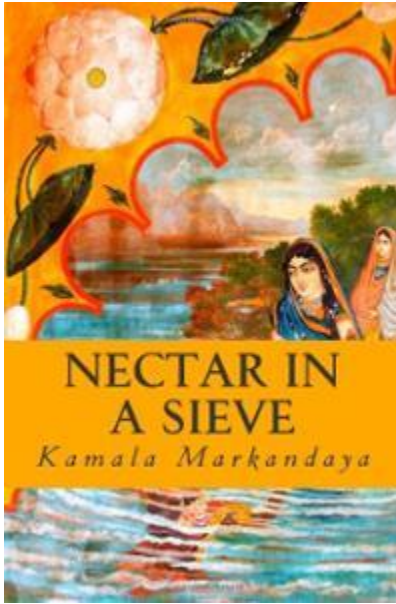


## Thematic Study of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar In A Sieve*

Ms. R. Mahalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.

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### Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is one of the well-known Indian Women novelists writing in English. She won international fame and recognition with the publication of her maiden novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. In *Nectar in a Sieve* Kamala Markandaya Spotlights the despair of the farmers realistically. They are desperate because of the vagaries of natural calamities, the resultant constant hunger, ruthless machines and heartless men. When an Indian village is on the threshold of industrialization, the peasant community suffers both physically and mentally. Nathan and Rukmani are representatives of millions of tenant farmers in India and their life is an example of the havoc caused by industrialization. The whole novel thus reveals the story of an Indian village shaken to its roots by the onslaught of modernization. *Nectar in a Sieve* is much more than the story of the life and suffering of Rukmani and Nathan, a faceless peasant couple, symbolic of rural dwellers all over the country. The tragedy of Rukmani and Nathaan is universalized and vested with an epical significance. Markandaya's novel vividly records the poverty-stricken, heart-breaking existence of the people in rural areas. Their struggle has been given an epical

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grandeur and dignity. The village where they lived has not been given any name and its locals had been kept vague and indistinct. This was so because it symbolizes rural India and Nathan and Rukmani symbolize the Indian farmer and the tragedy of rural India. *Nectar in a Sieve* captures the effects of social upheavals on its characters. Markandaya's themes depict her tragic vision of life.

**Key words:** Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, poverty, rural India, tenant farmers, effect of modernization.

### **Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004)**

The British impact on India has given rise to an impressive mass of writing in English that could be conveniently described as Indian English literature. Indian writing in English refers to the body of work by writers of Indian origin who write in the English language and whose mother tongue is usually one of the numerous languages of India. It has grown from a sapling to a strong rooted tree in full bloom in each of its genres – poetry, prose, fiction, novel and drama with a diversity of themes, forms and styles. Indian writing in English, especially fiction is gaining ground rapidly.

### **Depiction of Woman Consciousness and Poverty**

Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) is one of the most popular Indo-Anglian novelists with a vast concourse of readers in India and abroad. Her original name was Kamala Purnaiya which links her with the Dewan Purnaiya which was a well-to-do aristocratic family of Mysore in South India. The woman consciousness is central to all her novels. Markandaya died in London on May 16, 2004. She uses fiction as a vehicle for communicating her vision of life.

Markandaya's heightened awareness of poverty in India probably was the result of her visits to the country and accounts for the frequent repetition of this theme in her novels.

### **A Realistic Picture of Rural India**

*Nectar in a Sieve* is the first Indian novel in English in which a sincere attempt has been made to project a realistic picture of rural India in all its shades and details – famine, drought,

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excessive rain and struggle for survival, eviction, superstition, hunger and starvation. There is a realistic portrayal of a village which is symbolic of rural India. The sub-title of the novel “A Novel of Rural India”, gives a clue to the novelist’s predominant occupation in the novel and its inner content. It depicts with vivid clarity and keen observation the socio-economic conditions of rural India. Particularly, the terrible degradation that human life brings is depicted with unflinching realism.

