

The Trap of Overshadowing Righteousness: An Analysis of Human Struggles in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve

¹V Ahilabai, ²Dr. R. Kavitha

¹Research Scholar, G.T.N. Arts College, Dindigul.

²Associate Professor, G.T.N. Arts College, Dindigul.

Abstract: The word 'righteousness' may be unfamiliar to this modern era. The people's so-called smartness provokes them to ask these questions: Why should I follow righteousness? What is the benefit of that? This tendency reflects the expectation of advantages from doing everything, even their duties. The prevailing misconception among humans is that righteousness is an illusion and man-made. Owing to this, righteousness is one of the least concerns in the age of quarrel and hypocrisy. If this condition prevails, all unethical actions become ethical in the name of self-righteousness. The paper aims to check the relevance of moral concepts developed by the philosopher Immanuel Kant to the contemporary world. In addition to that, the researcher will analyze the situations or determinism (fate) that made the characters of Kamala Markandaya act against the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The paper adopts a qualitative approach to understand the struggles of people who are trapped under the veil of ignorance and choose self-righteousness over righteousness.

Keywords: righteousness, self-righteousness, Immanuel Kant, moral philosophy

Introduction

Among all other creatures, humans are considered the most privileged beings on Earth because of their reasoning power. The scientific or spiritual philosophies that expound the logic behind the creation of this universe or the chaos happening around it are the byproducts of human reasoning power. These philosophies made people perceive the world in multiple ways and helped them to evolve in all aspects over the centuries. Unfortunately, it created a plethora of contradictions about God's existence and morality. People are busy in their humdrum lives, and they have a high-key focus on fulfilling the low-key materialistic needs. Even though they have no time to see and share kind words, the blaming business about others is at its peak. As Plato captured the words of Socrates in his work *The Apology*, "The unexamined life is not worth living" (49). Humans are very proactive in examining other behaviors to claim them as wrong. However, they fail to introspect on their attitude or mistakes in handling situations, and this temperament makes people non-cognizant of righteousness. Some people believe blindly that there is nothing called standard morality and no one can structure or endorse it. If someone has done that, then these questions are readily available among the people. Why should I follow the morality devised by someone else? Why can't I lead a life as per my wish? Here, free will comes into play. What if one says, "I will not get a license, yet I will drive all kinds of vehicles; no one should ask me because I am doing it out of my own free will". This cannot be accepted as it is not safe for the individual as well as the people who drive on the roads. The righteousness of a driver is to learn proper driving skills and to obtain a license. This reflects that free will should be exercised by underlining the righteousness of an action. The common ideology is that free will has only the will to satisfy their own needs or develop their comforts, and these actions produce happiness. Still, the pity is that they are forgetting about mortality and that this birth is nothing but a temporary stay on this earth. Furthermore, materialistic things are destructible; however, they are keen on obtaining them by any means, and nowadays, humans are fascinated by debating the crimes happening worldwide on all social platforms. This is the kind of routine that prevails even in serious issues for some hours or some days. But the action of reforming the issue will not be implemented at all. There is nothing wrong with having opposition in worldly affairs. But when the thought arises to have a plurality in righteousness, at that point the destruction of individuals and society takes

its big shape.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the key philosophy taken for this research has not yet been included as a tool to analyze the actions of Kamala Markandaya's characters. Some studies have portrayed humans as being able to freely choose their actions and beliefs (Hieronymi, 2008). On the contrary, some research papers have explained that man is a finite and limited being; he can only exercise a certain amount of free will (Orji, Chidi Paul, 2003). Over the years, numerous researchers have also documented that man should accept responsibility for his actions rather than analyze them. Moral values are essential regardless of any situation (Omomia, O. Austin, 2014). A considerable amount of research has been devoted to explicitly stating the philosophical view of free will, but the implementation of those concepts in real-life situations is lacking (Hynek Tippelt, 2000). Consequently, this study aims to fill this research gap by understanding the intensity of every action of the characters in the novels and the reasons or traps that allow them to choose self-righteousness. The *Priori Principle*

