also known as the irony of fate. Therefore it is a fact that the irony of fate or of circumstances, or of life lies in the frustrations of human desires and it is accepted that some supreme power or fate dominates human beings.

Since literature is the mirror of life, irony plays a very important role in it. Irony has become a strong medium to create tragic effect. Kamala Markandaya like the Greek tragedians, puts the responsibility for man's misery on 'fate' that will not allow mortals to exercise Free will successfully. Her characters are all the victims of the irony of life, of 'Fate'. What happens to them is quite contrary to their wishes and expectations. Since their happenings are not desired and unexpected, they face sorrows and sufferings.

The life of Rukmani and Nathan becomes a tale of unexpected and undesirable problems. Both of them are good at their hearts, yet have to face the irony of fate. They seem to become playthings in the hands of cruel destiny. Rukmani, whose father was a rich man, thinks that she

would be married like her three sisters. But poverty of her father ruins her fate and she is married to a poor tenant farmer, Nathan.

After the marriage, both Rukmani and Nathan lead a peaceful married life. Though they are poor, later on, Rukmani gives birth to a daughter whose name is Ira. Nathan seldom pays his attention to Ira because he wished for a son. After the birth of Ira, Rukmani gives birth to many children, Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam, and Kuti and Rukmani feels a lot of difficulty in feeding her children.

Nature plays an important role in the life of the peasants. Nathan and Rukmani are usually crushed by the natural happenings. Sometimes it is heavy rain that ruins their fate and another time drought becomes the cause of their decline. After the marriage of Ira, it rains so hard that everywhere there is water. Both of them lose their peace of mind. Thus, heavy rain ruins them completely. Next year farmers have to face drought. They stare at the sky which is cruel, calm and indifferent to their need. They stare at the sky which until the farmer's conditions becomes more pathetic. At last one day it rains but it is too late support the farmers.

Ira's fate is the best example of irony of fate. Since she is a barren lady, her husband rejects her and she comes back to her parents. After some days there is a period of drought and all the peasants are bound to starve. Ira loves her brothers so much so that whatever is given to her, she provides it to her younger brother. Therefore, she prostitutes her body at the hands of tannery workers in order to feed her younger brother. Irony of fate reaches its in order to feed her younger brother.

Irony of fate reaches its climax when that barren Ira becomes pregnant and gives birth to an albino child. Though society does not welcome her child, because he is the result of prostitution, Ira loves her child very much.

Nathan is another character who becomes the instrument of irony of fate. There are heavy rains and the ripe crop is washed away. Then there is utter drought and their paddy fields are all scorched. They boldly face starvation, live on grass and wild plants their landlord and thus keep their land. When they succeed in their attempts, and are happy at the prospects of a good crop, the unexpected again happens. Their land is swallowed by the tannery. The landlord sells it to the tannery at a very good price, and they are evicted from the land which they loved so much, and for which they had endured and suffered so much.

Relentless fate continues to follow them, and the undesired constantly happens. They decide to go to the city to seek shelter with their son Murugan. The cart-driver puts them down on the out-skirts of the city. It is a large city, and instead of there being one Koilstreet there are several Koil streets. Tired and exhausted, they seek shelter in temple, and their humble belongings and their money are stolen during the night. Ultimately, with the help of Puli and Birla, they reach the house of Murugan but find that the (Murugan) has deserted his wife and children, and that his whereabouts are not known. Destiny, we feel, has played a cruel joke on them.

Once again they seek shelter in the temple, live on charity like beggars for some time, then Rukmani tries to earn something by letter writing, and then they take to stone-

breaking. They get good wagers, save little from day to day, and continue to live and work in the hope that soon they would have enough to pay the return fare to the village. A time comes when it looks that their hopes would soon materialize and they would be able to go back. They are happy and Rukmani purchases some rice-cakes-a delicacy which they had not tasted for long-and a dum-dum cart for Puli and one for her grand-son Sacrabani. But alas

Nathan dies and all her hopes are shattered. Again, the unexpected and the undesired has happened.

Nathan and Rukmani are the tragic victims of the irony of life. Their life-story illustrates that man is but a plaything in the hands of cruel Destiny which takes pleasure in inflicting pain and suffering on him. Mrs. Markandaya agrees with Hardy in this regard.

**References:**

1. Markandaya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1956.
2. Anjaneyulu, D. "Indian Writing in English from K.S. Venkataramani to Kamala Markandaya," *Triveni*, 32 (April 1963)
3. Badal, R. K. *Kamala Markandaya*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1973.
4. Chandrasekharan, K.R. "East and West in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya," *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English*", eds. M. K. Naik, et al. ( Dharwar: University of Dharwar in collaboration with Macmillan Co. of India, 1968)
5. Chauhan, P.S. "Kamala Markandaya: Sense and Sensibility," *The Literary Criterion*, 12, Nos. 2-3 (1976).
6. Geetha P."Kamala Markandaya – An Interpretation, "Common-wealth Quarterly, 3, No. 9 (Dec.1978).
7. Host, May Hooper. "Kamala Markandaya," *News Circle*, 18, No. 7 (March 1973).
8. Asnani, Shyam S. *Critical Response to Indian English Fiction*. Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1985.