Kamala Markandaya spotlights the despair of the farmers realistically. They are desperate because of the vagaries of natural calamities, the rampant hunger, ruthless machines and heartless men. When an Indian village is on the threshold of industrialization, the peasant community suffers both physically and mentally. Nathan and Rukmani are representatives of millions of tenant farmers in India and their life is an example of the havoc caused by industrialization. The whole novel thus reveals the story of an Indian village shaken to its roots by the onslaught of modernization.

### **Rukmani the Protagonist and Narrator**

Rukmani the protagonist and narrator in the novel is a simple peasant woman whose persistent battle has been against poverty. The younger daughter of a village- headman, she marries Nathan, a landless tenant farmer, at the age of twelve. The dwindling financial position of Rukmani’s father forces him to marry her to a tenant. Her sisters Shanta, Padmini and Thangam were married in a befitting manner, but as luck would have it the headman is no longer rich and is of no consequence; hence Rukmani with neither beauty, nor dowry is given away to Nathan a tenant farmer. Everybody pities her.

### **Poverty and Starvation**

Poverty and starvation stalk the threshold of the couple from the beginning of their married life. When Rukmani comes to live with Nathan, his house images her withered future, “Across the doorway a garland of mango leaves, symbol of happiness and good fortune, dry now and rattling in the breeze”. (NS4) Rukmani accepts her adversity calmly and reveals her stoic acceptance of the inevitable. In her relationship with her husband she

learns the values of mutual love, understanding, respect, acceptance, and adjustment. Both Rukmani and her husband lead a simple and contented life with the barest necessities such as food, clothes and shelter. Nathan was a poor peasant in every sense of the word. He possessed a very small hut:

Two rooms, one a sort of storehouse for grain the other for everything else. A third had been begun but was unfinished, the mud walls were not more than half a foot high. (NS4)

The wife of a neighbor had told her that Nathan had built the hut with his own hands. Nathan had his own problems but he made it a point to see that he was always good to his wife. He had great patience to put up with her, especially during those early days of their married life: “Not one crossword or impatient look and praise for whatever small success I achieved”. (NS 8) He showed great concern for his wife when she was pregnant. Rukmani begets her first child and sheds, “tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?” (NS 14) She knows that irrational conventions and anachronistic traditions decry a female offspring. As a typical village farmer, Nathan also believes in the notion of the superiority of a male child. After the birth of Ira he was not happy as he should be, since Ira was a girl.

During the next six years, Rukmani does not conceive. Troubled that she cannot produce a son for Nathan, Rukmani visits her ailing mother and there meets Kenny, a foreign doctor. Rukmani seeks help from Kenny who treats her infertility without Nathan’s knowledge. In quick succession, Rukmani bears five sons – Arjun, Thambi, Selvam, Murugan, Raja and Kuti. With each birth, however, the family has a little less to eat. Rukmani and Nathan find it difficult to manage things and are forced to lead a life of poverty.

### **Miseries of Farmers**

Heavy rain creates untold miseries to the people of the village. When waters have subsided the villagers venture out again. They run short of grains. Nathan goes to Hanuman, the rice dealer and told him that the gruel he and his family has been taking was almost plain water for the past few days. But Hanuman is not kind enough to part with any rice. He excuses himself and says that whatever he had was enough only for his wife and children. He then directs him to Biswas another merchant who also disappoints Nathan. The choice now left before him is to break the dam. He is accompanied by his wife and children who were sunken-eyed and noisy at the thought of the feast, carrying nets and baskets.

The next year again the rains fail and each day the level of the water drops and heads of the paddy hang lower. There is nothing to reap when the harvesting time comes. Sivaji who comes to collect his master's dues is told that there was nothing that year. But he is not ready to pay heed to Nathan's words:

You have had the land ... for which you have contracted to pay so much money so much rice. These are just dues, I must have them. Would you have me return empty handed? (NS 72)

Nathan makes a miserable plea to give him till the next crop. He has no option other than selling the vessels, trunk, shirts, etc.

