Social Realism in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *A Backward Place*

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**Abstract:** The present research article portrays the Social Realism in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *A Backward Place*. The research paper aims at studying their novels which deal with poverty, hunger and exploitation as their major themes. Markandaya in her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* reveal the very characteristics of rural India through the life of innumerable Indian villagers living in calamitous scarcity, starvation and exploitation. Jhabvala in her novel *A Backward Place* gives very detailed and reminiscent descriptions of poverty in India. She gives flamboyant descriptions of India as a place of cultural place of the backwoods. Jhabvala’s depiction of poverty makes no attempt to neutralize the effects of this social malevolence. So long as poverty exists various social evils and malpractices will continue to bloom. The anticipation for betterment lies only in the existing morality in a few human beings.

**Key Words:** Dowry System, Illiteracy, Industrialization, Poverty and Superstition.

The present research article portrays the Social Realism in the Select Novels of Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *A Backward Place*. The research paper aims at studying their select novels which deal with poverty, hunger and exploitation as their major themes. Kamala Markandaya has occupied an outstanding place among Indian English writers as one of the most important woman writers in English. All her novels deal with the themes of East-West encounter, rootlessness, human relationships, scarcity, starvation and exploitation. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, novelist and screenwriter, is well acknowledged for her humorous and discerning portrayals of contemporary Indian lives. Jhabvala typically creates characters, both Indian and European, who have an uncomfortable relationship with their cultural tradition. Both their fiction opens a panorama of Indian life with typical Indian characters and social manners. They write about the blazing problems like the dowry system, poverty, superstition, illiteracy, blind faith in civilization, customs and so on. Their sardonic revelation makes their fiction different from that of the other Indian English women novelists.

Kamala Markandaya derives the title *Nectar in a Sieve* from Coleridge, whose lines form an epigraph to the novel:

> Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,  
> And hope without an object cannot live. (qtd. in Iyengar, 438)

Markandaya has used the couplet by Coleridge because these lines adequately express the theme of the novel. When work is done without any hope it becomes as fruitless as nectar in a sieve. If there is no objective or ambition in life, life becomes unsuccessful. Markandaya also shows that happiness that stays in life only for a short while is like ‘nectar in a sieve’ for the peasant. Markandaya has subtitled the novel as *A Novel of Rural India* to reveal the very characteristics of rural India through the life of innumerable Indian villagers living in calamitous scarcity, starvation and exploitation. She has not named the fictional locale to make a village microcosm of rural India.

The novelist has made Rukmani, the protagonist; narrate the tale, in order to show the restrained intensities of the emotional framework. She has made a woman the central character because she knows that woman is at the centre of the socio-economic structure of the Indian peasant families. Rukmani is a symbol of an Indian pastoral woman. Her views are reflections of typical socio-cultural ethos which is intended to make an Indian woman forbearing, subservient, innocent and simply satisfied with her lot.
Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of a once flourishing village headman is married to a tenant farmer, Nathan, who is underprivileged in all respects. By the time of her marriage the hay days of her father come to an end resulting in her marriage with a deprived peasant. Rukmani becomes the victim of the dowry system as her father is unable to pay her dowry. The fourteen year old Rukmani comes to her new home, the sight of which sends a chill down her spine, “This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch was my home” (14). She cannot regulate herself to such a poor insecure abode. But when she comes to know that the hut has been built by her husband with his own hands, her apprehension and humiliation turns into conceit.

The Indian value system and Indian dowry system throws her in poverty and makes her to accept it as her fate. The first six years of married life are spent without much complicatedness. However with the birth of every child their paucity starts aggravating. Rukmani says “we no longer had milk in the house except for the youngest child; curds and butter were beyond our means except on rare occasions” (24). Till the birth of the sixth child their financial condition worsens to such an extent that they have to stay behind half fed though not starving till they grow vegetables in their own field. The increase in prices of the indispensable commodities compels them to sell the cattle.

When her only daughter Irawaddy turns fourteen she marries her to a farmless labourer by spending all her savings on her marriage. Unfortunately the flood destroys their crops in the same year and they have no other way but to stay alive on roots, leaves and plantain till the next harvest. To make the matters worse, four years after her marriage Ira returns to her parents as her husband abandons her for not giving him an heir. Her two sons Arjun and Thumbi, start working in a tannery and improve their economic condition. But soon they lose their jobs and go to Ceylon in search of daily bread. When the monsoon fails in the year they leave destroying their hopes. Nathan as a tenant is obligated to pay the revenue in order to save their tilling land for which they sell their household material and bullocks.

