

# Crisis of Conscience and Cross-Cultural Conflicts in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*: A Study

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## **Abstract:**

**Kamala Markandaya presents the issues related to the conscience and psyche of people, particularly of women, in her novels. She lays bare the inner self of women who face psychological problems which disturb their psyche to the extent that they become neurotic. However her women face the situation boldly because of their introvert nature of being sacrificing. Her women are the champions of moral values. Kamala Markandaya's tragic vision is based on the belief that women should face the crises and conflicts like strong persons. She portrays the society realistically by highlighting the socio-economic, spiritual, cultural and psychic problems of the people in her novels.**

**Keywords: Neurotic, traumatic, distinguished, urges, admiration, acumen.**

## **Introduction:**

There is strong impact of crisis of conscience and cross-cultural conflicts on the minds of people who become the victims to neurotic conditions in life. When there are problems of drought, famine, hunger, superstitions and struggle for existence, mostly there erupts a clash in conscience on one hand while on the other hand cross-cultural conflicts begin to have their toll on the moral values of the people who are ultimately left with their neurotic psyche. We find that almost all her women protagonists suffer from this neurotic situation and are characterized by the symptoms of neurosis comprising of over thinking, anxiety, ideas of obsession, traumatic situations etc., the irony is that in the complaints of neurotic situations, there appear no signs of physical disease; they only affect women's behaviour which deviates from the normal pattern. All this is because of the neurosis through which these women pass. In this connection, we can quote Fariduddin and Indu Singh who remark:

The deep roots of women psychology can possibly be brought to the light through the ideas of the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. According to Freud in A general introduction to Psychoanalysis: The various psychoses involve deficits in the autonomous ego function of thought's integration, in abstraction ability, in relation to reality and in reality testing. Unconscious conflict of the childhood might lead to the person various neurotic problems like anxiety, panic, depressive affect, isolation and aggression. Freudian theories believe that certain problems can be resolved from the peculiar phases of childhood and adolescence to make victim free from the sense of guilt and shame... In Indian culture women are meant to behave in certain ways as it is deeply ingrained in our culture. Society has no room of empathy for the feelings of women. She is expected to mould herself to the extent of zero tolerance what has put heavy burden on her mind and soul with many psychological problems. The modern Indian renaissance witnessed the emergence of feminine sensibility in the male dominated society. (Psychoanalysis of Female Protagonists of Kamala Markandaya's Novel 2)

In the delineation of psychology of human nature and especially the crisis of human psyche, Kamala Markandaya has distinguished herself in her approach. She understands well the inner clash found in man's

living and so depicts the crisis of conscience of her women protagonists that belong to middle class families. As a novelist, she knows how to tackle the issue of conscience of middle class people who face conflict in their conscience to a great extent. Kamala Markandaya lays bare the inner self of her women protagonists and their psychological problems which leave an unnerving impact of their conscience.

In almost each novel, from the beginning of first to the last one, Markandaya's women protagonists pass through various kinds of psychological phases that disturb their psyche time and again. She, very beautifully presents the psychological urges of her women who prove themselves resilient and resourceful. The possession of positive psychological traits and attitudes of her women is the result of their inner strength which makes them capable of withstanding social oppression. What idea Kamala Markandaya wants to bring home is that the real strength of a woman is not found in her muscular power rather it is found in her introvert nature of being compassionate, sacrificing as well as recognising the compulsory emotions. Kamala Markandaya shows her admiration for these women who bend but never break.

As Kamala Markandaya has social concerns in her heart and minds, she, in her novels, presents women who are the champions of moral values and continuously strive to maintain those values. Her women show resistance in upholding their moral values in odd circumstances; they never deviate from their customs, traditions, morality and ethic even when they face acute problems. When there is an inner conflict in the minds of these women, they prove themselves strong women. Kamala Markandaya deals with the crisis of conscience and moral values in the backdrop of the predicaments and cross-cultural conflicts of rural and urban poverty. In fact, Kamala Markandaya's tragic vision is based on delineation of the crisis of conscience which she presents through the women protagonists in her novels. It is with this tragic vision that she very successfully and realistically depicts the society of rural and urban life. In her novels, Kamala Marakndaya brings to light the socio-economic, spiritual, cultural, and to an extent psychic disturbances and brings home the point Indian women suffer due to man-made hardships and misfortunes created by patriarchal society. In this regard, M.K. Bhatnagar aptly observes:

