

## **Rural Industrialization and Socio-Economic Dispossession: A Sociological Study of Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve**

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### **Abstract**

The process of industrialization has played a significant role in transforming the socio-economic life of rural India. But, it is not always a blessing to the villagers. It grabs land from the villagers and dispossesses them in the process. It sometimes turns the peasants into factory workers. In the long course, its dehumanized process leads to rural unemployment and displacement, resulting in the socio-economic tension in the exact pattern of rural life in India. In her maiden novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Kamala Markandaya, a post-independence Indian novelist, makes an in-depth sociological study of the dimensions of socio-economic dispossession and exploitation of the rural community caught in the process of industrialization. Based on the story of Rukmani and Nathan, the novel enacts the tragic drama of hunger, disintegration, and dispossession of south Indian rural people at the intrusion of the industrial tannery. The book reflects the novelist's deep humanitarian concern with the sinister effects of industrialization on the agrarian society. The present paper seeks to explore from the sociological perspective the reflection of the harsh impacts of automation that dispossess socio-economically the village people, as depicted in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*.

**Keywords:** Industrialization, tannery, rural India, disintegration, socio-economic dispossession.

### **Introduction**

Indian society came to contact with the process of industrialization in the early decades of the Twentieth century as England came to it in the early nineteenth century. M.K. Naik records the track of growing industries in India: "The period of the First World War saw the rapid development of Indian industries....After the economic depression of 1929-33, the Second World War gave a further impetus to the growth of Indian industries" (Naik, 117). The very process of industrialization and urbanization greatly flourished in post-Independence India. As there was inadequacy in the industrial growth in British India, much emphasis was given to the growth and development of industry in free India with a mission of nation-building. It has

received added stress since the Five-Year Plans in India began. Robert W. Stern writes: "Driven by Nehru, planned industrialization was begun in earnest in the second plan, from 1956-57 to 1960-61" (Stern 207). In due course, the industries and factories remarkably increased in independent India as private and public enterprises set up initiatives in urban and neighboring rural areas. Consequently, India achieved a rapid rate of 'industrial growth by 1970s as exemplified in the increasing rate of the industrial production by about 274 percent in 1974 as compared to 1951' (Rao. *Rural Industrialization in India*, Preface). The process of industrialization and modernization played a significant role in transforming the rural socio-economic setup.

Rural industrialization has brought about significant changes in rural society and life. It has given birth, apart from various scopes and prospects, to the rise of new working class people in the traditional agrarian society. The industries in modern India have converted the peasants into a new labor class employed in newly emerged factories. It has created job opportunities in the villages. But in the long run, its dehumanizing process has led to more rural unemployment and misery. The advent of industries in the villages, on the one hand, has offered job facilities.

On the other hand, it has exploited them socio-economically if viewed from a Marxist perspective. According to Karl Marx, this exploitation had given birth to the rise of the two classes—the employer and the employed, the rich and the poor, and the problem of class conflict. Karl Marx, a great humanist, interpreted this newly emerged industrialized social reality in terms of the oppressor and the oppressed. The establishment and enlargement of industries have evicted many from their land and home. Their forced migration and exploitation to uncertain places in search of work has resulted in the displacement and dismantling of the traditional joint family setup. Thus, the advent of new industries has caused socio-economic tension overhauling the very pattern of the conventional agricultural socio-economic arrangement and rural life. The disastrous consequences of mechanical industrialization at the cost of rural life disturbed Gandhi, who prescribed that the basis of India's economic prosperity lay in the regeneration of the village, the essence of faithful India. Describing Gandhi's reaction to industrialization Geoffrey Ashe remarks: "The rural people were drifting into the cities for work, as the English had done a century or so before. Like the English, they sank into a morass of slums and dirt and debt and corruption" (*Gandhi—A Study in Revolution*, 168).

### **Objective**

The present paper seeks to explore from the sociological perspective the depiction of rural socio-economic dispossession and deprivation at the industrialization approach in Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*.