Rukmani’s third son Raja dies because of vicious beating by the tannery watchmen. The condition of the youngest child Kuti becomes more and more critical. Ira becomes a prostitute to save her brother; her sacrifice however fails to save Kuti. Old Granny, a well wisher of Rukmani’s family, also dies of hunger in the street. Kennington, a doctor, another well wisher of Rukmani gives a work to her fourth son in his mission of building a hospital in the village. One day the landlord gives a notice to Nathan to vacate the land within a week to which he does not complaint. The landless Nathan and Rukmani find no other option but to go to their son Murugan in the town for their continued existence. Selvam and Ira however decide to stay back.

They take shelter in a temple as Rukmani and Nathan fail to find out the address of their son in the town. Anymore they return to the temple and stay there like beggars when they come to know that their son does not live in that town. They plan to earn enough money to travel back home within forty to sixty days. But Nathan’s health continues to get worse day by day and he dies on the very day, on which they collect enough money to return. Nathan loses the battle against hunger but Rukmani does not admit defeat. She returns to the village with her adopted son. Selvam and Ira welcome them. Rukmani regains her harmony.

The novel appears circular in structure as the story ends where it begins. The novel deals with the peasants, their activities, hopes and expectations and joys and sorrows. It is a portrayal of goodness living in poverty, hunger and hopelessness. It is a story of landless peasants who are exploited by their landlords and shattered by the cruelty of nature. Almost all the characters in the novel lead the depressed life and most of them fail to survive.

Rukmani is a tragic character but she has no personal hand in any of the misfortunes which befall her and her family. Throughout the novel she struggles against the heavy odds imposed on her by the society and nature. Nathan, the husband of Rukmani represents an Indian peasant. He is a stereotype character. He is a submissive sufferer. He remains the shadow of his wife throughout the novel. Nathan accepts his poverty,
hunger and exploitation as his fate. He does not raise his voice against the exploitation by his landlord, when his agent comes to collect the tax.

Irawaddy, Rukmani’s first child, is another silent sufferer like her parents. Born as an discarded child, she remains unwanted throughout her life. The parents do not pay any consideration to her before her marriage. After five years of marriage, her husband abandons her as he considers her an infertile woman. She accepts it as her fortune and returns home to live with her parents. She does not raise her voice against this exploitation. She withdraws herself from others. She accepts her future with utter desperation.

She takes to prostitution when she realises that her younger brother is dying of hunger. The prostitution cannot save her brother, only it makes her pregnant. She gives birth to an albino. But she becomes contented because the birth of a child proves that she is not an infertile. She manages to survive turmoil one after another and survives till the end. In fact it is Ira who gives moral support to her mother in the end. Dr. Kennington is portrayed as a kind hearted doctor who has compassion for every poverty stricken villager. He tries to make them conscious of the carelessness of the government. He criticizes the dump peasants for not raising voice against their exploitation. Though he is an English character he is not portrayed as an exploiter.

Arjun and Thambi symbolize both optimistic and pessimistic sides of industrialization. They bring money and happiness to their family by working in the tannery. But they lose their jobs when they raise their voice against the exploitation by the tannery owners. Unable to stand the miseries of joblessness and poverty, both go to Ceylon in search of job. Kuti, the youngest member of the family, is a voiceless sufferer of poverty and hunger. Hunger works like a slow poison with him. He symbolizes all other poverty stricken children who try to survive the battle against poverty and hunger. All the members of Nathan’s family contribute to the realistic portrayal of the poor and suffering India. So the novel, rightly described as ‘a novel of rural India’ is an authentic picture of the Indian rural society, in which most people live in perpetual poverty and hunger and often die of malnourishment.

A Backward Place is a colorful drama of three European women who come to India in search of an alternative way of life. It charts the highs and lows of everyday life against the background of a bustling Indian city. The setting is the post-Independence India struggling to find its feet and the spectre of poverty haunts the novel. Some Europeans react negatively to this reality; others keep away from it completely and go into raptures over Indian democracy, music and esteem Indian intellectuals. The novel has more to do with the reaction of the characters to India rather than with geographical contours of the country and in that sense the title assumes its significance.

