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Glimpses of Traditional Indian Rustic Life and its Ruin in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Two Virgins*

C. Karthikeyan, M.A., M.Phil., and S. Gunasekaran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Markandaya and Modernization

One of the remarkable novelists in Indo-Anglian Literature is Kamala Markandaya. All the ten novels authored by her reflect the Indian scenario in a realistic manner. Her novels deal with diverse themes that touch upon domestic, economic, political, social, ethical, cultural and religious aspects of life. She portrays how the society becomes totally degraded because of its withdrawal from the original village atmosphere. The impact of modernization is felt not only by the society but also by the individuals who experience the pangs of material miseries.

East-west conflict, the problem of poverty and unemployment, the tug-of-war between traditional values and modern life, conflict between religion and science, the problem of hunger and starvation etc. are some of her recurring themes in her novels. The problems of independent

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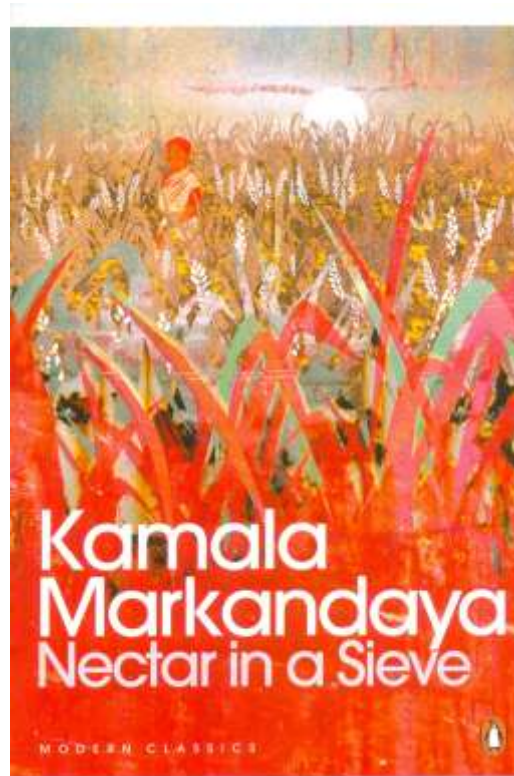
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India such as violence, murder, alcoholism, sexual abuse, prostitution, corruption, dishonesty are brought to light in an authentic way.

Nectar in a Sieve



In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, the traditional Indian village life is brought before our eyes. The novel revolves around a south Indian village where the people live in harmony with Nature. As man has to lead his life by the mercy of Nature, an ancient, traditional, land-based society like this one, stresses cooperation with Nature. In such a society, man fulfils his needs in a simple and eco-friendly manner. Bayapa Reddy opines: The novel presents a realistic account of rural India with all its sensitiveness to nature, convictions in traditions and attitudes to life. (RLSRKMNS: 62) The economic system here is totally based on need and not greed. Only in a village, Nature abounds in her beauty. Unlike the present modern civilization where man fulfils his needs in an artificial way by means of industrial enterprise, a villager is

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satisfied with the basic necessities of life. The villagers, despite their apparent poverty, are more content than the city dwellers who have copious money and modern amenities. Rukmani in this novel is a personification of such a complacent villager. She never hankers after anything. She is totally satisfied with the basic necessities of life provided by Nature. Her simple way of living gives her peace of mind. She says: While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful on the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? ... Peace and quiet were ours. (NS: 9)

On Agriculture

Agriculture is the backbone of any civilization. Without agriculture, a civilization will be ruined. The village people derive great satisfaction and peace of mind by engaging in agriculture. A villager derives great pleasure in seeing the rich harvest which is the outcome of his hard labour. Rukmani summarizes this in her own words: The sowing of seed disciplines the body and the sprouting of the seed uplifts the spirit, but there is nothing to equal the rich satisfaction of a gathered harvest, when the grain is set before you in shining mounds and your hands are whitened with the dust of the good rice; ... (NS:107)