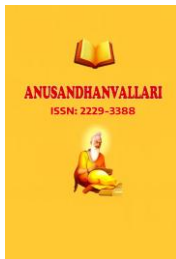
Kant's philosophy aims to establish pure concepts of morality (*a priori*) that apply to all rational beings in any situation. Moral principles should be based on concepts of reason, irrespective of circumstances or culture. It accentuates that morality is grounded in universal principles and duties rather than personal desires or situations. This idea leads to many criticisms; for instance, the nineteenth-century philosopher Nietzsche stated that the noble type of man feels himself to be the one who determines values, and he lives beyond good and evil. The explanation of the above statement goes like this: the lives of every human being are not the same on this earth. The incidents or situations experienced by one person are different from others. No one can predict happenings in the future or be in a position to judge the actions as morally just or unjust. They can formulate their morality concerning free will, and they are beyond good or evil. If this is the case, standard morality cannot be formulated. Kant is among the few Westerners who believed that true freedom is attained only when individuals are spiritually inclined and possess the power to subdue their bodily desires and emotional impulses. He contends that one cannot claim ownership of the action if it is affected by the circumstances and material conditions. Before Kant, moral philosophy was often rooted in theology or empirical constructs such as pleasure and utility. He broke this tradition by formulating moral imperatives that are not attracted by external factors but rather established by pure reason.

The concept of goodwill

The intention or will behind an action is considered the essential factor to determine whether it is good or bad, neither the consequence of the action nor reaching its ultimate purpose. The end product of an action may be fruitless, but if it is aligned with goodwill, it can be regarded as a good action. The virtues of humans cannot be named as good when they are used for bad purposes. If one person's courage helps to steal, intelligence helps to create an atomic bomb; here, the virtues fail because they lack goodwill. Thus, goodwill is the only parameter to weigh one action. Kant's statement suggested that "Nothing in the world-or out of it! - can be conceived that could be 'good' without qualification, except a good will" (Kant 5).

Categorical Imperative

The idea of the Categorical Imperative constitutes the foundation of Deontological ethics. The word 'Category' implies something is unconditional and universally applicable. While 'imperative' means 'command'. Together, these words can give the whole sense that the action guided by this imperative is an absolute command that applies to everyone, regardless of goals, desires, or conditions. This action is necessary because it is morally just, independent of any specific outcome or personal goal. According to this concept, individuals can formulate maxims (principles) to govern their actions. Before engaging in any action, one should examine whether the maxim of the action can be applied to all rational agents without contradiction. If an individual would permit others to act in the same manner in similar circumstances, then the action is morally permissible. Conversely, the action cannot be universalized without generating an ethical opposition; it is stated as morally impermissible. This example would explain this concept in simple terms: if you consider lying to someone, you should ask, "Would I



be okay when someone lies to me?” Obviously, you do not want to get cheated by others. When the action of others hurts you, the same action should not be enacted upon others. Kant strongly believes that treating other people as mere means is not morally acceptable; valuing others' dignity and autonomy is the ultimate purpose of the Categorical Imperative. Besides that, one cannot have humans as the tool to fulfill their desires or motives. To be precise, do the action with goodwill without expecting the outcome. Do the action out of respect for the moral laws themselves.

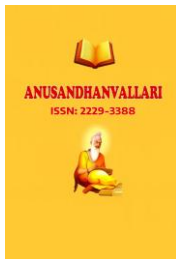
Here comes the contradiction: even though there are umpteen laws to reduce the crimes happening around the world, it is escalating over the years. The crime maker is also a rational being who is fully aware of morality and immorality. But what prevents him from making the maxim based on the Categorical Imperative? This research paper tries to answer the question by analyzing the situations confronted by Markandaya's characters in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Humans are tools

