

ROLE OF WOMEN IN EMPOWERMENT OF THE SECOND SEX AND NATION-BUILDING THROUGH THE WORKS OF MAHASWETA DEVI AND KAMALA MARKANDAYA

Raveena Kohli

To be Presented at Non-Collegiate

Women's Education Board

University of Delhi

Email: ravskohli2@gmail.com

Abstract:

In this research paper, the focus is being put on the representation of women and their role in transforming India through the works of Mahasweta Devi and Kamala Markandaya. The works chosen for the given purpose are Rudali and "Breast Stories", especially the representation of Draupadi by Devi. Draupadi emerged as a symbol of subaltern defiance. The conception of women's transformation from a figure of a marginalised other to an epitome of empowerment is discussed in detail. There is emphasis laid on exploring the portrayal of female trauma pertaining to resistance in her works. Kamla Markandaya's works titled Some Inner Fury and Nectar in a Sieve will also be taken into consideration. There is a general discussion on the depiction of women by Marakandaya in the above-cited works. The idea of feminism is highlighted, as seen through the eyes of the author. There is also a budding idea of women's identity that is being emphasized upon. The major objective of the paper in question is to bring forth the proposition that how Indian women have emerged triumphant even after being burdened with unaltered form of patriarchy and societal oppression based on their so-called feeble bodies and the notion of them being inferior to men in all ways. Indian women have stood the test of time and have emerged victorious by defying all orthodox norms and have contributed towards nation-building. The women of the Indian subcontinent have played a crucial role in building Bharat in ways that are impeccable, and it has led to the upliftment of Indian society in all contexts.

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 13.05.2025

Approved: 21.06.2025

Raveena Kohli

*ROLE OF WOMEN IN
EMPOWERMENT OF THE SECOND
SEX AND NATION BUILDING
THROUGH THE WORKS OF
MAHASWETA DEVI AND KAMALA
MARKANDAYA*

*RJPSSs 2025, Vol. LI,
No. 1, pp. 187-192
Article No.22*

Similarity Check:12 %

Online available at:

[https://anubooks.com/journal-
volume/rjpss-vol-li-no1-june-
2025-254](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjpss-vol-li-no1-june-2025-254)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2025v5i101.22](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2025v5i101.22)

Introduction

Uma Parmeswaran, in her work titled “Five plays by Mahasweta Devi, Samik Bandopadhyay; Breast stories by Mahasweta Devi, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak”, focuses on Devi being one of India’s leading writers. She won many accolades and the country’s most prestigious literary prizes for her writing, and the Padmashree award for her activist work among the tribal communities of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. She has written noteworthy and remarkable novels, short fiction, and plays in Bengali, and has made a mark in all the three genres.

She recreates a span of history, filling up her narration with trenchant satire against government and city people and poignancy for peasants, tribals, and student idealists.

Ajay Sekher’s essay titled “Gender, caste, and Fiction: A Bahujan Reading of Mahasweta Devi’s Rudali” highlights how she tried to tackle and address the turbulence of caste/class/gender in the historic context of the brahmanic caste patriarchy. Even after assuming an occupational class status, the “rudalis” transform themselves into a gendered caste, specifically a low caste of “whores.” This could be identified as a central contradiction in the social practice of Devi’s fiction and her narrative praxis.

Further, Sekher mentions about how Devi’s fiction focuses on a powerful representative attempt from the point of view of the third world marginalia. Questions of caste/gender/class are discussed. The author becomes the voice of the classes that exist at the periphery of social strata. She raises her voice for the silenced and takes up themes such as gender marginalisation within caste, the cause of the gendered subaltern, women’s empowerment, and radical feminist realism.

Coming on to an essay by Joanna Kirkpatrick titled “Women in Indian English Literature- The Question of Individuation”, it directs our attention towards Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel. *Nectar in a Sieve* is Markandaya’s first novel and it talks about the life story of a poor village couple, as told by the wife. The husband is a landless tenant farmer. She has children and their life goes from poverty to utter tragedy, and they are thrown off their land. They try to locate their lost son but end up finding only his deserted wife. A beggar child befriends them, and they earn by breaking rocks.

Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel, is sturdy, uncomplaining, empathetic, and loving towards her family and husband. She works in the fields with the rest of the family when needed, and drudges in the house. She becomes the decision-maker and makes potent choices, such as her adoption of a beggar boy who befriended them in the city.