... rather these should go...than that the land should be taken from us, we can do without these, but if the land is gone our livelihood is gone, and we must thenceforth wander like jackals. (NS 74)

Nathan has nightmarish dreams and the theme of the dream continues to be the paddy turning to straw and the grain getting lost. His voice remains stark and bereft of the power of dissembling which his full consciousness brought. On such occasions only his wife could give him some courage.

### **Dislocation and Disintegration**

*Nectar in a Sieve* is also a study of dislocation and disintegration of Rukmani's family. It deals not only with the major theme of hunger but also the co-existent theme of human

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degradation and debasement that hunger brings. The quiet and peaceful life of Rukmani's family is affected by the undesirable advent of a tannery. The tannery, symbolic of mechanical power, finally destroys the traditional village. It brings inflation, vice and disease and completely disturbs the village life. The calm, serene and peaceful atmosphere of the village is destroyed. The water of the river contains the stinking waste material of the tannery and the productivity of the land is decreased.

Tannery is the main cause of the forces that uproot the elder sons of Rukmani, Arjun and Thambi from their native soil and force them to go to an alien place. Rukmani has taught Arjun reading and writing. He spent many hours writing on scraps of papers he collected or even on the bare earth when paper was not immediately available to him. He shows no interest in the land and chooses to work at the tannery. He believes in the dictum that the important thing was to eat: "I am tired of hunger and I am tired of seeing my brother's hunger. There is never enough, especially since Ira came to live with us". (NS 51)

Thambi, her next son also joins the tannery. He had his own reason for choosing his career as he himself made it clear to his mother: "If it were your land or mine...I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return? Far better to turn away from such injustice."(NS 52) Thambi along with his brother Arjun earns good wages which is handed over to Rukmani. Then there is a strike in the tannery and Thambi turns out to be more rebellious than anyone else: "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." (NS 65) Soon he becomes restless. Along with his brother Arjun he begins to frequent the town more, coming and going at all hours with no word as to what he was doing. His mother suffers in silence because she knew that they have no money to lead them to harm. She has no cure for the restlessness that affects them. When the tannery stops work Arjun and Thambi could have helped their father. After the strike they are left jobless. The ultimate choice before Arjun is to migrate to Ceylon where labourers are required.

### **Money-Oriented and Materialistic Values**

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The tannery represents the money-oriented and materialistic values which make human life quite futile and meaningless. After alluring two of Rukmani's sons who have become victims of false values the tannery happens to be the main cause for the death of Raja, the fourth of son of Rukmani. She is terribly shocked and horrified when the dead body of her son is brought home by the tannery officials. They tell Rukmani that her son was caught in the act of stealing a calf-skin and no one was to blame for the consequences. His family could not get compensation. Afflicted with great sorrow and heartache Rukmani sadly narrates:

For this I have given you birth, my son, that you should lie in the end at my feet with ashes in your face and coldness in your limbs and yourself departed without trace, leaving this huddle of bones and flesh without meaning.  
(NS 89-90)

Once more Nathan is to bear the whole burden of the household. His struggle fails to bring the good living the family could have known. The reserves of grain Rukmani had put by begin to dwindle despite her utmost care.

### **Kunthi**

Kunthi is a village woman who is quieter and more reserved than any other woman. She is thin, slight and pretty. Her two eldest sons are among the first in the village to start work at the tannery. This helps them bring home more than a man's wages. Kunthi visits Rukmani and says that she has come not to be seen or to see her, but for a meal. She has not eaten for a long time. After taking some food she makes a request for some rice. When she expresses her helplessness, Kunthi tries to blackmail her: "I will have the rice now or your husband shall hear that his wife is not virtuous as he believes...or she pretends". (NS 83) Rukmani is shocked to hear such a threat from Kunthi. Things become clear when Nathan tells her that the grains have been stolen for Kunthi: "Kunthi took it all, I swear it. She forced me, I did not want you to know". (NS 86) Kunthi does not stop here. She blackmails Nathan also and again succeeds in taking away rice from him. It is at this juncture, that Rukmani comes to know that her husband is the father of the sons of Kunthi.