Kant's philosophy stated that one should not use other people as mere means to fulfill their needs. However, the practical aspect of this statement is lacking. This changes the common perspective of most people. As individuals grow, they meet different people at different points in time. The person who is important at one point may not be at another point in time. But the word mere in the statement gives a better understanding. In the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Ira's husband sent her to her mother's home as she could not bear a child. Here, he just treated Ira as a means to give a child to him. When she failed, he threw her like garbage without considering any consequences. Biologically, women should undergo many struggles to embrace motherhood. This beautiful emotion is converted into a nightmare by her associates, even the females around her. If a woman is not capable of conceiving a child, society portrays her as good for nothing and makes her think that she has committed a big crime. Ira had gone through the same ordeal and felt her life had ended right there. After some years, Ira's husband married another woman. If Ira's husband had waited patiently, she would not have turned into a prostitute. This downcast story of Ira reflects that women can be used as a mere means to satisfy the physical needs of men in the name of marriage. Many women like Ira feel lost, somewhere in the forest, not focusing on their self-development, losing their righteousness by choosing the wrong path after an unhappy marriage. Ira did not think about turning into a prostitute. She came from her husband's home as an extra burden to the ailing family. At that time, torrential weather hit the family so badly that even her parents could not feed their last baby sufficiently. Ira had zero tolerance for seeing her brother in that horrible condition. So, she took prostitution as a stratagem to uplift the socioeconomic standing of her family. Here, nature acted as a reason for Ira to choose self-righteousness. If the rain were moderate, the crop would not turn into a disaster, and the family would not face its lowest state. Considering humans as mere objects to satisfy one's needs is against Kant's moral philosophy. He suggests exercising reasoning power to analyze situations and make decisions wisely, and then people will have many options to overcome it without overshadowing righteousness.

Poverty as an advantage

The village had not witnessed the huge buildings, machinery, and many people who had come there to develop the tannery. The inhabitants were astounded as the intricate process of construction unfolded before them. Though Rukmani was not happy about this development, all farmers and their families lost their belief in farming and lost their lands due to natural calamities. At last, they had no option but to join the tannery to fulfill their basic needs. Nathan always wanted his sons to take up farming. But misfortunes confronted the family, forcing his sons, Arjun and Thambi, to work in the tannery. They worked for long hours but earned peanuts. Some workers in the tannery, including Arjun and Thambi, protested to get a fair salary. However, the tannery people, immersed in all comforts, did not realize that their families were struggling to eat even one meal a day, and never listened to their queries. They focused only on profits and treated the workers like slaves. Because if some people were ready to leave, the village had many workers readily available to get into the tannery. They were very well aware of the struggles of



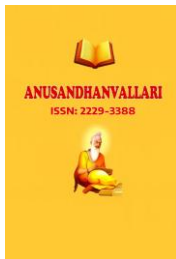
the villagers, yet they had no heart to provide fair wages. This situation reflects the self-righteousness of the tannery people to grow their wealth even though they are already wealthy. Kant's philosophy insists on treating other people like "you". Imagine that you were in their situation; what would you do? One should contemplate this before framing the universal law. When selfish desires dominate rational minds, humans tend to forget they are humans. Kant accentuated this by stating, "Act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature" (Kant 24).

Rukmani's one lie

The description of the character Rukmani is well-curated by the author. Her temperament aligns with Kant's philosophy perfectly. Though many hardships tested Rukmani's righteousness, she stood by it with all her sincerity. Her mother said that they had arranged an ostentatious marriage for her sisters since her father was a village head. The situation turned opposite for Rukmani; her father was no longer in that position; they found only a farmer to marry her so that less dowry would suffice. Rukmani accepted everything, though she got little comfort in her husband's home. She never complained about the misfortunes to her husband. The village was in complete drought, and all the hard work made by Nathan ended in vain. Moreover, she changed all adverse situations into manageable ones with her exceptional skills.

Rukmani, as a mother, struggled very much to change the state of Ira. The village had a doctor named Kennington. When her husband had gone to attend his relative's funeral, she decided to visit the doctor to ask about the treatment of Ira. She had been waiting to see him since morning, but could only meet him at night. She was returning to her home after this meeting. Kunti, the neighbor of Rukmani, watched this and was completely unaware of the visit's purpose. She cooked up her own story that Rukmani had an illegal relationship with the doctor. Countless people like Kunti living in society were intrigued to know about other businesses and were born ready to spread false stories. This feels like entertainment to them. In reality, they are trapped in this world of illusion and forget the real purpose of their arrival on this earth. Kant strongly says, "One should never lie". In this regard, Kant's take is quite unacceptable. He created a situation to emphasize that moral law cannot be compromised, even in extreme situations. Imagine if a friend of yours ran towards your home seeking shelter to save himself from the murderer and hid in one of the rooms of your house. As a human being or rational human being, everyone will lie to the murderer that the friend is not here. All will think nothing will happen with one lie because a friend's life is more precious than their principles. Kant argues that one should not lie to the murderer, even if it results in your friend's death. The duty to tell the truth prioritizes the possible outcomes of the situation. Though your lie may save your friend, you are treating your friend as a mere means to save him, rather than as a free individual who has the right to make their own decisions.