### **Kamala Markandaya as a Novelist**

Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) is the earliest well-known woman novelist in the post-Independence Indian literature in English. Markandaya has depicted contemporary Indian society with all the challenges and changes at the advent of modern forces in her novels. She is

one of the few writers who captured the new spirit of Independent India. Enriching the literary field with her creative writings, Markandaya, a post-independence Indian novelist in English, has explored with her strong sense of contemporary reality the facets of socio-economic, cultural, and psychological problems and dilemmas confronted by men and women. Ignatius Hemenway argues that she "is one of the most productive, popular, and skilled Indo-Anglian novelists and a superb representative of the growing number of Indian women writing serious literature in English" (52). A champion of the poor, Markandaya, like Gandhi and M. R. Anand, is concerned with the process of socio-economic exploitation in the wake of modern forces in contemporary Indian society. Her discourse of socio-economic dispossession refers to the theme of the evil impact of industrialization and urbanization in her novels like *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *The Coffer Dams* (1969), and *Pleasure City* (1982).

### **Textual Analysis of *Nectar in a Sieve***

In her maiden novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya focuses on the dimensions of socio-economic dispossessions and exploitation of the rural community caught in the process of rural industrialization. The 'socio-economic dispossession' in the present context is a social process or a condition in which a person or a group of people or families is/are exploited, dislocated, and relocated by other mightier groups of people or forces during rapid rural industrialization in the name of modern technological progress and development. Based on the story of Rukmani and Nathan, the novel enacts the tragic drama of hunger, disintegration, and dispossession of the south Indian village community under the impact of an industrial intrusion. Markandaya, like M. R. Anand, champions the cause of the rural victims of industrial threats in *Nectar in a Sieve*. However, the novelist convincingly depicts the prospects of rural industrialization and the problems and challenges that follow it. The novel highlights the deteriorating influence of automation on rural people showing the socio-economic tensions and hardships of the rural community in the advent of the tannery. Being a follower of Gandhian economic policy on rural development, Markandaya consciously but critically points out the mechanical aspect of rural industrial development causing socio-economic marginalization and exploitation of rural people in the novel.

The novel is primarily concerned with the sinister process of socio-economic dislocation and exploitation of the poor villagers. The close perusal of the book from the Marxist perspective traces the evil impact of the demonic emergence of the tannery in a south Indian village. The villagers get perplexed by the sudden assault of industrial and technological forces symbolized by the tannery. K.R. Srinivas Iyenger aptly says:

Markandaya takes us to the heart of a south Indian—or Tamil Nadu—the village where life has not changed for thousand years. Now industry and modern technology invade the town in the shape of the tannery, and from this impact, sinister consequences issue. (438)

The setup of the tannery in the village premise, though there is nothing wrong with it, causes havoc in the socio-economic structure of the village. It ushers in new modern opportunities and

works for the villagers. It creates curiosity among the villagers. Different kinds of reactions come from the villagers. Some of the villagers get pleased with the appearance of the tannery. Kunthi, Rukmani's neighbour, gladly accepts it: "Are you not glad that our village is no longer a clump of huts but a small town? Soon there will be shops and tea stall, and even a bioscope, such as I have been to before I was married, you will see" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 31). Kunthi is delighted at the employment of her two sons in the tannery. She welcomes the prospects the tannery has brought to the village without predicting its far-reaching consequence. She restates Rukmani: "The tannery is a boon to us. Have I not said so since it began? We are no longer a village either, but a growing town. Does it not do you good just to think of it?" (48). Like Kunthi, many villagers could not speculate on its devastating impact on the fundamental structure of rural life. Even Nathan, Rukmani's husband before his eviction from the land, reveals his over-expectation from the tannery: "Did you not benefit from their stay, selling you're your pumpkins and plantains for better prices than you did before?" (30).

But in the long run, the tannery causes innumerable troubles in the village life, as felt by Rukmani in the course of her life. She apprehends that the tannery will change their lives drastically. She visualizes the cruel jaws of the new-built tannery industry and intruders who at first dispossess the villagers of the new, simple socio-economic village life. She is upset with the intrusion of the tannery and takes on the industrial agents who are responsible for soaring price-hike and grabbing of the village playground:

There were some among the traders—those who had put up their prices and made money—we regretted their going. Not I. They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us. I was not sorry to see them go. (30)

Rukmani's utterance against the disappearance of the old village landscape and soaring up of the market prices in the process of establishing the tannery industry in the village is a protest against the evil impacts of rapid industrialization in a dehumanized manner. Her voice reflects Markandaya's dissatisfaction and warning to the sole mechanical progress that declines humanitarian interest. In the words of K. Meera Bai: "The novel reflects Kamala Markandaya's concern with the effect of industrialization on the agrarian Indian society and the consequent social and economic upheaval" (Bai 192).