Kirkpatrick’s view is that Rukmani is no slouch. Although she accepts whatever falls her way, she is clearly an autonomous individual with a strong sense of her own identity as a worker on the land, a mother and a wife. She is conventional and competent.

Body

In Mahasweta Devi's short story collection titled 'Breast Stories', she portrays Draupadi as outgoing and having undaunted courage and willpower. In an article titled "Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi as a Symbol of Subaltern Defiance", Nikhat Hoque talks about the representation of Draupadi as a rebel against an oppressive society dominated by her male counterparts. "Draupadi" is a story about Draupadi, a woman who belongs to the Santhal tribe of West Bengal. He was quoted as saying:

She is a Robin Hood-like figure who murders wealthy landlords along with her husband and usurps their wells which served as primary source of water for villagers. The government tries to subjugate these tribal rebel groups through various means- kidnapping, murder and rape. Dopdi is captured by Officer who instructs the army officers to rape her to extract information about the rebel uprising.

Nearing the end, ironically, the same officers who violated her body, insist that she cover up once she is done within. She rips off her clothes and walks towards officer, "...naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts. Two wounds is shocked by her defiance as she stands before him 'with her hand on her hip' as the 'object of his search and exclaims, 'There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed.'"

Devi highlights that in both the cases of Durga and Draupadi, what happens to their body is due to patriarchal voices that deny them agency and power. What is important here to note is that Draupadi subverts the physicality of her body from powerlessness into powerful resistance.

In another article titled "Mahasweta Devi's Works Discussed on Marginalisation to Empowerment" by Priyanka Priyadarshini, she showcases that the female characters portrayed by Devi are placed at the heart of multiple victimhoods due to caste discrimination and economic exploitation, patriarchy and sexual exploitation. They become symbols of suffering, pain, and anguish. But they have the verve to stand against all the odds and show a desire for life.

Priyadarshini emphasises that "they resist authority, stereotyping, icons and gender-based survival and self-definition. Whatever the onslaught, they carry out their struggle by adopting a variety of survival aids rising again and again from ashes like a Phoenix."

Rudali, the focus of hunger, is a powerful critique of, and linkages between, the exploitative and repressive socio-economic and religious system. Mahasweta Devi built a powerful indictment by showing how villagers were suffering due to hunger.

In the author in question's work *Rudali*, the caste patriarchy's ultimate perversion could be identified in the forced custom of making the low caste women

weep over the body of a dead upper caste male. This turns out to be an intentionally caused humiliating and mutilating assault over the material and emotional domains of the gendered subaltern could be contextualised and read as the historically fetishistic, genocidal and perverted core of Brahminic patriarchy. To quote Devi's *Rudali*,

They (upper castes) need Rudalis to wail over the corpse. They have caught hold of two whores. In the household of the masters, whores weep for the dead. The two were Bhairab Singh's whores at one time. Now they are wizened crows. They will be of no good. The two of you go, wail, cry and accompany the corpse. You will get money, rice. On the day of the kriya ceremony you will get clothes and food. (*Rudali*, pg 70)

Mary R. Oran in her work "*Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamal Markandaya" discusses that first-person narration begins with her wedding day, her memories of herself as a 12-year-old bride, then follows her life as wife, mother, labourer, and finally, as an old woman. Through the story we get an idea about what it is to live in India as a peasant and fearing change. *Nectar in a Sieve* shows the simple hopes that compel Indian families to labour endlessly, to sacrifice and fight, only to lose. Rukmani follows her husband, obeys him, but but does not play the role of a meek or unintelligent individual lacking willpower and capability to take crucial decisions in life. To quote Markandaya,

Hope and fear, Twin forces that tugged us first in one direction and then another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear, fear of dark future, fear of the sharpness of hunger, fear of the blackness of death."

According to Oran, the novel is written for students, and it is a poignant reminder of a humanity they know little about. It's reality alarms them but Rukmani's faith moves them. The novel leaves some nectar in the lives of all those who read it.

Markandaya's work *Some Inner Fury* is a woman-centered novel. It delineates the part played by women in India's freedom struggle. In a paper titled "Feminism in Kamala

Markandaya's '*Some Inner Fury*'" written by Santosh Kumar Patralekh, he argues that in the novel in question, female voice is pertinent as the author portrays three wonderful female characters- Mirabai, Roshan, and Premala who exhibit virtues of love and loyalty, friendship and understanding.

