

**Impression of Poverty on Middle Class Life - Literary
Reflections: A study on Select Characters in Kamala Markandaya
Novels**

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Abstract:

Poverty leads to migration. Migration paves a way to complexity of life. Life becomes horrible due to dilemma prevails because of heterogeneity in life. All these major turning of life happens generally in middle class life. The impressions of poverty on middle class life move it into different circumstances sometimes surprisingly also ending of one's life. The objective of this paper is to find the ways and means of impressions of poverty on middle class life as described in the novels of Kamala Markandaya. For this purpose, the author of the paper has taken a few characters from the novels and elevated the major incidents happened in life of "Rukmini" (*Nectar in a Sieve*), Murugan and Ravi (*Handful of Rice*). The author's description is about the hunger people to show their needs and sufferings in day-to-day life. The cost of shelter and food is too high that they cannot sustain it. The paper concludes with suitable remarks on a kind of ambiguity and dilemma initiated by the inner struggle between the good and the bad. Whatever the situation and circumstances are, one should not leave honesty and sincerity in life.

Keywords: ambiguity, migration, middleclass life, honesty and sincerity life

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya (1924–2004) remains one of the most significant voices in Indian English literature. Her novels, particularly *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and *A Handful of Rice* (1966), explore the devastating impact of poverty, migration, and hunger on ordinary Indian lives. While her protagonists often belong to the fragile

middle class, their struggles reflect broader socio-economic realities of postcolonial India. This paper examines how poverty shapes middle-class existence in Markandaya's fiction, focusing on Rukmini (*Nectar in a Sieve*), Murugan, and Ravi (*A Handful of Rice*), and situates these narratives within critical debates on Indian English literature

Poverty and Migration

- Migration as survival strategy: In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmini and Nathan are forced to leave their village due to famine and industrial encroachment. Migration intensifies their suffering rather than alleviating it.
- Urban disillusionment: In *A Handful of Rice*, Ravi migrates to the city in search of prosperity but finds himself trapped in cycles of hunger and moral compromise.
- Scholars note that Markandaya uses migration as a metaphor for displacement and rootlessness, reflecting the broader postcolonial condition of India.

Hunger and Daily Struggles

- Hunger is not only physical but symbolic of social injustice and systemic oppression. Rukmini's children eat grass and scraps, while Ravi threatens violence simply to obtain food
- Critics argue that hunger in Markandaya's novels functions as a social evil that erodes morality and dignity, pushing individuals toward crime and despair.

Ambiguity and Inner Conflict

- Rukmini embodies resilience, clinging to honesty despite deprivation. Ravi, however, oscillates between integrity and corruption, symbolizing the moral ambiguity of middle-class survival.
- K. Venkata Reddy observes that Ravi's dilemma is not merely between tradition and modernity but between penurious respectability and affluent disrespectability.

Literary Techniques

Kamala Markandaya's writing is rich with symbolism, realism, and a diasporic perspective, and comparing her with other Indian writers helps us see how she carved her own niche in Indian English literature. Let's break this down

- In *Nectar in a Sieve*, nature itself becomes symbolic. The monsoon rains represent both fertility and destruction, while the land symbolizes continuity and identity.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, nature itself becomes highly symbolic. The monsoon rains symbolize both fertility and destruction: they nourish the crops and sustain life, yet excessive rains and floods bring ruin, hunger, and suffering to the peasants. Similarly, the land represents continuity, stability, and identity. For Rukmani and her family, the land is not merely a source of livelihood but also a symbol of emotional attachment, cultural roots, and survival. Through these symbols, Kamala Markandaya highlights the fragile relationship between human life and the forces of nature. The cyclical movement of nature parallels the instability of peasant life. The monsoon functions as a double-edged symbol: it ensures fertility and sustenance, yet it also brings devastation and famine. Rukmani's observation that "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you" reflects humanity's fragile dependence on natural forces. Through this symbolism, Kamala Markandaya foregrounds agrarian vulnerability and ecological uncertainty.