The establishment of industrialization, as already said, over time led to the social problem of displacement and migration in rural society. In the novel, poverty and rural industrialization endorse the relocation and disintegration of rural families and communities. The tannery causes total disruption of the traditional village life. The farmers lose their lands, and they turn into laborers. Markandaya shows how the process of rapid industrialization leads to the fragmentation of Rukmani's family. Primarily, the poor harvest and hunger force the family of Nathan and Rukmani to lead a meaningful life in the village. In no circumstance, however, do they ever think of leaving their town. But, when the threat comes from the encroaching tannery

and its quick expansion, Rukmani and Nathan are forcibly dispossessed of their ancestral land. The introduction of the tannery in the village is the root reason for all sorts of socio-economic tremors and trauma in the life of Rukmani and Nathan. Getting uprooted from the ancestral land due to intrusion of the tannery factory, they become destitute, and finding no alternative; they decide to quit the place of their birth and rearing. The tannery indirectly coerces them to leave their ancestral home and land. They are shocked and heartbroken at the sudden turbulent situation that tosses them like toys in the hand of uncertainty. Rukmani is greatly shocked by the news of their eviction from their ancestral land, where she has lived since her marriage to Nathan. Indeed, it is a severe blow to their economic stability and mental spirit, as Rukmani reveals, "My being was full of the husks of despair, dry and lifeless" (137). She hardly accepts the intrusion of the tannery that crushes her family and home. The following speech of Rukmani brings home the heartfelt pain and agony she goes through with the installation and encroachment of the tannery:

This home my husband built for me with his own hands while he was waiting for me; brought me to it with a pride that I, used to better living, had so nearly crushed. In it, we had lain together, and our children had been born. This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonged to another. They do not know what they do to us. (137)

Rukmani's passionate utterance brings out her overwhelming state of mind while thinking over what is waiting for them. Being part of the society represents the hapless tragic plight of Indian peasant families who cannot withstand the life-threatening challenges ushered in by the tannery and become rootless and displaced.

In the novel, Markandaya as a humanitarian artist makes an in-depth sociological study of the traumatic experience of rural displacement and dispossession during the rapid industrialization in post-independence India. Nathan has his roots deep in his paternal land. The land is his heaven. He also vainly hopes his sons will assist him in farming the land. The land of his cultivation gives him a sense of identity. Naturally, when Nathan is asked to vacate his land of cultivation and habitation, he experiences a feeling of uprooting. Finally, Nathan, accompanied by Rukmani, reaches the city for shelter for his son, Murugan, and there he becomes a beggar, then a stonebreaker, and meets his tragic death. Thus, Nathan becomes an unfortunate victim of the ongoing industrial modernization of agricultural India.

Like their parents, Arjun and Thumbi are compelled to leave the village. Dissatisfied with and dispossessed of the land, they join the tannery for money. But, they are dismissed from the tannery. Then, being needy and dispossessed of their home, they choose to set sails for working in a tea plantation in Ceylon, knowing they would perhaps never return to their native village and family members. This forced migration brings in the collapse of the joint family setup, causing separation and dislocation in the family of Nathan and Rukmani. When Rukmani's sons decide to go to Ceylon, she does not support the idea as she apprehends the loss of her child and her family. In utter despair, she senses agony: "Two sons have gone, now the third is

going, and not to the land ..." (68). The forcible dispossession of the poor villagers from the ancestral land causes the problem of rootlessness and family disintegration, having a severe crack on the traditional joint family system in the villages. A.V. Krishna Rao says in this context: "Industrialization with its main emphasis on urban development and the mechanization of the means of production and distribution necessarily result in the social dislocation of the family" (Rao, 64).