A Backward Place highlights some of the optimistic aspects of conventional Indian joint family life. The description of Judy's home and her Indian joint family serves to lay emphasis on the importance attached to people being in the house rather than to the appearance of the house itself. Judy lives with her husband, two children, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, their children and an old aunt called Bhuaji who, in the Indian way, gets economic and emotional support in this family. This is in direct contrast either to Judy's childhood home in England where her parents shut out the outside world and with the Etta's apartment in Delhi where visitors are hardly ever entertained. It appears that, beautiful surroundings fail to provide Etta the support she needs, while the chaotic joint-family appears to support Judy.

Jhabvala gives very detailed and reminiscent descriptions of poverty in India. She gives flamboyant descriptions of India as a place of cultural place of the backwoods. Jhabvala's depiction of poverty makes no attempt to neutralize the effects of this social malevolence. Etta talks of Delhi or India as a primitive society of a backward nation, “we happen to have landed ourselves in this primitive society, that’s no reason why we should submit to their primitive morality” (5). She even curses the Indian sun and says to Judy, “Don’t you know that the Indian sun has put specially in the sky to ruin our complexions?” (7). Etta always shuts herself away from the outside world within the European furnishings of her room and calls Delhi as “dull, homely,
and backward” (34). This view of Delhi or India as a backward place is not restricted to low middle-class communities and localities, but is also extended to the rustic and urban poor.

Jhabvala presents abject poverty in a way that may be repulsive but is nonetheless moving, and in this respect the author’s representations give evidence to the honesty of her vision. The most silent fact about India is that it is very poor and very backward. There are so many other things to be said about it but this must remain the bases of all of them. One cannot acknowledge Indian democracy which goes into raptures over Indian music, admire Indian intellectuals but it is a fact that a very great number of Indians never get enough to eat literally that is from birth to death at least for a day they suffer from starvation. People dying of starvation in the streets, children kidnapped and maimed to be sent out as beggars – but there is no point in making a catalogue of the horrors with which one lives, on which one lives, a on the back of an animal.

In the novel, Sudhir, like Arjun and Thambi on his way to Madhya Pradesh, recalls “an abandoned slum colony, where the pitiful shreds of deplorable lives lay scattered over the cracked and filthy earth and an old woman dug hopelessly in a heap of ashes” (183). Mrs. Hochstadt’s attitude to the beggars of India sums up the Hochstadts attitude to India as a whole: “She and Franz had discussed the problem of beggars and had come to the conclusion that it was no use giving any of them anything” (156). She emphasized that “if one wished to be charitable, there were certain charitable organizations to whom one could send a cheque at Christmas or Diwali or some such time of national rejoicing” (156).

Looking at the Indian landscape from Etta’s balcony, Judy reflects that it became very clear that this was not Europe. The houses, true enough, were built from bright pictures in European or American magazines, but the surrounding scenery was not actually consonant with anything those magazines might know of. Vast barren spaces, full of dust and bits of garbage, flowed around and between the stylish new houses; there was not a tree in sight, and the only growth to spring impulsively out of this soil was, here and there, little huts patched together out of mud and old boards and pieces of sacking. For the western expatriates, the dull, dry, drab and dreary Indian landscape is made more insufferable by the scorching Indian heat.

Thus, *A Backward Place* pragmatically underscores the ambivalent feelings of Europeans towards India and Indian way of life. The three major characters, Clarissa, Judy and Etta, in varying degrees, represent what Jhabvala has described the three phases of her life and career: enthusiasm, lack of enthusiasm, and hatred (*Myself in India*, 13).

Thus Rukmani and Ira in *Nectar in a Sieve* Judy, Clarissa, Etta and the Hochstadts in *A backward Place* are portrayed as representatives of their race and culture. At the same time the Indian local colors areas also presented in both Markandey’s and Jhabvala’s social canvas. The images of social realism and contemporary India are seen through their novels. Markandaya and Jhabvala show their profound understanding of many aspects of Indian society as well as Anglo society in their fiction.

Thus Markandaya and Jhabvala succeeds in proving through their novels that it is the socio-economic condition that is responsible for various kinds of social tribulations. Poverty, hunger and exploitation can give birth to the social evils like prostitution, crumbling of family, and a mad rush towards city. So long as poverty exists various social evils and malpractices will continue to bloom. The anticipation for betterment lies only in the existing morality in a few human beings.

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