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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Existentialism in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar In A Sieve*

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Kamala Markandaya was one among the novelists of the post -independence India. Markandaya includes theme like feminism, nationalism, male domination, equality, rural India, etc in her novels. Existentialism is also one among the themes. The quest for self-realisation is known as Existentialism. In Markandaya's debut novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, many characters search for identification. The characters in this novel do not have freedom of choice. Rukmani and Nathan are the major characters in this novel. Rukmani emerges stronger than her husband. Markandaya as a woman novelist expresses woman existentialism. Rukmani is facing an inner conflict between her desire to act for freedom and passive acceptance of the society. Though through this novel, Markandaya describes the absurdity of life that is life brings us back to the starting point of exploration and efforts are nothing after death, the novel ends with hope.

Introduction

The artistic use of language is known as literature. According to Terry Eagleton, "Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech". As picture is an art which is created out of human ability to paint, as sculpture is an art which is created out of human ability to carve, literature is an art which is created out of human ability to create beautiful language.

The common definition for literature is that it includes four genres namely poetry, prose, drama and fiction. It is an elevated use of language, emotional effects and moral sentiments. The most recent amendments include oral narrative as literature. But there are many arguments claim that only written work can be included in literature.

Literature is something that reflects society through which we can know ourselves and others. Any writing cannot be called literature. The journalist who has a great brilliance writes pieces only to read tomorrow or next week. An advertiser writes only for the people of his own time. Their writing will not last for hundred and thousand years.

But the authors of literature on the other hand write not only for their own age but also for their future generation. Their works are permanent. This permanency or immortality

is not only for the writings but also for the writers. Shakespeare's sonnets explain this permanency of poetry and immortality of the writer.

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (p -3)

There is a problem prevails in explaining what is 'good' and 'bad' literature. Most of the literature produced in this world is mediocre; some is bad, some is good and a very little great. But all of them are literature. According to R. J. Rees, a good literature must possess qualities include, it should 'hold the mirror up to nature' (p -5). Then it should be 'life enhancing' (p -5) or as Matthew Arnold says that it must be 'a criticism of life' (p -5). The next quality is originality. Though not original its stories and situations must be new and have fascinating light.

English literature is the study of literature in English language. The authors need not necessarily from England but can be from all over the world. In that way, authors from various parts of India produce works in English and that is known as Indian writing in English. Indian writing in English is a short but a highly charged history.

In 1793, Sake Dean Mohamed wrote *The Travels of Dean Mohamed* which was the first work in Indian writing in English. In 1917, Dhan Gopal Mukherjee wrote many children's stories which were awarded Newberry Medal in 1928. In 1935, authors like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao elevated the standard. These writers become the forerunners to the magnificent Indian writing in English. Though these works are written in English they have Indianess. Raja Ram Mohan Roy can be considered as the pioneer in this literature. Indian English poets in the beginning were Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, MadhusudanDutt, AruDutt, Toru Dutt and ManmohanGhose.

Novel has been a new genre to India. Somebody considered Bana's *Kadambari* and Subandhu's *Vasavadatta* as novel. But the proper genre of novel arrived only in the latter half of Nineteenth century. According to R.J. Rees, Novel is a means of expression for the writer and ultimately born of understanding and love. Whatever the subject of the novel may be – past history, contemporary life, politics the novelists must have love and understanding to attain vitality and dignity.

The major fiction writers in Indian English are R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Muk Raj Anand. These writers and many others expressed terrible poverty, agricultural tradition, ritualistic religion, caste system and post- independence social milieu. The post-independence era has made an advancement of many woman writers. It is "the creative release of feminine sensibility" (p -4).

The lists of women writers include, Kamala Markandaya, NayantaraSahgal, Anita Desai, Ruth PraverJhabwala, etc. Of all these women novelists Markandaya stands head both chronologically and qualitatively. Markandaya was born on 1924 in an aristocratic Brahmin family of South India. Her original name was Kamala Puranaiya. Her first novel was *Nectar in a Sieve* which was published in 1954 which brought her international recognition.

As Markandaya is a woman novelist, woman consciousness forms central to all her novels. Markandaya's novels are of social documents. Her themes include rural poverty and hunger, tension between tradition and modernity, national upsurge, psychological maladjustment and husband wife relationship and problems of Indian immigrants.

According to Srinivasa Iyengar, though Markandaya was a traditionalist, it did not betray her identity. H.M. Williams views on her themes,

She treats of the themes of tragic waste, the despair of unfulfilled or ruined love, the agony of artistic ambition, the quest for self- realisation and truth by the young, all themes popular with European and American novelists of decades. (Camus, Saul Bellow and Updike)". (p -31)

Existentialism

H.M. Williams pointed out that the quest for self-realisation is known as Existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining one's own development through one's acts of will.

According to an existentialist the human should define their own meaning in life and try to make rational decisions. Existentialism believes that individuals are entirely free and must take personal responsibility for themselves. It asserts that people should make decisions based on what has meaning to them, rather than what is rational. Emerson says that the key responsibility for the individual is that he has to think for himself and one should not be discouraged by the societal conformity; he also argues that the individual has the freedom to do as they wish.

