

## Conflation Of The Ancient And The Modern : A Celebration Of Polarity In Kamala Markandaya's " Nectar In A Sieve"

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### ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya's post partition novel depicts dichotomy as well as conflation of various cultural values. Set against the backdrop of industrialization each of the characters depict their ethos in an appalling, changed time. The lingering colonial hangover coupled with a sense of liminality and double marginalization and the constant questioning of the presence and absence of God seem to re invent the Man v/s God debate. The transformation of Indian villages rendered many dominant values as obsolete. The repressive state apparatus (tannery synonymous with power) works upon the minds of the people to move them further towards a culture of materialism. The characters are hegemonised into believing the supremacy of the modern values as the only means of survival.

**Keywords:** dichotomy, conflation, liminality, hegemonised.

“ Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,

And hope without an object cannot live.”

– S.T. Coleridge, Work Without Hope.

Kamala Markandaya's , “ Nectar in a Sieve” depicts an all pervasive theme of work ethics. The central characters Nathan and Rukmini are co peasants who are intimately connected with the land that they own. Right from the beginning we see an Indian couple rooted in their tradition. The land for them is an extension of themselves, synonymous with progeny. The detailed account of sowing, reaping, hail and storm affecting them form the crux of the novel. Prior to the advent of modernity the village bustled with the unnecessary chatter of the house wives, their tawdry little jealousies over their produce ( be it their children or their crops) , the gregarious nature of man and a close knit society existed where conventional values ran deep in the psyche of the society.

Rukmini is a traditionalist at heart. She says, “ **While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to 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 ?** ”

For her what is of paramount importance is the stock of grains that would sustain their lives. It assures a life free from fear and doubt. Like the other traditional women in her society the catalog of happiness is completed through her ability to bear a child. The society that she inhabits gives paramount importance to procreation. Any woman who is incapable of reproducing is denounced by the society . For Rukmini true happiness lies in procuring the bare minimum or the necessities as opposed to luxuries.

The traditional psyche of the society goes through a sea change as the Indian village transform from a feudal order to a Zamindari system. Markandaya introduces the ancient and the modern and the complexity that arose from the co existence of both the culture. The Zamindar who is an epitome of God like absent figure too is seen in a state of limbo amidst the advent of modernity and the passage of old order. The European doctor Kenny on the other hand takes up the colonial burden of educating the villagers by instilling modern consciousness amongst them. However, amidst the chaotic social order marked by the advent of industrialization the villagers try keeping their values intact. The God like figure of the Zamindar remains forever unquestioned and unchallenged seeking utmost reverence. Nobody is seen revolting against him. The Zamindar here stands for an old patriarchal head commanding respect and supremacy amidst changed times.

The villagers have a very fatalistic, deterministic stance about reality. They believe it to be static. However, the younger generation have a new ethos. They are rebellious keen on becoming the harbinger of new age but are ousted by authority or old order. New values are introduced with the introduction of tannery. The old order paves way for the new. The capitalistic modes of production reduces the proximity with the produce ( end product). It is no longer an extension of the self.

The new value system engulfs the village. Arjun and Thambi move to the tannery that promises easy money as opposed to the agrarian production practiced by Nathan, the farmer. The wages remain unaffected by the sales in the tannery and thus is a lucrative choice. A clear alienation and distance is generated in the machine based economy. The dearth of creativity becomes the “ new normal”. Replacement and renewal becomes a part and parcel of the economy.

The novel also depicts the changing times. The new age shows a form of embarkation from the known to an unknown space. The existential crisis among the nouveau riche breeds chaos which is never eradicated. Arjun and Thambi leave for Sri Lanka and never return. Displacement becomes the new order . Raja, Rukmini’s third son is beaten to death in the tannery while he tried embracing modernity.

The pure space of the village is encroached .People are seen trying to make both ends meet. Rukmini has a wistful memory of the past or humanism. The sense of community breaks down in the new age of machine based economy. The unnecessary chatter of the traditional villagers die down. Industrialization paved way for displacement, migration , inflation, crises etc. Characters like Janki are unable to fit in and are thus relegated to the margins. She leaves the village in search of “pure space” that does not exist in the new world order.