The limited reasoning power of humans would ask this question: Should I follow my righteousness as a friend to save him? Or should I tell the truth to the murderer by following the categorical Imperative? If Kant asks to frame a maxim (principle), this kind of maxim can be framed: "One should save their friend when they are in danger". If this is the case, why cannot that friend lie to the murderer to be a righteous friend? There may be many possible ways to save his friend rather than lying. But the human mind will always choose the easy one. Rukmani never thought to mask her visit to Kennington. Since the doctor is a foreigner, Nathan would not accept seeking help from him. Rukmani's concern as a mother is justifiable. Rukmani never expected this lie would bring her great difficulty. When their family had nothing to eat, they sold all the utensils and clothes they had. Rukmani stored some rice to feed her family in these difficult situations. She measured the leftover rice and finally breathed, knowing that there was no room for starvation. When Kunti asked Rukmani for food, she had to deny it as she had a big family and a baby. Kunti used Rukmani as a mere means to get food; she threatened her that she would disclose her visit to Kennington to her husband. The one lie made Rukmani provide food to Kunti daily, while her family barely ate. Ultimately, Rukmani was paying back for her lie, even though she had good reasons to hide it from her husband.



Death of Raja

Raja, one of the sons of Rukmani, came home as a dead body. The body was carried by two people; Rukmani had no clue about the happenings, and she was standing still. He was bleeding from his nose, and the two people said, “He died from repeated beatings as he tried to steal”. After three days of Raja’s death, the tannery people visited Rukmani and told her that they were not responsible for the death. He was too weak to endure the beatings with the Lathi, and the mistake was on his part, so there was nothing wrong from their side. This scene, constructed by the author, may not be considered fictional. In reality, many poor people cannot claim justice as they are not financially stable. Wealthy people can do whatever they want, and even justice favors them since they have money. Imagine if a villager killed any person from the tannery; the law would be different. Affluent people have the power to rewrite the law in this money-driven society. Many innocent, harmless people are punished to hide the atrocities committed by influential people. Almost in all fields, money takes its full power, making humans corrupt. This results in social inequality even in essential services like education and healthcare. After many years of independence, there are still ill-equipped schools and hospitals that are meant for poor people, whereas well-maintained, fully equipped schools and hospitals are for wealthy people. There are many anti-corruption laws formulated to eschew it, but still, money has its supremacy. Markandaya also depicted the incapability of Rukmani even to file a complaint against them. The brutality of humans is growing unimaginably, even killing their associates without any regret. Many Rukmanis are losing their sons; no one will be there to be concerned about the injustices confronted by them, and even their deaths will not be addressed. Rukmani told the tannery people with extreme frustration that.

‘Claim?’ I said. ‘I have made no claim. I do not understand you. He made a gesture of impatience.

‘You may think of it later, and try to get compensation. I warn you, it will not work.

Compensation, I thought. What compensation is there for

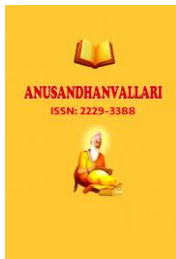
death? I felt confused; I did not understand what he was getting at. (Markandaya 93)

Desires as an unending story

Desires are inevitable in everyone’s life. Healthy desires are acceptable, but if some desires affect the well-being of another individual, they ought to be monitored properly. Nathan and Rukmani were completely aware of the foodless situation in the family. When they could not control their physical desires, Rukmani reared one child in that hardship. They could not feed the baby because of their poor economic status, and it died without proper nourishment. Here, the righteousness of husband and wife subsided in the uncontrollable physical desire. Their pleasure-driven decision made them forget their current situation. They were struggling to afford a proper meal, and they should have questioned themselves before taking this step: if a new child were to come into the family, would they have the capacity to raise the child with all the comforts, including the provision of nutritious food daily? The child became a victim of their immoral desire. Kant expressed this view in his book *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

It is distinguished from the pleasant, which influences the will only by means of sensation from merely subjective causes, valid only for the sense of this or that one, and not as a principle of reason which holds for everyone (Kant 31).