### **Betrayal of Marriage**

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Rukmani accepts her husband's betrayal and moral weakness with calm resignation. She suffers silently. It does not mean that she lacks sufficient strength and courage to protest against her husband. She accepts her husband with all his weakness and limitations because she loves him deeply and profoundly. Her genuine love for him enables her to forgive him and accept him whole-heartedly. Thus we find that in spite of her taking to the profession of prostitution, life was not all a bed of roses for Kunthi. She is also made to struggle in her life and it is when she has no way out, she goes to Rukmani to blackmail her with a false allegation. She was not successful in her efforts, but unpleasant truths are revealed which implicate Rukmani's husband.

Nathan's miseries know no bounds and the latest in the series come when he is made to confess to his wife that he had an affair with Kunthi. It was an affair which he had started even before their marriage. The next in line is his daughter giving birth to an illegitimate child. Ira's life has been a struggle throughout.

### **Ira's Agony and Misery**

Ira had been stamped as a barren woman and returned after five years of marriage. She is rejected by her husband because she is unable to bear children. In the patriarchal society, barren women are considered to be cursed and inauspicious. They are not recognized and respected. Men have the social sanction to reject barren wives. Nathan understands the situation and says, "I do not blame him. He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient". (NS 50)

Ironically, when Ira is fit to conceive, especially after her medical treatment under Dr. Kenny, Nathan goes to Ira's husband to convey the good news. But to his shock and surprise, he finds that he has married another woman. Rukmani accepts this unavoidable, poignant and distressing situation with equanimity and reconciles herself to the ill-fate of Ira. After that Ira spends long hours out in the country. She speaks little, withdrawing completely into herself and goes about her tasks with a chilling feeling of hopelessness: "with a dowry it was perhaps possible she might marry again, without it no man would look at her, no longer a virgin and reputedly barren". (NS 62)



It became inevitable for Ira to earn some money in order to save her youngest brother Kuti from hunger and starvation. The only path that is thrown open to her is to take to a life of prostitution. When Rukmani and Nathan find out Ira's immoral way of earning money, they are thunderstruck. Rukmani and her husband try their best to prevent her from continuing her immoral actions, but Ira does not heed their advice. She tells her parents firmly that she will never allow herself or her brother to go hungry.

As a logical conclusion to her new way of life, Ira becomes pregnant giving birth to a fatherless child. It is a cruel twist to fate that a woman who is made to be known as a barren woman had to become the mother of a fatherless child. Rukmani receives the child and nameless fears descend on her:

I held him, this child begotten in the street of an unknown man in a moment of easy desire, while the brightness of the future broke and fell about me like so many pieces of coloured glass. (NS 117)

For her it was cruel but not unbearable as the mother and the child were happy. The child who looks peculiar with pink eyes is christened Sacrapani. The albino child was isolated from the start. His skin is unable to stand the sun and the light affects his eyes. Nathan sees the whole issue "as a cruel thing in the evening of their lives". (NS 118)

### **Hope and Wish for a Better Future**

Nathan tries to console himself and Rukmani with the hope of a bright future:

You brood too much and think only of your trials, not of the joys that are still with us. Look at our land is it not beautiful? The fields are green and the grain is ripening. It will be a good harvest year, there will be plenty. (NS 69)

Nathan dreams of a happy future and of possible rich crops. But all his dreams end in nothing because the rains fail. As a result there is no rice to eat. Rukmani manages to get a handful of rice. She feels satisfied at this small quantity of rice. Rukmani and Nathan recall how once the heavy rains ruined their paddy crops. Nathan and Rukmani undergo