A similar symbolic treatment of nature appears in *The Guide* by R. K. Narayan, where drought symbolizes both physical barrenness and spiritual crisis. The drying river and parched landscape mirror the moral emptiness of society, while the anticipated rainfall at the conclusion signifies redemption and renewal. Nature thus becomes inseparable from the protagonist's spiritual transformation.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai employs the stark mountain landscape as a psychological symbol. The silence and barrenness of Carignano reflect Nanda Kaul's emotional withdrawal and alienation. Nature is internalized into the consciousness of the character, transforming the external landscape into a metaphor for solitude and suppressed trauma.

Likewise, Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* uses rivers, rain, and lush vegetation as recurring symbols of memory, forbidden desire, and social decay. The river Meenachal, in particular, functions as a silent witness to transgression and tragedy, embodying both life and death within the narrative structure.

In *So Many Hungers!*, Bhabani Bhattacharya transforms famine-stricken landscapes into symbols of colonial exploitation and human suffering. The barren fields and dying crops represent not merely natural calamity but also the socio-political violence inflicted upon rural India.

- Hunger is a recurring symbol — not just physical deprivation but also the erosion of dignity and morality.

The symbolism of hunger as not merely physical starvation but also moral, emotional, and social deprivation appears in several Indian novels. You may use the following comparative observations for publication purposes:

Indian literature, hunger frequently transcends biological necessity and emerges as a multidimensional symbol of social inequality, moral disintegration, emotional emptiness, and political oppression. While Markandaya and Bhattacharya associate hunger with agrarian suffering and famine, Anand links it with caste and labour exploitation, whereas later writers like Mistry and Roy extend its meaning into psychological and existential domains.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, hunger symbolizes the gradual erosion of human dignity and ethical stability. Persistent poverty forces individuals into morally compromising situations, suggesting that starvation destroys not only the body but also emotional resilience and social values. In *So Many Hungers!* by Bhabani Bhattacharya. Set against the backdrop of the Bengal Famine, the novel portrays hunger as a destructive socio-political force that strips people of humanity and morality. Starvation compels ordinary individuals toward exploitation, selfishness, and desperation, exposing the brutality of colonial economic structures. In Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* presents hunger as symbolic of social deprivation and caste oppression. Bakha's physical hunger parallels his yearning for dignity, equality, and human recognition within a rigidly hierarchical society.

In *Coolie*, hunger becomes inseparable from economic exploitation. Munoo's constant struggle for food reflects the larger dehumanizing machinery of industrial and colonial capitalism. Hunger here symbolizes the denial of childhood, innocence, and identity.

Rohinton Mistry in *A Fine Balance* also explores hunger metaphorically. The Emergency-era scarcity, poverty, and displacement reduce individuals to conditions of survival where moral choices become increasingly fragile. Hunger represents political oppression and the precariousness of human dignity.

In *The God of Small Things*, hunger operates more psychologically and emotionally. Characters experience a hunger for love, acceptance, freedom, and identity. This emotional deprivation ultimately leads to alienation and tragedy, broadening the symbolic scope of hunger beyond material want.

Likewise, Mahasweta Devi in works such as *Mother of 1084* and her tribal narratives portrays hunger as a political condition produced by systemic exploitation. Hunger becomes symbolic of marginalization, voicelessness, and state neglect.

- The tannery in *Nectar in a Sieve* symbolizes industrialization and the intrusion of modernity into traditional rural life.

Industrial structures such as the tannery, factories, mills, plantations, and tractors function symbolically as forces of disruption. They represent the erosion of rural harmony, traditional values, and human relationships under the pressures of industrialization, colonialism, and capitalism. While Kamala Markandaya portrays industrialization as a painful intrusion into agrarian culture, writers like Dickens, Anand, Steinbeck, and Premchand similarly depict modernity as a force that alienates individuals from community, labour, and nature.

The industrial town of Coketown symbolizes mechanization, dehumanization, and the destructive effects of industrial capitalism. Dickens describes it as:

“It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves forever.”

The imagery of “serpents of smoke” suggests pollution, moral corruption, and the oppressive nature of industrial society. Like the tannery in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Coketown destroys individuality and traditional human values.

Factories and mills symbolize exploitative industrial modernity. Munoo’s movement from village life into industrial spaces reflects the destruction of innocence and humanity under capitalism. Anand writes:

“The siren sounded like the wail of some evil spirit.”

