

**THE STORY OF HUMAN AGONY IN KAMLA MARKANDAYA'S NOVELS****Geeta Rani, Ph. D.**

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Abstract

All human agony and anguish are the direct outcome of injustice, oppression and poverty. Since Kamala Markandaya has treated her subjects in a very realistic manner, the impact is tragic. As a matter of fact, all the novels written by her reveal human agony although the causes of this agony are different in different novels. Kamala Markandaya is a novelist of broken hearts, wounded humanity, bruised self-respect and the callousness of inhuman attitude on account of a clash between the races but the total impact is of human agony, All the novelists who are devoted to realism ultimately become the painters of human agony. This is why Stephen Ignatius Hemenway has remarked that "Markandaya is definitely one of the most productive, popular and skilled Indo-Anglian novelists and a superb representative of growing number of Indian women writing serious literature in English,"¹



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Kamala Markandaya's first novel *Nector in a Sieve* is a wonderful story of human agony. It is a very touching tragic novel which has been compared with Pearl S Buck's *The Good Earth*. It deals basically with the tragic turmoils that are caused by socio-economic factors in the life of Rukmani's family, it is a realistic story of Rukmani's family in particular and the sufferings of peasants in colonial India in general. The heroine Rukmani is the youngest of the four daughters of a village headman and is married at the age of twelve to Nathan who is a tenant farmer. Reconciled to her lot, Rukmani lives with her husband in a hut built with his own hands. Facing utter penury, she bears him children. Unfortunately and beyond her forbearance, 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, incessant, heavy monsoon for over a week spells disaster in the village but more disastrous than this flood is the severe drought that is followed. These two things create terrible desolation and

starvation dashing all the hopes of Rukmani and Nathan. Rukmani faces one misery after another and Nathan becomes unfaithful. Her daughter Ira resorts to prostitution to save the family from starvation. Kuti, the youngest child of Rukmani, dies of starvation. Her two sons Arjun and Thumbi, leave for Ceylon for work and Raja, the third son, dies in a quarrel. Finally, they are evicted from their land. In the last Rukmani and Nathan leave the village to join their son Murugan but they discover that he has disappeared abandoning his wife and children. Helpless, they become stone breakers. On their way back to the village, Nathan dies and Rukmani brings Puli, the adopted son with her. She decides to live anew with him, Selvan and Ira. The ingredients of the story illustrate that the entire novel is a very touching tale of human agony caused by forces beyond our control...

A Handful of Rice is again a story demonstrating human agony caused by poverty and hunger. This novel has been compared to Bhabhi Bhattacharaya's He who Rides a Tiger. Ravi, the main character in the novel leaves his village and comes to Madras with a dream to lead a better and more satisfactory life. Unfortunately, the city offers him nothing except unemployment and frustration. He comes into contact with Damodar who introduces him to his gang that deals in smuggled goods. One night, while he is drunk, he tries to escape a policeman. To escape the policeman, he runs into the house of a tailor Apu, Apu's wife Jayamma ties his hands and feet. Hearing his story of hunger, she leaves him in the morning. Next morning, he goes to Apu's house in a mood of repentance. He gets attracted to Apu's daughter Nalini. He is appointed as apprentice by Apu. He gets married to Nalini. He works hard and his business prospers but he feels sad when he compares his economic condition with that of those whom he visits in connection with his work. He is more frustrated with the remarks of Damodar. He is torn between a conflict that lies between honesty and dishonesty. After the death of Apu, his business declines. He grows violent in his temperament and the joint family disintegrates. He also gets into deep debt. His son also dies of meningitis. The death of his son and Nalini's rejection makes him angry with the society. Out of sheer frustration, he meets Damodar but with no result. Then, a riot breaks out. Ravi also joins the unruly mob looting the granary but his strong morality once again overpowers him. The novel thus is the story of a character who cannot change himself and has lived constantly under the burden of misery, pains and poverty. It is once more a tale of human agony.

The Nowhere Man is also a story of human agony. It is the story of Srinivas who settles down in England but it is his misfortune that he is not accepted by the English

community. "He becomes a rootless and restless individual dispossessed of India and disowned by England."2

The events take such a disappointing turn that the original thinking of Vasanta, the wife of Srinivas is shattered and she does not even get a chance to choose a wife for her only surviving son because he marries an English girl. Her family is disintegrated and she collapses and dies leaving Srinivas all alone, desolate and depressed in his big mansion and the world. Although Srinivas lives in England for full thirty years but he is a nowhere man because he is never able to identify himself with the nation which possesses him and the several tragedies that he witnesses leave him a person broken and defeated. "The spiritual loneliness nags Srinivas's mind much more than his physical solitude"3

The *Coffer Dams* and *The Golden Honey Comb* are also two novels that portray conflict of the mind and the resultant state of despair and helplessness but in their themes they are different from the novels discussed earlier, but the scene of human agony is also present in these two novels. Her attention is fixed on the disparities between the East and the West, a theme which has been chosen for treatment by various novelists. According to R.S. Singh "Markandaya is a sensitive fabulist and her depiction of the clash on the two attitudes, the Eastern and the western, is authentic."4

This is why H.M. Williams has bracketed Kamala Markandaya with Anita Desai in exploring the anguish in the modern society. There is little doubt that Kamala Markandaya has an observant eye, a sensitive heart and an inquisitive mind and it is with these three things that she realises what human agony is and how it becomes responsible for destroying not only lives but also the faith that lives within.

References

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