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nightmarish and traumatic experience, when the entire family finds itself in the grip of devastating hunger and agonizing fear. Rukmani understands that hunger and fear have become part and parcel of peasants' lives. The villagers cannot easily overcome these malignant factors, as they are always the outcome of the unpredictable prospects of nature. Rukmani becomes quite miserable and sorrowful. She realizes that her sons are too engrossed in earning money and becoming affluent. What makes her more downhearted and unhappy is her realization that she would not be able to see them again in her life. Unable to find work in the tannery and at the same time finding it difficult to help his father in the fields, Murugan, the third son of Rukmani, leaves the village in order to get a job in the city. The separation of another son makes Rukmani more depressed and disconsolate. Yet she endures the ordeal without giving up hope in life.

### **Yet Another Blow**

Another blow confronts Nathan when he hears from Sivaji that the landlord was going to sell his land. He is told that the landlord has completed the deal and papers have been signed. They were given two weeks' time to leave. He is fully aware that it is not just and also not right. But it is a cruel reality: "There is no law against it... we may grieve, but there is no redress" (NS 136), he tells Selvam, his son. At the same time he knows that he cannot live except by working the land for he has no other knowledge or skill. The only alternative that is there before him is to go to his son Murugan who is in the town and he does exactly that.

### **Selvam**

In spite of the fact that he had been reared on the land and has the earth in his blood, Selvam did not take to farming. He had no love for it and in return it did not yield to him. He had knowledge of crops and seasons, born of experience, but where crops thrived under Nathan's hand, under his they wilted. One day he declared that he was not going to be a farmer: "The land has no liking for me, and I have no time for it". (NS 111) Kenny had offered him a job in the hospital. Though Rukmani couldn't reconcile herself to this decision of Selvam, she was not displeased but disappointed since all her sons had forsaken the land.

### **Death of a Son**

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Rukmani's sufferings become intensive and grim when her last son, Kuti dies due to hunger and starvation. Kuti's struggle for life is pathetic and unbearable. It becomes a horrible and a harrowing experience for Rukmani to see her son become quite frail and die gradually.

### **Kenny Returns**

Kenny returns from one of his long absences with money to build a hospital in the village. He offers to train Rukmani's remaining son, Selvam, as his assistant. As Nathan nears his fiftieth year, he has no sons left to work the land. He suffers from rheumatism and debilitating fevers. Rukmani and Ira try to help, but they are not strong enough. The family experiences its greatest loss when the land agent tells Nathan and Rukmani their land has been sold to the despised tannery. No one else will lease land to a man as old and ill as Nathan, and Rukmani and Nathan must leave their home of thirty years to go to their son Murugan in the city. Ira thinks that she would stay back when Nathan and Rukmani decide to leave the place: "I will not be a burden to you. I am happy enough here, people are used to me and my son. I cannot start a new life now". (NS 137) They leave Ira and their grandchild under Selvam's care.

### **Economic Woes**

The setting up of the tannery leads to the complete dispossession of Rukmani's family. The land which they have been cultivating for nearly thirty years has been bought by the tannery owners for the expansion of the tannery, at a high price from the land lord. Rukmani and Nathan receive the terrible and cruelest blow when they are asked by the land lord to vacate the land. The lamentation of Nathan is quite moving, "Where are we to go? What shall we do?" (NS 133) Rukmani becomes a pathetic woman when the land is taken away from them.

After eviction from the land Nathan and Rukmani migrate to the city for their livelihood and suffer untold hardships. They enter the city in search of Murugan, and flounder in it throughout the whole day. But they cannot find him. In the evening they go to a temple where food is distributed free. The innocent couple cannot get their share, for there

is a large crowd. Nathan is sick. So Rukmani goes to the priest and begs him to give her, her own and her husband's share. But she is insulted and her husband's share is not given to her. They share the food which Rukmani gets for herself. Rukmani and Nathan are not welcomed by the destitute and beggars gathered in the temple. Nathan says passionately, "Better to starve where we bred than live here. Whatever happens, whatever awaits us, we must return". (NS168)