Patralekh emphasises upon the idea that Markandaya represents the peculiar sensibility of the modern educated and progressive Indian woman. To quote him:

She projects a national image and patriotism in myriad forms. In fact, like Kamala Markandaya, her woman character Roshan has a cosmopolitan outlook and seems to be the truly liberated woman of modern India. Like Markandaya, Mira has a close affinity with the individual westerners and like the author again, she participates, at least by heart, in the political struggle against Britain. She loves the Western values, yet she has a deep love for her motherland. Roshan sacrifices her parents, her husband, and aristocratic life at the altar of national loyalty and does not hesitate to go to jail.

She exclaims with enthusiasm: “What do you think? Of course, I’m not sorry! I’d rather go to the devil my own way than be led to heaven by anyone else.” (Some Inner Fury, pg 223)

Mira, one of the three protagonists ruminates that individual suffering is not greater than national cause as personal losses don’t count for a noble cause. Mira sacrifices her love for the nation. She is not a feminist in the sense of being a rebel but shows signs of resistance to male hegemony and colonial subjugation. She is courageous with grace and dignity. Her judgments are accurate accompanied by a positive attitude. Roshan, her paramour is quoted,

There was something in her, a flame, a vitality which drew people to her despite themselves; and this quality which she possessed so lightly as hardly to be aware of it, enabled her to surmount the barriers not only of race and creed but also- perhaps even more formidable that of politics. (Some Inner Fury, pg 69)

In an article titled “Tradition and Change in the novels of Kamala Markandaya”, Shiv K. Kumar explains that the novel in question presents an India caught up in the maelstrom of its struggle against British rule. Mira falls in love with Richard, one of the governor’s aides. Her liaison with an Englishman is a direct assault on the powerful and impregnable citadel of convention. Mira rides roughshod over all social taboos and goes on long honeymoon expeditions with her lover. She disregards decorum and propriety. They are sundered only when political and national barriers intervene.

Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that all in all, women have played a crucial role in the freedom struggle and nation-building. They have worked very hard to portray the traditional role of wives, daughters, and sisters. On the other hand, very tactfully and efficiently, they have broken the hegemony of patriarchy. It seems as if they have served as an epitome of industriousness, valour, vigour, and loyalty to their country. The contribution of the second sex in nation-building is inevitable and complete in all forms. The indomitable spirit and iron-willpower of the females is to be reckoned with. The second sex is remarkable when it comes to defying social

norms and emerging as an independent entity exhibiting power, confidence, and flamboyance. The works of Mahasweta Devi and Kamala Markandaya are the evidence to prove the veracity of the above-mentioned ideas.

References:

1. Devi, Mahasweta. "Draupadi in 'Breast Stories.'" Trans by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2010.
2. Devi, Mahasweta. *Rudali*. India, Seagull Books, 1997.
3. Hoque, Nikhat. "Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi as a Symbol of Subaltern Defiance." *feminismindia.com*, FTI Media Private Limited, Feb 8, 2019.
4. Kirkpatrick, Joanna. "Women in Indian English Literature: The Question of Individuation." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol 12, no, 1997, Pg. 121-129, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40872162>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2022.
5. Kumar, Shiv.K. "Tradition and Change in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya." *Books Abroad*, vol 43, no 4, 1969, Pg. 508-13. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40123776>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2022.
6. Markandaya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. India, Penguin India, 2009.
Markandaya, Kamala. *Some Inner Fury*. India. Penguin Books, 2009.
7. Oran, Mary.R. "Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya." *The English Journal*, vol 66, no 3, 1977, Pg. 62-63. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/815814>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2022.
8. Parameswaran, Uma. "Five plays by Mahasweta Devi, Samik Bandopadhyay, Breast Stories by Mahasweta Devi, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak." *World Literature Today*, vol 72, no 2, 1998, Pg. 457-58. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40153982>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2022.
9. Patralekh, Santosh Kumar. "Feminism in Kamala Markandaya's Some Inner Fury." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol 8, issue 10, 10 Oct 2020, Pg. 3784-87, www.ijcrt.com
10. Priyadarshini, Priyanka. "Mahasweta Devi's Works Discussed on Marginalisation to Empowerment." *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Research in Allied Education*, vol 19, issue 5, 11 Oct 2022, www.ignitedin
11. Sekhar, Ajay. "Gender, Caste, and Fiction: A Bahujan Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Rudali." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol 41, no 42, 2006, Pg. 4422-25. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418829>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2022.