

Title: Economic Inequality and The Disintegration of Family**Unit: A Marxist Reading of *Nectar in A Sieve*****Dr.Tonoy Jyoti Dowerah**Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese,
Pandu College,Guwahati, Assam**Abstract**

Kamala Markandaya's cult novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is set in an unnamed village of South India. Her novel, that mirrors an Indian society, can be read in the light of Marxism. Drawing on Marxist terms—base and superstructure— this paper will discuss how economic exploitation leads to the disintegration of a heterosexual family. My paper will adopt the aforementioned theoretical framework to examine how the narrative addresses the advent of industrialization. It will argue that Kamala Markandaya upholds the agrarian society and is critical of Western capitalism.

Keywords: tannery, economy, base, superstructure

Main Paper

Kamala Purnaiya Taylor who writes under the pen name Kamala Markandaya is a towering figure in Indian English literature. Devoid of sub-plots, Markandaya's novels follow a linear structure. Her stories revolve around the themes of hunger, class-conflict, love, and the plight of immigrant Asians. She won international fame and recognition with the publication of her very first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*. NageswaraRao notes, "The novel [Nectar in a Sieve] deals with the peasants, their activities, problems and anxieties, hopes and expectations, joys and sorrows". Told from the perspective of Rukmani, a third-person

narrator, it is set in an unnamed village of South India. It depicts the lives of peasants and their struggle against an oppressive system. RahmatJahan writes, "...it is a stark exposure of

the high handedness of the moneylenders and the Zamindari system. The main theme of the novel, however, is the tragedy of uprooting of Nathan and Rukmani from their native village.” (201).

According to Marxist thought, there are two groups within a society—one group controls the modes of production, the other group includes the economically weaker section. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the tannery people represent the bourgeoisie class. They are the owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. Economic exploitation of the labourers leads to a social movement that is started by the workers. They fight for a genuine cause—“We shall not go back until our demands are met,” Thambi said. ‘All the workers have stopped. We do not ask for charity, but for that which is our due.’”(Markandaya 67). When Rukmani and Nathan go to the tannery to meet their sons, they find its gate closed. The gatekeeper lets them know that because of the conflict between labourers and management, the tannery has been closed. Their sons return with angered faces at dusk. When asked about the matter, they say, “we asked for money and they took from us our eating time (Markandaya 66). Arjun stands up against the exploitation of the poor at the hands of capitalists. Arjun opposes the capitalist oppression of the common workers by industrial tycoons. There are slight “masalas” of socialism in him which bring him in confrontation with the owners of the tannery who stand for capitalism. His brother, Thambi, revolts against the cruelty of modernization and capitalism. The tannery officials declare that those who do not return to work would be replaced. The conflict ends with the defeat of the labourers. They are expelled, only to face the pangs of unemployment. Markandaya narrates:

People will never learn! Kenny had said it, and I had not understood, now here were my sons saying the same thing, and still I did not understand. What was it we had to learn? To fight against tremendous odds? What was the use? Only one lost the little one had. Of what use to fight when the conclusion is known? I asked myself, and got no answer. (Markandaya 67-68)

In the preface to *A Contribution to the critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx writes:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, *relations of production* which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive *forces*. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (qtd in Eagleton 2)

The economic base or the infrastructure refers to the forces and relations of production—the production forces, the materials, and resources that generate the goods society needs. The superstructure consists of “definite form of social consciousness and its function is to legitimate the power of the social class which owns the means of economic production (Eagleton 3). In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the tannery is a means of production which functions as the economic base. After the tannery is set up, the economic condition of the villagers is raised. When the villagers are helpless in the face of flood and drought, the tannery provides employment for the villagers. When there is no source of income for the villagers, the tannery opens its door for the unemployed youths. The sons of Kunthi join the tannery. So do Arjun and Thambi. The boys always hand over their earnings to their parents. Rukmani can now store some rice, dhal and chillies for the future. They are also able to properly thatch their hut. After many years they buy clothes for their children. Along with the rise in economic condition, the tannery brings vices, social filth and moral debasement. The overall atmosphere of the village is vitiated as we find women like Kunthi prostituting their bodies. The bodies of economically poor women become a site where men can validate their masculinity. Irawaddy is one of the main partakers of the grim tragedy of hunger and human degradation. Irawaddy loves her younger brother Kuti so much that whatever is given to her she provides it to him. She prostitutes her body at the hands of the exploiters in order to feed her brother. When her parents scorn at her activity, she shows the inevitable sense of revolt. She says that she cannot see her brother starving. In the novel, Raja does not die his natural death, but he is rather murdered in the tannery. He is put to death, while the tannery owners