### **Poverty and Hunger**

The novelist has given a vivid and graphic account of poverty and hunger in the city and Rukmani describes the grim struggle for survival in the city. Even in the city they come across poverty, hunger, disease and wickedness, in its most naked, stark and horrible form. The whereabouts of Murugan are not known and they are compelled to resort to begging, live with thieves and beggars in a temple and work as stone-breakers. Their possessions reduced to the few bundles they carry, Nathan and Rukmani try to find Murugan in the city. They rest one night at a temple, where thieves steal their bundles and all their money. A leprous street urchin named Puli helps them find the home of Kenny's doctor friend. They reach the doctor's house where Murugan was supposed to work. To their disappointment, they came to know that their son had already left. Then they go to the collector's house as they came to know that Murugan was working there. Again, disappointment awaits Nathan and his wife as Murugan has already left his wife. Nathan and Rukmani meet their daughter-in-law, Ammu, Murugan's wife, who is also leading a life of poverty. Ammu, was the one who makes every effort to make both ends meet. She is a thin girl with untidy hair. When Rukmani and Nathan reach her house what they see there is abject poverty.

### **Ammu**

Ammu is on an all-out struggle to survive. Her older boy, their grandson, is thin with hunger. Her starving baby is too little to be Murugan's son. Rukmani sees that she and Nathan cannot impose upon their daughter-in-law. Rukmani and Nathan return to the temple and unhappily subsist on the single daily meal the temple provides. Rukmani and Nathan consider the skills with which they might earn a living and find none of them suited to city life. Nathan can farm but has no land; Rukmani can spin and weave, but has no money for materials. Despite all of the people and the commerce surrounding them in the city, they have no opportunities. Her

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vivid image of the tethered goat describes both her constraint and her powerlessness. It evokes the gentleness of the goats at the temple whose grateful eyes thanked Rukmani for a mouthful of leaves.

### **Only Money Counts**

In the country, Rukmani and Nathan manage to survive without much money by living simply on the products of their own labor. In the city, with no work available, Rukmani rues the fact that only money counts. The city's insistence upon cash reduces a person to an animal state and deprives Rukmani of the free will that characterizes her as human. Just as city thieves rob Nathan and Rukmani of their last coins, the city's unjust structure robs them of liberty and choice, their birthright as humans.

Rukmani and Nathan dream of home but have no means to make the trip. Rukmani tries to get work as a letter reader but earns only enough to buy rice cakes. Puli takes them to a stone quarry where there is better-paying work. He helps them learn to break stones, and they come to rely on him. They entrust him with their earnings, and, as they save, they begin to hope. One evening, Rukmani splurges on extra food and toys for Puli and her grandson. When she returns to Nathan at the temple, she expects him to be angry, instead he is violently ill. During a week of monsoon rains, Nathan continues to work in the quarry despite his fevers and chills. One evening, after she gets paid, Rukmani begins to plan for a cart to take them home. Hurrying to catch up with Nathan, she finds him collapsed in the mud in the street. Kind strangers help carry him to the temple, where he dies in her arms after reminding her of their happiness together.

### **Moving to Urban Area**

Even when he is desperate, Nathan takes a quick decision to go to urban lands in search of pastures new. The city has nothing to offer to the farmer couple. Rukmani's spirit is not curtailed by any tragic situation. She faces the worst of blows boldly and offers her service as a writer of letters. She hopefully remarks, "I am sure if I write letters as well as read them, I shall earn even more". (NS 168) Her aspiration in the midst of desperation is to save money so that they could go back to the village and settle down there in peace. Though her venture is not successful, it speaks volumes of Rukmani's far-sightedness.