Existentialism often stresses certain themes that are shared by a variety of philosophers who are called 'Existentialists'. There are some common themes that are shared by existentialists. They are: Emphasis on human freedom, existence precedes essence, contingency of the world, the world has no meaning and is absurd. Most existentialists have said that the existentialism is not a term to be defined but it must be experienced only then it is possible to know the subject matter of existentialism. The most well-known existentialists are Soren Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jean- Paul Sartre, Simon De Beauvoir and Camus and Heidegger.

There are two kinds of existentialist. One believes in Christianity for example, Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel and the other is atheist which includes Heidegger and Sartre. According to Soren Kierkegaard, a person who believes in God believes in the absurd and thereby achieves inwardness, since such an individual is doing something on his or her own. He says one discovers oneself by believing in God. But Nietzsche's subject matter of existentialism differs from ethical individual because ethical individual believes in God and does not accept the values of their own responsibility. His famous slogan is 'God is dead' (p -93)says that there are no universal moral principles and there are no natural properties guaranteeing that a given action is right or wrong.

Throughout childhood everyone has values instilled in them by their parents, friends and mentors. Though these values do not come from within, they undoubtedly control one's action throughout one's life. If one goes against it one feels guilty. If however God is dead, the effect is exhilarating. For if God is dead and there are no objective values, then everyone is free to create their own values. Thus the death of God liberates everyone to make their own decisions and choices.

However Nietzsche does not say that one can act arbitrarily. The choice must be according to one's own instinct and must find what is right and what is wrong. Jean Paul Sartre approaches this subject matter through an examination of nature of consciousness. His famous slogan on existentialism is existence precedes essence. For Sartre consciousness is spontaneous because one has no power over it. Future decision is beyond our freedom.

Martin Heidegger approaches this subject matter by the way of a technical philosophical problem in metaphysics namely the problem of being. He gives a detailed account of Dasein. He also deals with existence and essence. He says existence is the result of what one does and essence is what one is. This essence is completed only at death. Essence continues to change throughout existence. Simone De Beauvoir concerns women existentialism, "One is not born but rather becomes woman" (p – 380). According to an existentialist anything is not born, everything is the result of the choices. For Beauvoir the freedom is not only one's own individual freedom but also the freedom of others. "To will oneself free is to will others free" (p -382).

Camus' famous work is "The Myth of Sisyphus". It brings us back to the starting point of explorations. Everyone searches or seeks to find something greater, something solid, something true, something outside but all is illusion. Camus says one lives for future, one does everything for future. But when time passes one recognizes life also passed. "..... a day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty" (p -384). According to Camus freedom should not be metaphysical freedom but "absurd freedom". What everyone longs for is at the same time what everyone rejects. Death is a fact of life and it makes everyone feels that none of the strivings and efforts makes any sense.

Existentialism In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar In A Sieve*

This theme of existentialism is very common during post- independence India. Many authors used it in their works. Kamala Markandaya is one among the novelists who employed this theme in most of her novels. In her most famous work, *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya used existentialism as one of the themes. Markandaya derives this title from Coleridge's poem and this is also subtitled as *Novel of rural India*.

According to an existentialist, the life should be according to one's will, one must have freedom of choice. In the same way many characters in this novel longs for existentialism. The individuals are ruled by economic and cultural context. *Nectar in a Sieve* projects how the freedom of individual and their consciousness are affected by the economic change. The author in this novel wants to present that every individual has the freedom to act

according to their will but they are forced to accept or bear the world. This also includes in enduring economy, culture or society.

Nectar in a Sieve mainly focuses on the lives of Rukmani and Nathan who are the representatives of rural peasants. Markandaya through this novel dramatises how an Indian villager or peasant is assaulted by the economic struggle. This economic struggle prohibits the individual's free will or choice. Markandaya through the protagonist, Rukmani presents the psychological conflict between the desire to act according to her wish on the one hand and the tendency to accept and endure on the other hand.

The condition of village immediately after the advancement of industries is the theme of *Nectar in a Sieve*. But the author also presents how an individual freedom is affected through socio-economic freedom. Though the villagers are wishing to lead their life with agriculture they are forced to quit the job and lead life with tannery. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the major characters not leading the event, but events are leading them. They are mere victims of the circumstances. This shows that when people lead the life as it goes, it will definitely end in struggle. The people must know to lead the event to achieve in their life.

A.V. Krishna Rao and Madhavi Menon pointed out that Rukmani is facing inner clash between her desire to act for freedom of action and passive acceptance of the norm of the society. Rukmani does not accept the tannery but she is forced to do it. She cannot raise her voice against it. This shows though the characters expect and love existentialism this is stopped by the society. Markandaya through this novel delineates how the freedom of choice and sense of responsibility and endurance have no distinct division in the process of life. Even though there is a freedom of choice, there is also a restrictive moral responsibility.

According to critic Ram Sharma, Indian women novelists in English have been presenting women as the centre concern in their novel. A woman's search for identity is the recurrent theme in their fiction. These themes find reflection in Markandaya's novels and constitute a significant motif of the female characters in her fiction.