The village people know how to utilize natural resources to meet all their requirements for simple living. Fresh air, fresh food and hard work constitute the average village life style. The villagers always whole heartedly acknowledge God's mercy and God finds a place at the center of all their activities. When the land is ready for sowing the seed, they seek the blessings of God for a good harvest. The following words of Rukmani corroborate this fact: As soon as the rains were over, and the cracks in the earth had healed, and the land was moist and ready, we took our seed to our Goddess and placed it at her feet to receive her blessing, and then we bore it away and made our sowing. (NS: 81)

Equilibrium of Mind

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The villagers possess equilibrium of mind which makes them face the vicissitudes of nature and challenges of life without being disturbed. Sometimes there is abundance of rain, and at other times there is insufficient rain. They accept the vagaries of nature as part of their lives and they hope for the best. But the advent of tannery proves to be a death blow in the calm and peaceful life of the village. It deracinates the ancient cultural roots and makes people ape the western culture in the name of modernization. It not only spoils the wholesome atmosphere of the village but also lures the innocent villagers into greedy, self-centered, deceitful and grossly materialistic beings. The unexpected change brought about by the tannery ushers in disastrous consequences. Yashoda Bhat comments: The 'change' comes to the village in the form of the tannery abruptly, like a stone dropped into a quiet pond giving rise to numerous ripples and waves. But however quietly it comes, it is a veritable bombshell. (NSANCRI: 4)

Gradually Submerged in Social Evils

All social ills like prostitution, crimes, demoralization, dishonesty, corruption, alcoholism etc. gradually engulf the villagers and they start behaving in a different way. Prices of essential commodities shoot up, inflation clenches the vulnerable villagers and everywhere there are crowds, filth and noise. The tannery, besides polluting the village, succeeds in polluting the body and minds of the villagers. It spoils Nature and distorts the village life totally. Rahmat Jahan points out: Though a sign of modernity, this industrialization spoils the natural beauty, uphauls village economy, destabilizes a tenant farmer, sets in social degradation and erosion of traditional and human values. (NSATHSD: 202) The owners of the tannery behave in an abnormal way. They seem to be callous hearted people who treat the poor without any compassion for them. Saxena remarks: The owners of the tannery did not behave like normal human beings. They were devoid of any feelings of compassion and kindness to the poor. The tannery had made them savages. (TBVC: 180, 181)

Demoralization

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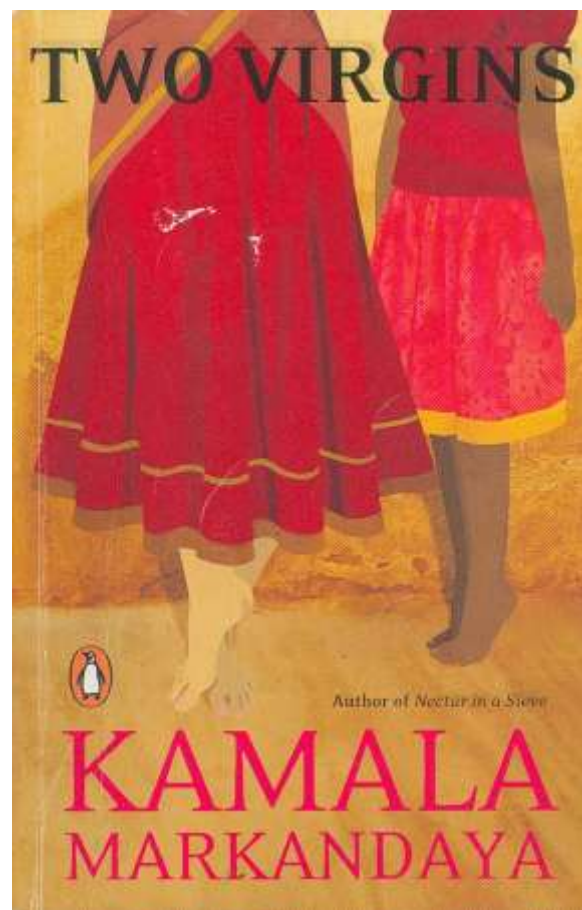
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Demoralization, which is the outcome of industrialization, takes its root in the quiet life of the village. The smell of tannery, the shouting and the crowds make the village a replica of hell. The youngsters have become ruffians by exhibiting rude behaviour. Everybody has become selfish and money-minded. Rukmani's daughter Ira turns to prostitution and money has become everybody's interest. Rukmani sums up the prevailing condition: Now it is all noise and crowds everywhere, and rude young hooligans idling in the street and dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour, and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his money. (NS: 48)