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## **Nathan's Death**

The final blow that Rukmani receives from the cruel hand of fate is by means of Nathan's death. The untimely death of her husband happens to be an appalling and horrible blow to Rukmani. The heart-rending mental agony, anguish, pain and suffering can be understood from her words: "If I grieve I said, it is not for you, but for myself, beloved, for how shall I endure to live without you, who are my love and life". (NS188)

After Nathan's death, Rukmani rashly promises Puli his health if he returns to the country with her, a promise she hopes that Kenny and Selvam will help her keep. Rukmani returns alone on the death of her husband and Ira welcomes her back: "You look tired and hungry... come with me and rest, I will prepare the rice". (NS189)

## **Irawaddy and Rukmani**

Irawaddy was not fortunate enough to be born as the daughter of rich parents and she could not think of a happy married life either. But she was the one with a strong will and she managed to survive the turbulences which made her the target one after the other. It is only her determination that prevents her from joining her parents when they decide to go to the town. She is there as she had been earlier to receive her mother back despite the ordeals she was made to undergo in her life. Rukmani introduces Puli to Selvam and Ira as the son she and Nathan adopted while they were away. Demonstrating both hope and compassion, Ira hastens to prepare a meal for Puli, and Selvam promises his mother that they will manage.

Rukmani's dropping spirit elevates not only at the heartening words of Ira, but also at the familiar sight of the rural abode which she has cherished for so many years. She happily ponders, "I looked about me at the land and it was life to my starving spirit. I felt the earth beneath my feet and wept for happiness". (NS 188) What she has aspired, she has achieved. In her village she hopes to start a brand new life. Buffeted by both man and nature, Rukmani sums up their tragic life:

Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear, constant companion of the peasant.

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Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow, should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear, fear of the dark future, fear of the sharpness of hunger, fear of the blackness of death. (NS83)

### **Old Granny**

Old Granny is brought into the main stream of the novel by her death which is caused by starvation. She, therefore, symbolizes the pangs of hunger during the drought conditions in the village. She is one who struggled hard to survive and failed rather miserably

Rukmani feels that the villagers, herself included, closed their eyes and ears to Old Granny's plight though she lived within sight and sound of them. She speculates that Old Granny might have been saved by the hospital had it been finished, but Nathan points out that a hospital is not a soup kitchen, and even the tireless Kenny understands that the hospital will not be able to serve all those who need help. Although Rukmani is amazed that strangers do often give to the needy in her village and in soup kitchens elsewhere, she laments the extent of the need and the ease with which it can be ignored. She realizes that help requires two-way communication, dependent in part on the needy asking for help, but equally dependent upon a receptive humanity to answer those needs.

### **Portrayal Of Rustics Who Live in Fear, Hunger and Despair**

*Nectar in a Sieve* is remarkable for its portrayal of rustics who live in fear, hunger and despair. It is "fear of the dark future, fear of the sharpness of death". (NS 79) Almost all the characters in the novel lead a miserable life and most of them fail to survive. It not only deals with the major theme of hunger, but also the concomitant theme of human degradation and debasement that hunger brings. Hunger forces Raja, one of Rukmani's sons, to the compound of the tannery, perhaps to steal the costly hides. Ira, who cannot see Kuti starve, takes to prostitution and sells her body to workers belonging to the tannery and feeds him with the money thus earned. The tannery is responsible for only a little disturbance and turmoil in the life of Rukmani. The real tragedy of their lives arises from the vagaries of nature and the things ensuing from them. There is no plantation, so naturally the Old Granny has nothing to sell in her shop. She also dies of starvation.

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## **An Assertive Vision of Life**

In spite of social evils which are present in the world, Kamala Markandaya has an assertive vision of life. Nathan and Rukmani believe that there is an affirmation of life in the midst of colossal human suffering. The characters show great powers of heart and soul even in moments of crisis and calamities. The novel does not end on a note of despair. All the characters in the novel experience troubles and turmoil in life. But they rise above their desperation triumphantly because of their endurance and hope. Thus the sharp edges of life are blunted.

Kamala Makandaya establishes the fact that poverty, hunger and starvation followed by innumerable sufferings, can lead families to terrible degradation.

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