Markandaya's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* illustrates all her basic preoccupations: the protagonist– narrator Rukmani caught in a hard peasant life; the vagaries of nature, the depredations of modern civilization (in shape of tannery), the forced migration to city and so on, revealing how work without hope draws nectar in a sieve. (Kamala Markandaya: The Insider-Outsider 3)

Kamala Markandaya has always social purpose of the novel in her mind and so she shows her commitment in the way she is rooted in Indian soil ethos. She presents the rural society before her readers so that they may see the rural reality of India. Her purpose is to enlighten the polite circles of our society towards its problems. A. V. Krishna Rao observes:

It is this purposive direction of a creative sensibility that endows her novels with a certain representative character that marks them out as a significant entity in the Indo-Anglian fiction. (The Indo-Anglian Novel and the Changing Tradition 55)

Kamala Markandaya's sense of involvement as a social being in India, her keen observation combined with critical acumen as well as female psychology brought her international fame when she got her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* published in 1954. Rukmani, the protagonist, is a mother figure in *Nectar in a Sieve* and she has the innate quality of kindness and sacrifice in her. It may be a different thing that she does not possess the physical strength of man, but she is strong enough as a mother:

The land is the mistress to man, not to woman; the heavy work needed is beyond her strength. (*Nectar in a Sieve* 129)

Rukmani is not only a good mother but also a source of influence for Nathan who finds comfort, peace and love in her relationship. The only force that creates bonding in the novel is the character of Rukmani who is not simply a village girl but also a loving and devoted wife and a sacrificing mother. She has surpassed these limited physical identifies to depict the universal mother figure. Kamala Markandaya has not limited

Rukmani to any particular status, cult or convention. She is conceived as the encompassing, tolerant, committed, sacrificing, loving and forgiving mother character.

Rukmani is the centre, the immovable, influential force upon whom all the other persons in the novel depend. She has no illusion in life, is disturbed by no wish or expectation, her support does not stumble. Rukmani is always, attentive and ready to extend her eager heart to the persons who are in need of any help. A. V. Krishna Rao remarks:

Rukmani's narrative is her fatalistic resignation and acceptance of duty as the only solace of life. Always generous and sacrificing, she cares for Nathan till his death, and after that, she can only remember his gentleness. At the end, she is fully fledged, with a stronger spirit of acceptance and endurance that give her courage through many more days of economic difficulties. Her kindness and sympathy towards Puli is symbolic of her own rejuvenated self. Puli also becomes a symbol of Rukmani's responsibility. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels 21)

There is no doubt in it that Rukmani is indeed a great woman character, who shows courage in facing the crisis of conscience in difficulties and misfortunes. Despite the odd circumstances in her life, she perfectly behaves as a wife, daughter, mother, and sister, and bears all problems, calamities, miseries, famine etc very courageously and boldly throughout her life:

She is the eternal mother bound by love and affection to her hearth and home. Biologically, she is the receiver giving birth to human beings. Emotionally, philosophically and spiritually too she is the absorber who imbibes everything that comes her way - joy, happiness, hardship, poverty, loss, pain, suffering - Nectar as well as poison. Her journey from home to her husband's house is her journey to motherhood. (Chatterjee Arundhanti 85)

Rukmani becomes a victim of the tragic events in her life such as the Raja and Kuti die; Ira has been separated from her husband and consequently falls prey to prostitution; Murugan migrates to the city, two sons go to Sri Lanka and finally Nathan also meets his death in her life time. But she bears all the misfortunes courageously and continues to be very caring for her family members. Not only she faces these personal sorrows, she also becomes a victim of the movements which prove fatal for her in the city. A. V. Krishna Rao and K. Madhavi Menon remark:

We thus understand how much Rukmani is particularly a product of her environment and her culture more than anything else, how her peculiar set of circumstances have contributed to making her what she is. Markandaya emphasizes the victimised, not self-activated, aspect of Indian peasant life through the very tone of the narrative. The characters are shown as submitting to either an aspect of invincible Nature or unconquerable Fate. It is the tenderness with which Markandaya has touchingly portrayed the peasant's plight that is extraordinary and gives her the special place. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels 21)

Regarding the treatment of predicaments faced by Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Dr. Deepty Pandey aptly observes:

Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*... tells the story of India what the picture of India was after the independence. It shows the difficulties, suffering, disasters, desolation and problems of Indian peasants... It is a realistic chronicle of Rukmani's family in particular and the sufferings of peasants in colonial India in general. Rukmani is the youngest of the four daughters of a village head man and is married at the age of twelve to Nathan. Her family is tortured by poverty, hunger, deprivation and starvation created not only by socio – economic factors but also by the vagaries of cruel nature. Rukmani was the hardworking and devoted wife of Nathan. She was willing to accept challenges in order to achieve her aims. Rukmani bore six sons and one daughter. Her daughter, Ira, resorts to prostitution to save the family from prostitution. Kuti, the youngest child of Rukmani, dies of starvation. Her two sons Arjun and Thambi leave for Ceylon

for work, and Raja, the third son, dies in a quarrel and at last they lost their land. (Feminism in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya 16-17)

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya Also deals with the tension between tradition and modernity in the backdrop of cross-cultural conflicts. It is a tragic story of trials and tribulations of couple smarting with them in village life. Nathan and Rukmani come in contact with the English missionary Kenny and the confrontation of viewpoints of the persons belonging to the soil begins to take its toll on them. Nathan and Rukmani endure their miseries with calm resignation while having conflicts with the enlightened British idealism of liberalism. Gajendra Kumar remarks:

There is a clash or conflict between the scientific spirit and the basic human values in, *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel is overcharged with references of the conventional customs, beliefs and superstitions. Nathan is a tenant farmer who wakes with the Sunrising and keeps himself busy during the time of sowing and harvesting. Nathan's gradual impoverishment reminds one of Hori Ram, an illiterate tenant farmer in Prem Chand's 'Godan', Hori Ram Mahto is a symbol of simplicity and usefulness. In the pattern of typical Indian peasant, he too is fatalist believing in age-old customs and superstitions. Hori Ram, a man of older, traditional morality fails to comprehend the changing circumstances. Nathan too in *Nectar in a Sieve* is a traditional tenant farmer who desire his sons to work on the fields but that does not interest them. Nathan's aspirations are shunned and shattered...(Voices in the City: A tour de horizon of Existentialist Philosophy 56)

*Nectar in a Sieve* is a comment on the process of modernization of Indian villages in which the cross-cultural conflicts become the root cause of the miseries of noble souls like Nathan and Rukmani. Markandaya very beautifully depicts the difference between the Eastern and the Western philosophies through the juxtaposed attitude to life of Rukmani and Dr. Kenny. In the following dialogue between Rukmani and Dr. Kenny Rukmani says:

Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons on earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that, which has always been and cannot change... (*Nectar in a Sieve* 113)

At this remark of Rukmani, Dr. Kenny admonishes her and says:

You must cry out if you want help it is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will succour the drowning man if he does not clamour for his life?...There is no grandeur in want or in endurance...(113)

Still Rukmani is not ready to accept any counsel of Dr. Kenny and says:

Yet our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishment and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence, and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed. (114)

Dr. Kenny, being a man of western rational bend up of mind, becomes surprised at Rukmani's philosophically resigned attitude, comments:

Acquiescent imbeciles, do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering? What thoughts have you when your belly is empty or your body is sick? (114)

It can be mentioned here that the theme of East-West encounter becomes the main cause of cross-cultural conflicts here. Markandaya is aware of this conflict between the Eastern and Western attitudes to suffering. No doubt she has been trained by her religion to orthodox principles, yet her exposure to western philosophy has taught her to see the possibility of fighting evil.

In the second part of the novel, Markandaya projects the plight of the couple struggling to accommodate themselves in the new city. Rukmani and Nathan, who are simple by nature and are industrious by habit, expect at every turn that the life will be far better if their fate does not desert them and foils their efforts of improving their fortune. The city in which they try their fate also rejects them because they are not able to fit themselves in the hectic life of that new city. Ultimately Nathan dies while returning to his village.