Damage through Urbanization



In *Two Virgins*, Kamala Markandaya touches upon the traditional ways of Indian rural life and the damage brought about by the impact of urbanization. The story centres around two

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sisters – Saroja and Lalitha, the former being rooted in Indian tradition and customs and the latter being influenced by the western ways of living. Saroja is a God-fearing village girl. Generally the villagers acknowledge God's mercy and love by giving offerings to God in the temple. Kamala Markandaya informs: People were always surrendering things in the temple, not to each other but to God. The priests took them in his name. Mostly it was fruit, flowers, coconuts, honey and milk which they laid at God's feet, which Saroja considered beautiful and proper. (TV: 23)

Anti-Machine Attitude and Other Trends

Like Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Saroja is also totally against allowing machines into her village which, according to her will spoil the skills of her people. Having influenced by the western education, Lalitha willfully gives up the long cherished tradition and rich heritage of her country. She frowns upon the traditional village life as it is devoid of all modern gadgets. Anita Mahajan points out: Lalitha, being modern in her ways and outlook, always disparages the traditional village life considering it primitivistic due to the absence of comforts and facilities the city life has, such as refrigerators, telephones and electric fans. (ACBYOGTV: 161)

She wants to become a film star and enter into the glamorous world. She comes across Gupta, a film director. But Gupta seduces her and makes her pregnant. She tries to commit suicide and ultimately runs away from the village never to return. Kamala Markandaya, through the character of Aunt Alamelu, clearly brings out age old virtues and time-honoured traditions which are always held in high esteem in the society. When Lalitha reveals her mind to become a film star, Aunt Alamelu warns her about the consequences. As Lalitha is adamant, the Aunt sums up the mentality of modern youth in the following words: I know what is going on these days, these days young people think they know best, they have no respect for their elders, they have no respect for anything except their own willful ways... (TV:62). But Saroja, on the contrary, is deeply rooted in the village soil. She loves her village with its buffalo, monsoon rain and the calm and serene atmosphere with green fields and fresh air. Unlike

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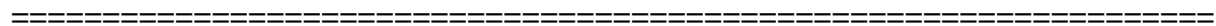
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Lalitha, she abhors the lure of the city and escapes the sexual temptation of Devaraj, the assistant of Gupta. Though Lalitha is beautiful, well educated and modernized, she has become a victim of illusion. She lives in a world of fantasy, but finally she realizes what reality is.

Crime-ridden Cities

Despite their advancement and economic development, modern, unhealthy, crime-ridden cities are unable to even provide fresh air and food, what to speak of peace of mind. Modernization has totally destroyed the traditional culture and values and modern man has descended to a level of a massive hard-working machine. Lust, greed, anger, sense gratification, avarice etc. have become the constant companions of modern men and women. Though modern man does not believe in hell, he is busy creating it on earth by leading a machine life.

The motto of ancient Indian Rustic life is to lead a simple life without any anxiety. It teaches people how to utilize the rare human form of life for a higher purpose of living in harmony with Nature. It shows the way to the people to lead a life of tranquility without striving hard for the basic necessities of life. The ancient Indian culture is not a primitive one; it is pragmatic and universal. By following the traditional Indian life style, modern man can indubitably find the oasis of peace in the desert of material miseries.



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