The novelist also shows how the poor, dispossessed villagers become the worst victims of industrial exploitation and dehumanization. Raja, Arjun, and Thumbi, since they're joining the factory as workers to quench their hunger, are to work hard in the dingy atmosphere of the tannery at a low remuneration. The poor wages and inhuman behavior of the tannery authority to the workers cause labor unrest that gradually turns into a labor strike against the mill owner. Arjun and Thumbi, along with other workers, boycotted the work and raised their due demand for higher wages and respect in the process of the strike against the anti-labor policy of the employers. When they ask for 'more money, the authority takes from them 'eating time' (66). They held a meeting in which Rukmani's "sons had been spokesmen" (66) and decided to cease work. Thumbi says: "We shall not go back until our demands are met. All the workers have stopped. We do not ask for charity, but for that which is our due" (67). Finally, the protesters led by Arjun and Thumbi are cruelly sacked; this shows their fight against industrial exploitation and injustice. This cruelty of the capitalist company owner finds finer expression in the cruel behavior of Raja. Poor and hungry Raja gets killed by the guard on the charge of stealing the calfskin from the factory. Even the factory authority ruthlessly tempts Rukmani not to claim compensation for his murder. They send the dead body with two officials utterly indifferent to the sentiments of a bereaved mother. One of the officials says: "The lad was caught in the act of stealing... and for the consequences that followed, no one was to blame except himself.... In these circumstances, you naturally have no claim on us" (93). Regarding the Marxist interpretation of the master-servant relationship, the novelist here criticizes industrial discrimination that disapproves of the concerns and cries of the poor workers.

From the Marxist perspective, the novelist also exposes how the malicious intrusion of the industrialized capitalistic, competitive economy brought about by the tannery industry endangers the traditional 'self-sufficient' rural economy and its native dependents. Besides the cases of Rukmani, Nathan, Arjun, and Thumbi displaced from the ancestral land and professions, Markandaya brings out the possibility of Kannan, the local cobbler, to the foreground, further the industrialized social problem of contemporary India. The village cobbler who used to live in the ancestral profession of cobbler loses his work and suffers severe financial crisis with the uncouth appearance of technology-based factories in the rural locality. He cannot withstand the factory-made products in quality or cost. The novelist describes his economic uncertainty and fear of poverty in the following words: "As if he owned us,' muttered Kannan the chakli [cobbler]. I think that already he foresaw his livelihood being

wrested from him, for he salted and tanned his skins, making them into chaplis [hand-made shoes] for those in the village who wore them" (29).

Interestingly, his foresight becomes true. He loses his profession as a cobbler when the tannery comes into its full-fledged operation, and he finally decides to leave the village where he has lived from childhood in weal and woe. Here, Markandaya shows with deep concern the cobbler as another representative of the poor people who witness the monstrous hit by the tannery.

The novel embodies from the perspectives of marginal people, mainly rural economy, with a pragmatic approach to industrialization. The novelist has recorded the pathetic condition of another village family who undergoes the professional threats made by the commercial market economy. Markandaya shows how the village shopkeeper, Perumal, the husband of Rukmani's neighbor, Janaki, loses the shop in the stiff competition with the more enormous storehouses. Through the reminiscence of Rukmani, the novelist depicts the mood of anger and utter despair of Janaki and her husband. He represents the condition of thousands of shattered families in rural Indian society. Mark the situation:

Her (Janaki) voice held both anger and bitter hopelessness: for a long time, her husband's shop had been doing poorly. He could not compete with the other bigger shopkeepers whom the easy money from the tanners had drawn to the new town. A few days after our conversation, the shop finally closed down... and one day, they came to bid us farewell, carrying their possessions with their children, all but the eldest, whom the tannery had claimed. (49)

The novelist with a humanistic vision reveals that the ruthless advent of the modern factory paralyzes the self-dependent rural handicraft and the socio-economic ways of rural life. Though the tannery generates work for the unemployed, it is a modern instrument of exploitation and dispossession. In this context, S. John Joseph remarks: "The tannery disrupts not only the ecology but also the economy of the village in a harsh manner. The entire business and trade structure of the village community collapses due to the establishment of the tannery" (Joseph 47-48).

### **Conclusion**

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya, as a contemporary conscious novelist, presents critically but from the humanitarian perspective the sinister impact of industrialization symbolized by the tannery on the rural society. She is not against rural industrialization and development. A Gandhian follower, she only talks about the inhuman and mechanical ways that cause socio-economic troubles for the villagers. A realistic novelist, she ably dramatizes through the narrative of a few characters a convincing and graphic portrayal of the socio-economic dislocation, dispossession, and disintegration of the rural community from their home, land, and the economic stability at the advent of industrialization. Thus, the novel reflects Markandaya's deep humanitarian concern and warning against the evil effects of mechanized automation on the rural agrarian society.

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