Amidst, traditional set up Markandaya has also introduced a curious mixture of modern women. Kali, Janki, Kunti are depicted as strong, sturdy women with voice. They stand out as the author's anachronistic portrayal of new women. They confirm the bicultural outlook that Markandaya weaved into the novel.

Rukmini talks about change throughout the novel. She says, “ **...change I had known before, and it had been gradual....I had seen both my parents sink into old age and death , and here to there was no violence. But the change that now came into my life , into all our lives , blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye. ”**

The shift and cohabitation of the ancient and the modern has been problematised in the novel. The shift seems to be a movement away from a “pure” , “peaceful” space to a realm of “unknown” and “anxiety”.

Every character is caught amidst tradition and modernity. The older order was maintained through norms. Secrecy, silence, memories defined institutions like marriage. The same institution began to be questioned with the onset of modernity. Rukmini's daughter, Ira is destroyed by tradition. She is seen merely as a child bearing machine who is later rendered useless when she is unable to reproduce with wedlock. The older order does not question the virility of the man ( Ira's husband), nor questions Nathan's infidelity. Whereas, Rukmini, Ira and Kunti are always under the male gaze and chauvinism which questions their chastity. Ira falls prey to her situations and becomes an object of desire for the modern man too and bears a child outside the wedlock.

Rukmini swings between tradition and modernity. She is a keen follower of Indian tradition . Family is crucial to her survival while on other hand she meets the European doctor Kenny who had to sacrifice his family for his work in India. Rukmini has a stoical resolution towards life. She like a devoted Indian believes that suffering purges the soul, so, one must endure in silence rather than cry in the face of calamities. She does not cry when her son is killed in the tannery nor when the crops are destroyed. However, she approaches Kenny for a westernized/ modern treatment to cure her off her barrenness. We see her reiterating the following lines - “ **Privately I thought. Well, and what if we gave into our troubles at every step ! We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak , for is not a man's spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes ?”**

However, as the novel progresses we see Rukmini imbibing modern values. She shirks her stoical resignation and renounces silence. She like a modern woman voices her concern. She slowly realizes the dying community culture which she was once a part of . The tight knit villagers who once stood out for one another drifted apart. Nobody cared for Old Grany who died out of starvation. Even Rukmini who knew her plight did nothing to save her. She said “ **It is not enough to cry out, not sufficient to lay bare your woes and catalogue your needs ; people have only to close their eyes and their ears , you cannot force them to see and hear – or to answer your cries if they cannot and will not.”**

Her reverence for family ties and her traditional value system was crushed by her son Murugan, who leaves for the cities, marries and later abandons his wife and child. He does nothing to support Rukmini and Nathan and goes missing from the city. The novel clearly brings forth the modernist angst and the existential crisis which loosens familial ties.

Rukmini with the turn of events in the novel also realizes the importance of money. She deciphers the manimalistic transformation of men in a capitalist economy and says, “ **For where shall a man turn who has no money ? Where can he go ? Wide , wide world, but as narrow as the coins in your hand. Like a tethered goat, so far and no farther. Only money can make the rope stretch, only money.** ”

Even Nathan swings between tradition and modernity .He wanted his children to join him in his agrarian pursuit but at the same time he allows his children to earn money like the rest of the youths in the village. He does not formally educate his children but basks in the glory of the education that they had received from their semi educated mother. He tries his best to adjust in the city but dies in the process. He dies as a traditionalist at heart when he says, “ **“You are not alone,” he said. I live in my children....**” He believes a part of him lives in every child they have and embraces death as a traditional Hindu attaining salvation and liberation from the physical journey

Rukmini though progressive is also a traditionalist at heart. She like the other villagers wanted a son after Ira was born. She never called Nathan by his name and detested the idea of having a daughter as the first born in the family. Values determined her ways in life. However, she is not averse to making changes in life when deemed necessary. Even though she believes that the new logic of the market has distanced and defragmented relations she welcomes it. She accepts industrialization as a necessity and an inevitable historical moment.

The fittest seem to survive the new world order. Nathan dies unable to chalk out a compromise while Rukmini restarts her life. She accepts the change of space as necessary. She is hegemonised into believing the supremacy of the market forces. She is however, in a constant endeavour to strike a balance between tradition and modernity and fathoms a way to bring the old and the new together. She brings a child from the city to the village to almost rejuvenate the distanced, forgotten human relation.

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