The chief protagonists in most of Markandaya's novels are female characters who are in constant search for meaning and values of life. In some of her novels, she presents an existential struggle of a woman who refuses to submit her individual self. In her novels she traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realisation, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation.

The critics say that in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani emerges stronger than her husband. When a woman is married in India whether in a city or a village, she gradually finds a name and recognition though the name is invariably associated with her husband, for she is generally called the wife of such and such a person, still she is known by her distinct virtues. Though Rukmani accepts the pains in her life, her visit to Kenny reflects that Rukmani rebels against the restrictions of the society and act to her sense of individual freedom. Krishna Rao and Madhavi Menon pointed out that it is Non-conformist on Rukmani's part to go to Kenny for medical treatment. Kenny is the voice of westernised individualism where individual freedom must not be threatened.

Fatalism is the creed of Indianism. Their Indianism is questioned by westerner. Rukmani accepts or reconciles with the woes of her life. But Kenny questions her passivity.

Times are better, times are better. Times will not be better, for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools. Why do you keep this ghastly silence. (p 43-44).

Rukmani asks “what we can do?” (p -113). Kenny advises her to “cry out if you want. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will succor the drowning man if he does not clamour for his life” (p -113).

Some existentialist believes in God while some not. Emerson who is a non-conformist believes in God. He advocates though God is almighty, one must accept responsibility. But the characters in the novel believe in God and handover everything to Him. They are not ready to accept responsibility. Rukmani says “How can we? It is not within our means....we are in God’s hands” (p -131). When her barren daughter Ira is forsaken by her husband, she consoles her by saying the name of the God. Though she utters the name of the God she readily takes Ira to Kenny to treat her bareness. This proves Sartre’s view that consciousness is spontaneous. When one is in problem, though it is not suggested to behave in such a way, their consciousness automatically makes decision.

This can also be interpreted in the view of Nietzsche. According to Nietzsche the ethical man who believes in God does not accept responsibility. In the same way Rukmani prays God when she is in problem and not ready to accept responsibility. When the industrialisation spoils their life they do not know what to do. This can be compared with Jean Paul Sartre’s definition that when one is in problem one does not know what to do. This is known as anguish. But Rukmani’s visits to Kenny denote that she makes decisions by herself and she accepts responsibility of her action. She likes to bring future. Thus she avoids anguish through ego.

Beauvoir points out “One is not born but rather becomes woman” (p - 380) . They become women as the result of their own choices. Rukmani loving Nathan not of any external effects because Nathan’s standard is not up to her family standard. But Rukmani likes her through her own consciousness. Rukmani’s love for Puli is also of no external influence but of her motherly consciousness. Beauvoir also points out that freedom is not only one’s own individual freedom but the freedom of others also. Rukmani’s visit to Kenny is the symbol of freedom. Rukmani also takes Ira with her for treating her infertility which shows that she gets freedom not only to her but liberation to others also.

Camus points out that the life brings us back to the starting point of our explorations. Rukmani’s return to village is considered as return to exploration. Ira’s married life denotes absurdity of life. Rukmani begins her description as that it is a memory coiled away like a snake within its hole which means the tale begins where it ends and ends where it begins. This shows Camus’ view on absurdity of life. Camus also points out that strivings and efforts are nothing after death. The strivings and efforts of Nathan perish with his death.

Conclusion

The whole story of *Nectar in a Sieve* can be expressed through the single definition of existentialism that is existence precedes essence. Existence is individual acting independently, individual's free will but essence is actual life of individual. When one compares this definition with *Nectar in a Sieve*, the actual life, the true essence is that they have to accept the industrialisation. Though the characters are forced to accept it, they love to live according to their will.

From the beginning the characters are forced to accept the problems in their life. The story begins by saying that Rukmani's father lost his position as country's head man and the economic condition of her family lowered; then the advancement of tannery in their peaceful life which ends in poverty; thirdly because of family crisis Ira changed into prostitute; finally they lost their land. In spite of bearing all her pains and changes she does not achieve anything in life except sorrow. Though the characters are facing many problems and sorrows, they have hope and faith for their future.

According to Himanshu Parmar, post-independence Indian novels were influenced by existentialism and absurd literature. Arun Joshi resembles Sartre, Camus and Kafka. Markandaya in her *Nectar in a Sieve* expresses existentialism and absurd literature but have hope in them. Though the whole village is dehumanized by industrialization, Rukmani displays her faith in human dignity by assimilating the destitute leper boy, Puli to her family and gets him cured of his disease. This shows though the life is absurd the characters have hope.

The subject and scope of *Nectar in a Sieve* is exceptionally clear. Coleridge says that when one works without hope that is like nectar in a sieve. But many characters in this novel worked with hope for better future. Rukmani's hope for better future for herself, for her husband and her children is what she clings to. Thus Markandaya through this novel wants to conclude that the purpose of life is self-identification. One should find meaning for one's life by providing life to others. By providing life to Puli, Rukmani finds a new meaning in her own life.

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