



Re- Examing Women Suffering Through Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in A Sieve

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**“A woman's life is a reaction
To the crack of a whip,
She learns to dodge it as it whistles-
around her “- Tara Patel**

The Treatment of Women Characters in the novels of Kamala Markandaya makes an inquisitive survey on her. The study of research goes deep into the details of the treatment of women especially in the selected novels of Kamala Markandaya.

Nectar in a Sieve symbolizes the hopelessness of the countless rural folk whose very survival is an everyday fight for existence in Kamala Markandaya's first novel .R.S.Singh aptly views:

Sense of involvement in the social life of India,
Along, with her sensibility and keen observation that
The novelist brought her international acclaim with
The very first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*[1954]

The very first novel has carved the safest niche in the fictional field of Indian writing in English. *Nectar in a Sieve* is the first-person narrative told by Rukmani, the widow of a poor tenant farmer. Rukmani, the narrator of the story, is also mother of sorrows. The author displays Rukmani's life, which is full of hopes and dejections, pleasures and pains victory and defeat, rise and fall. The novelist begins the novel with the marriage of Rukmani and Nathan. Being fourth daughter and facing the problem of dowry she has married him. Rukmani begins her life with him and finds care and love in him. She gives birth to their first child daughter named Irawaddy (Ira). After a long wait, the couple is blessed with five sons. The family is very happy upto certain time with little food and money.

Rukmani's content becomes a nine days wonder. She bears shock aftermath as her husband Nathan's infidelity, her daughter's sacrificial going on streets to save the family from starvation, the death of her one of the children, Kuti, the ejection from the house by the landlord. Rukmani and Nathan become stone breakers in a new small village. She is forced to accept her two oldest sons to work in a tannery though she is resistant of its initiation. The family saves a little money but before they could return to their former village Nathan dies leaving Rukmani and family forlorn. However, Rukmani displays her faith in human dignity by assimilating the destitute leper boy Puli into the nectar of her love and warmth gets him cured of his disease. She comes back to her village and finds soothe at last. Rukmani with her children, Ira, Selvan, and Puli, start to rebuild their future on the ruins of the old and pathetic segments. Markandaya's strength as a novelist comes from her sensitive creation of individual character and situation which are simultaneously representative of a larger collective. She is always preoccupied with the issues of women especially in exploring the inner working of the minds of women characters, their perplexities and the social confrontations. The realistic presentation of life in all the novels impresses everyone. She deals with problems like the dowry system the contempt with which a childless woman is regarded in certain sections of Indian society, prostitution as a way out of sheer poverty and starvation. The novel is a restrained as well as touching account of the life of an Indian peasant woman the core character-Rukmani that the novel is centered round. It goes to Markandaya's credit that she uses fiction as a vehicle for communicating her vision of life. The source of the title is taken from Coleridge's sonnet, **'Work without Hope which draws Nectar in a sieve and hope without an object cannot live(2)**.

This line helps to understand the central idea of the novel. The general story of the novel deals with the suffering of the poor caused by social injustice. One of the many undertones that went in making this novel is the Indian wife's inconceivable patience, and unflappability in the face of crisis. As Indian American writer, Indira Ganesan, comments on Nectar in the sieve:

"This is very short book but don't let that fool you. There is so much packed into little novel that if you blink you miss something. In some ways it is a very hard read in the fact that it was written over 45 years ago. It is so modern and forward thinking that I assumed it had been writing in the past year or two.

Kamala Markandaya in this particular novel portrays its positive woman characters as ideal sufferers and nurturers. "The cause of her suffering springs mainly from poverty and natural calamity. The women are from the rural sections of the society. They are the daughters of the soil and have inherited age-old traditions, which they do not question at all. Their courage lies in meek or at times cheerfully way of facing poverty or calamity" (57).

Kamala Markandaya with her experimental stage not only formed the secured zone for herself but also explored certain issues related to women in the society. In Indian writing in English, she posed some fulminating questions to operate dominated world. In the words of K. R. Chandrasekharan. "Kamala Markandaya draws our attention to the fact that notwithstanding the pessimism and despair which may appear on the surface, there is an undercurrent of optimism and confidence in the Indian character" (123).

The novel, *Nectar in a sieve*, is a story moved round the family of eight members. They are Nathan and Rukmani who are blessed with six children. Rukmani is the fulcrum and the sustainer of the family bond. At the initial stage of the novel, she is seen as the threshold of death, waiting patiently for the divine call. Her ruminations go into shape the story of the novel. Rukmani represents every Indian woman. In other words, the representation of Rukmani reflects every woman in Indian social fabric. The writer, while delineating the character of Rukmani, all she might have intended to do is to give the true picture of an Indian wife, who is mixture of moral energy, spiritual grit and physical fiber. She is the delicate daring but can still rise to the occasion to meet all turmoil, turbulence and tribulations.

“Women are not weak, frail little flowers that they are advertised. There has never been anything invented yet, including war, that a man would enter into, that a woman wouldn’t too”

The novel is more appealing to modern readers for its sensitive and moving portrayal of the strength of a woman struggling with forces beyond her control. It is a story about the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of values. India is a wonderful country. India with all its principles, landscape and religion, still remain to be a mystery to the foreigners and more astonishing and puzzling is the Indian Wife and the role played by her in various walks of life. India with its scenic beauty, remains ever, to be a source of joy.

“The air was full of the sound of the bells and of birds sparrows and bulbuls mainly and sometimes the cry of an eagle, minaus and parrots. It was warm and unused to so long a jolting, I feel asleep”(3).

This is even confirmed by a foreign voice, Henry James, “The vast Indian subcontinent with its flora and fauna is an immense sensibility a peculiar paradoxical conglomeration of illusion and reality and hence it provides a veritable feast. Such lovely country with the entry of west in the name of modernity in the form of tannery brought with them, the spare to strike at the stability and togetherness of Indian culture. The peasants so loved their land that they developed a sort of relationship with it. It is their mother earth for generations together welcoming no change unmindful of its yield they love to cling to it. They often experience nature in its “red-tooth and claw” yet would not venture to develop any idea of forsaking it. “Rukmani though illiterate clearly sees into the damage that the tannery is likely to create. Rukmani stands for the traditional values of life and so she revolts empathically against the encroachment of the western industrial values on rural life. She becomes a victim to what she foresees. Some how I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men. Staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and clearing its school silences with clamour... It had change the face of our village beyond recognition and alerted the lives of its inhabitants in a myriad ways.”(NS,P.134)

The changed trend in the life style of India has brought a perverted idea into existence regarding women, her education, and her position as wife, her status in the society. An educated

girl is often misunderstood. It is taken for granted that, women on knowing the taste of knowledge, individuality, and money would act according to her whims and fancies. Rukmani is learned to read and write. She proves the other way round. This is the Indian wife at heart for her; home is her cosy paradise and husband heartthrob. The tradition trains the girl to be acceptable, amiable and amicable to meet any situation.

Rukmani enters the world of Nathan, as his wife at a very tender age of 12 years. She has enjoyed prosperity as the daughter of a headman. Yet with no second thoughts, accepts the decision of her parents, in going to live with Nathan, who is poor, both in learning and earning. The system of marriage further reduced the significance of women in society. Because women were unable to hold property or exist as individuals in their own right, their importance as people was almost entirely limited to the domestic arenas –knowing pretty well that he is conditioned to draw nectar in a sieve –work without hope-into this hopeless world she prepares to play the anchor of hope.

References

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