In case a person’s free will is not governed by rational principles rather than by desire or mere self-interest, it cannot be called a righteous action. The novel incorporates yet another miserable situation that explains the risk of self-righteous behavior through the character Ira. She brought forth a child through the practice of prostitution. Though it is Ira’s free will to take up prostitution as a way to feed her family, the baby would suffer when it grows up. When the child knows the truth about its birth or the perception of society towards it, it will cause many insecurities throughout its life. The foremost responsibility of the parents is to oppose the unethical behavior of



their children, and also teach them to tackle hard situations by only ethical means. Nathan and Rukmani were unsuccessful as parents because they could not control Ira's foolish decision. After the child's birth, Nathan worried and told Rukmani that

She has done great wrong to herself and the child and has given up her sanity rather than face the truth. My fault,' he said, rocking slowly on his heels. 'I might have prevented this' (Markandaya 120).

Characterization of Nathan

Nathan, as a husband, perfectly aligns with Kant's moral formulations. The morality of Nathan would surprise the readers, as he strongly denied eating from Ira's money derived from her sex work. Rukmani also insisted many times on eating by pointing out his worst physical condition, and also explained that they had no options to survive. Nathan's decision was not affected by any desperate circumstances. The portrayal of his character in the novel is rudimentary because he knew nothing other than farming and never thought of choosing any unethical way to overcome his hurdles. He was not ready to leave his land, although he had nothing to eat. He prioritized his family always and worked tirelessly to stabilize it in all financial crises.

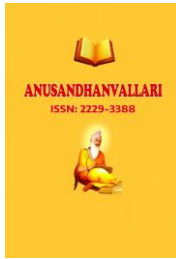
His love for farming did not diminish despite it providing nothing, and it turned his family's circumstances upside down. When his wife could not bear a child, he was very supportive and cared for her. He regarded Rukmani not merely as an instrument for child-rearing but as a wife and acted as a righteous husband. The way he lived a life without concerning extra luxuries and enjoying little simple things with his family led Nathan to lead a righteous life. Humans would turn selfish when they could not gratify their materialistic comforts. Then, they have this common statement that there is nothing wrong with creating self-righteousness to reach the ultimate aim of life, which is happiness. Their desires act as an oar to cross the shore of the materialistic sea, but they should be cautious about the invisible icebergs, which can be detected through reasoning power.

Summation

Human beings have limited power, so all their actions will be based on their situations. The Character Ira in the novel did not want to take sex work for pleasure but to support her family financially. If nature had supported her father's farming, the family would not have faced this trauma. Even their fundamental necessity for sustenance is jeopardized; how can they contemplate morality? The novel exposes this idea through the words of the character known as Kennington, the British doctor. He told Rukmani that

'Acquiescent imbeciles,' he said scornfully, 'do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering? What thoughts do you have when your belly is empty, or your body is sick? Tell me they are noble ones, and I will call you a liar (Markandaya, 116).

Hunger is the most serious issue that prevails all around the world. There may be several scientific developments and achievements to showcase the country's development, but a large proportion of the population still struggles to obtain sufficient food. Many people are dying due to hunger. Kennington rightly said that if the stomach is empty, it is not fair to expect morality from that person. He will not have any concern about following righteousness but will instead choose any path to relieve the pain caused by his intense hunger. This state can be changed under collective responsibility to change this state by formulating one categorical imperative, which is not to use people as a means to fulfill selfish desires. He reiterates that nature provided an extraordinary factor to humans, that is, reasoning power to understand the nature of reality and make moral decisions. He is particular about following moral values without any conditions. He also stated that this view may get high criticism, and the question may come to everyone's mind: Why should one follow moral values without any conditions? If one uses their reasoning power to find the answer, they may squander their time, and the proper answer will not be derived. He claimed that happiness cannot be the outcome of moral actions. It must be done for the sake of moral law itself, unaffected by any hurdles, circumstances, or consequences.



Works Cited

- [1] Kant, Immanuel. Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals. Trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbot. United States, 2021.
- [2] Kant, Immanuel. Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. Trans. Jonathan Bennett,
- [3] 2008.
- [4] Markandaya, Kamala. Nectar in a Sieve. Penguin Random House, 2009.
- [5] Nietzsche, Friedrich. Beyond Good and Evil. Maple Press Pvt Ltd, 2018.
- [6] Plato. Apology. Double 9 Books, 2023.