The factory siren becomes symbolic of industrial oppression and the loss of freedom, much like the tannery’s impact on rural life in Markandaya’s novel.

Although centered on nationalism, the Skeffington Coffee Estate symbolizes colonial economic intrusion into traditional Indian village culture. The villagers become dependent on colonial labour systems, reflecting the erosion of self-sufficient rural life.

In Kanthapura Raja Rao states that

“There must be something in it, this coffee, that makes the white men so powerful.”

Coffee plantations symbolize colonial capitalism and its psychological domination over villagers.

The tractor symbolizes industrial capitalism replacing traditional farming communities. Steinbeck writes:

“The tractor had lights shining, for there is no day and night for a tractor.”

The machine represents relentless industrial progress that uproots human lives and destroys the bond between farmers and land, similar to the tannery’s disruption of village existence in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Urbanization and economic modernization symbolize the decline of rural ethics and peasant stability. Hori's struggle reflects the helplessness of villagers caught between traditional agrarian life and emerging capitalist structures.

Premchand repeatedly contrasts village simplicity with urban greed, suggesting modernization often deepens exploitation rather than improving life.

Comparison:

- Mulk Raj Anand (*Coolie*) uses the symbol of the railway to represent colonial exploitation and modernity.
- R.K. Narayan, in contrast, uses more subtle everyday symbols (like the financial ledger in *The Financial Expert*) to highlight middle-class anxieties.

Realism in Markandaya

- Her novels are grounded in social realism, portraying famine, migration, and urban poverty with stark detail.
- Rukmini's family eating grass in *Nectar in a Sieve* is a realistic depiction of famine conditions in rural India.
- In *A Handful of Rice*, Ravi's struggles with unemployment and hunger reflect the harsh realities of urban middle-class survival.

Comparison:

- Mulk Raj Anand's realism is more politically charged, exposing caste oppression and colonial exploitation.
- R.K. Narayan's realism is gentler, often infused with humor and irony, focusing on the quirks of small-town life rather than systemic poverty.

Diasporic Perspective

- Markandaya lived in England, which gave her a double vision: she wrote about India with both insider knowledge and outsider detachment.
- This diasporic lens allowed her to present Indian poverty to a global audience, often balancing empathy with accessibility for Western readers.
- Critics note that her expatriate status sometimes led to simplified class distinctions, but it also gave her novels international resonance.

Comparison:

- Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*) also writes from a diasporic perspective, but his style is more experimental, blending magical realism with political allegory.
- Anita Desai, though based in India, shares Markandaya's interest in psychological depth, but her diasporic works (like *Bye-Bye Blackbird*) explore identity crises in immigrant contexts.

- Markandaya: Rukmini's endurance in *Nectar in a Sieve* symbolizes resilience amidst poverty.
- Anand: Munoo in *Coolie* embodies the exploited labour class, realism sharpened by political critique.
- Narayan: Margayya in *The Financial Expert* symbolizes middle-class ambition and folly, depicted with humour.
- Desai: In *Clear Light of Day*, the decaying family home symbolizes memory and fragmentation, realism tied to psychological states.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's blend of symbolism, realism, and diasporic perspective makes her unique among Indian English writers. While Anand foregrounds political protest and Narayan emphasize everyday humour, Markandaya focuses on the fragility of middle-class life under poverty, using symbols of hunger, land, and migration to universalize the Indian struggle. Her diasporic stance allowed her to bridge Indian realities with Western readership, ensuring her novels remain central to discussions of poverty and resilience in Indian literature.

- Symbolism: Natural cycles in *Nectar in a Sieve* mirror human suffering and resilience
- Realism: Markandaya's firsthand knowledge of rural India lends authenticity to her depictions of poverty and famine
- Diasporic perspective: Living in England, Markandaya wrote with "double vision," balancing Indian realities with Western modernity

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's novels vividly illustrate how poverty destabilizes middle-class life, forcing migration, intensifying hunger, and generating inner conflict. Through Rukmini, Murugan, and Ravi, she portrays poverty as both a material condition and a psychological battlefield. Her literary vision compels readers to confront the fragility of middle-class existence and the resilience of human dignity amidst deprivation. Ultimately, her work underscores that honesty and sincerity, though difficult to sustain, remain essential anchors in the struggle for survival.

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