In the third part of the novel, Rukmani is shown smarting with her calamities. From the very beginning of the novel the reader has been aware of Rukmani's total surrender of her interests and freedom to her family

members. She is left unsupported after Nathan's death however she struggles to survive without any break or weakness in her physique, mind or spirit. This comes from her inner strength in her spirituality. No doubt, she has to resort to extra-marital relationship with Dr. Kenny, in spite of the fact that she remains loyal to her husband in thought, word and deeds. A.V. Krishna Rao and K. Madhavi Menon comment:

Rukmani's acceptance is traditional but she does feel, at times, like questioning her fate, and the conflict between her sense of acceptance and her sense of defiance bobs to the surface. The absence of explicit presentation of the conflict leads many critics to conclude that this is a harrowing tale of passive inert suffering. Rukmani's suffering is out of proportion to her deserts. She is passive in action, but there is nothing she can do to ameliorate her miserable living conditions. She cannot accept the tannery but she is forced to pay revenue for land that has not yielded. She is helpless in making her voice heard. When the inhumanity of the tannery confronts her and Nathan, Rukmani takes refuge in the native tradition of fatalistic resignation but not absolute stoicism. (Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels 1954-1982 19)

Rukmani and Kenny stand for different cultures of the East and the West. Rukmani stands for the culture of the East while Dr. Kenny represents the culture of the West; Rukmani blindly believes in her faith while Kenny has faith in rationality. No doubt, Kenny does not hesitate in helping the people having foolishness in them but often he becomes furious on them. He remarks to Rukmani:

I go when I am tired of your follies and stupidities, your external shameful poverty...I can only take you in small doses. (Nectar in a Sieve 71)

Kenny is also desirous of helping Rukmani whenever she faces any problem. However Rukmani does not accede to his help and keeps her firm faith in the goodness of God. Her mother had gifted Rukmani a *lingam* at the time her death; the *lingam* stands for fertility. She remarks:

I slunk away, frightened of I know not what; I placed even more faith in the charm my mother has given me, wearing it constantly between my breasts. (NS 20)

Thus it can be said that Rukmani represents the values of the culture of the East. Faith and medicine go hand in hand among conventional Indian people, especially among women. When Rukmani's faith does not give her desired results of getting rid of barrenness, she goes to Dr. Kenny to get the medicine. When she is cured of her curse of infertility within a year, she gives birth to her son. This shows that she is evolving in her character because gradual change in attitude is developing in her. But it does not mean that she has lost her faith in God; she still staunchly believes in the power of God. During the famine in the village, she speaks to Kenny:

We have a little rice, it will last us until times are better. (NS 430)

At this remark of Rukmani, Dr. Kenny becomes irritated and loses his patience:

Times are better, time better...Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools. Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand-cry out for help-do something? There is nothing in the country, oh God, there is nothing. (NS 43-44)

Thus we see that Rukmani is a typically traditional woman having the values of the culture of the East. She clashes with the western values in her encounter with the English doctor Kenny who represents the West and hence is absolutely against the fatalistic attitude of Rukmani and Nathan, who have intimacy with the soil.

Rukmani is representative of Indian womanhood representing through her fortitude and perseverance. She bears all the miseries with a calm mind and never loses her courage. Her personality has all the glorification and innate heroism in it and she bears all the calamities with fortitude. Dr. Kenny is also a man of pure heart he has love and respect for Rukmani's innocence and purity of mind. But at the same time he is ill at ease with Rukmani's and Nathan's docile temperament, their attitude though slow in changing, their personal hygiene and lack of education and information which is responsible for various superstitions.



The culture of the East is, no doubt, spiritual but there is blemish in it that it treats its women with contempt. All the widows, barren women etc. are treated cruelly. Harish Raizada remarks:

Social evils are caused by cruel customs – Ira, Rukmani's daughter is rejected by her husband because she is barren and in the village the blame falls squarely on the wife. (East-West Confrontation in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya 508)

Rukmani and Nathan undergo hardships, representing their fortitude of people of the East. According to Shyam Asnani:

Rukmani's indomitable spirit, drawing *Nectar in a Sieve*, justifies the title of the novel. (The Theme of Famine Hunger: Bhabhani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya 91)

Thus it can be concluded that there is a clash between the cultural spirit and the basic human values in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* which abounds in references to the traditional rites, faith and religious beliefs. Rukmani stands for the traditional values of life and hence she reacts against the trespassing by the western people who have brought their values in the name of industrial revolution. This new culture replaces the human values of Indian village life by its materialistic approach to life. The establishment of tannery ultimately influences the human values and creates havoc in her life. She comes to realize the impact of this new culture in the form of the complete change in the appearance of the village which cannot be recognized at the representative of Indian human values. Thus the identity of the village is entirely affected in the way that the villagers are now completely changed. The crisis of conscience now begins to leave its impact on her mind.

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