prosper more and more. It shows the helplessness of the working class in the pitiless hands of industrialization. When Raja's fellow workers ask Rukmani to try to get compensation, she refuses. The entire episode speaks of the cruelty and heartlessness of industrialization. Old Granny is an old woman whose reason of death is starvation. She represents the destitute women of rural area. She has nobody to look after and dies unnoticed. To quote Shiv. K. Kumar:

...the story of the teeming millions of this country, who have to face periodic outbursts of hunger and famine and encounter all evil consequences flowing from such calamities, moral lapses, traffic in illicit relationships and all the ghastly scenes that accompany famine in India. Characters in these novels like nomads go in search of food and employment to distant part only to have nostalgic memories of their home towns. (Markandaya283)

The tannery becomes the root cause of the tragedy of Nathan and Rukmani. Rukmani is right because she has already declared that tannery would ruin their lives.

They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were that we have done these things. (Markandaya30)

The village traders make trade with the tannery people and the prices go very high. Because the employees at the tannery can spend more than what the villagers spend, the price of goods increases. This is beneficial for those who sell their products, but detrimental for those who have to purchase. Likewise, small village shopkeepers are forced out of business by the larger shopkeepers who arrived in the village after tannery is opened. The pastures are replaced by the residential quarters. The tannery swallows the land of the farmers by purchasing it at a high cost. The farmers are evicted from their land and from their houses. Nathan's land has been taken away from him. Arjun and Thambi spend most of their time in the town after having lost their jobs in the tannery. One day they come and announce that they are going to Ceylon as there is great demand for workers there. After a little argument Nathan allows his sons to do whatever they want. However, Rukmani does not want her sons to go away. She argues that money is not everything in life and Ceylon is a distant place. But the sons reject

her argument and say that money is an important part of living. They realize that they will not be able to get any respect if they fail to earn money:

‘It is an important part of living,’ he answered me patiently, ‘and work is another. There is nothing for us here, for we have neither the means to buy land nor to rent it. Would you have us wasting our youth chafing against things we cannot change?’. (Markandaya 70)

As with most Indian peasant fathers, Nathan wants his sons to stay and work, but are reluctant to do so because they recognize that the family’s situation would not improve and their opportunities are better elsewhere. This provides an example of how changing, industrialized economies alter extended family structures that tend to exist in agricultural, peasant economies. Selvam has similar thoughts about the land, but when he decides to work for Kenny his parents do not stop him because he is not going to leave the family’s home as his elder brothers have done. Murugan also follows the footsteps of his brothers. He goes to the city to become a servant. But they aspire to earn more money instead of working on their land. It is not due to poverty, but due to tannery which mars all their interest in working on their land which renders them unemployed. Nathan’s income is too low to feed the family. Under those circumstances, Nathan and his wife are forced to leave the village and seek shelter in the city where their son, Murugan, lives. The disintegration of a single family epitomises the disintegration of the agricultural way of life under the impact of western capitalism. Rukmani narrates:

Somehow I have always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and cleaving its cool silences with clamour. Since then it had spread like weeds in an untended garden, strangling whatever life grew in its way. It has changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants in a myriad ways. Some-a few-had been raised up; many others cast down, lost in its clutches. And because it grew and flourished it got the power that money brings, so that to attempt to withstand it was like trying to stop the onward rush of the great juggernaut. (Markandaya 136)

Nectar in a Sieve was first published in 1954, a few years after India attained independence. It can be argued that in *Nectar in a Sieve* Kamala Markandaya emphasizes that labour results in nothing, but in sorrow and miseries brought about by the rich. The economically rich people in her novels lead a luxurious life and are free from financial worries. Sometimes, they take an undue advantage of their strength and misbehave with people who are economically poor. The clash between the rich and the poor happens because there is economic inequality in society. Drawing heavily on rural life, Kamala Markandaya, through her narrative, makes an attempt to highlight the plight of the poor. Rukmani's story is a revolt against capitalism, against the disappearance of the old landscape.

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