

ROKMANI: THE CENTRAL CHARACTER OF NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya has portrayed, Rukmani as a main female character in her first well known novel '*Nectar In a Sieve*'. Markandaya draws our attention towards the traditional attitude of woman in her novels. She is called a conservative feminist and feminism is implicit in her novels. Women in her novels fall into two distinct categories first who play traditional social roles being an obedient daughter, a subservient wife, a protective mother and do not participate in decision making only follow the decisions of dominant male and second category is of the women who attempt to assert social rights. Rukmani, the central in the novel of *Nectar In a Sieve* represents the first category of womanhood. Markandaya portrays the actual social and emotional bonds that shackle women. Like many other Indian woman novelist in English Markandaya has also reflected in her writings, a sharp concern with the role and status of Indian women in terms of social and familial power.

Present paper examines the feminism in the novel of Kamala Markandaya , "*Nectar In a Sieve*" through the central character Rukmani.

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Kamala Markandaya has a particular interest in analyzing women characters and in her novels women have a significance place they play a traditional role, but makes them face the modern predicament. In her novel *Nectar In a Sieve*, for example, the home takes on the sacredness of a temple, in which the

mother priestess makes merry a close association, uniting the members of the family circle by means of a mystical life force. Raja Rao in her novel believes that “ to be wife is to worship your man.”(Rao: 32) But the heroines of Kamala Markandaya’s novels do not adore or worship their husbands, though they respect and love them.

Rukmani is typically representative of Indian womanhood, an depiction of courage and firmness. She suffers calmly and never gives in “She bends like grass so that she may not break.”³(P,28)

Her sacrifices for her family should not be mistaken for lack of courage. She proves herself equal to the situation when the time demands. A series of misfortune succeed only in bending her body, not her sprit.

Rukmani is the central character of the novel. The story starts with the Rukmani’s remembrance of her husband. It will not be hyperbolic to say that *Nectar In a Sieve* is the autobiography of Rukmani. She is a dominating character in the novel only she exists from start to end. The whole story moves round her. Rukmani is a traditional bound woman who has deep faith in tradition. She does not call her husband by her name. The following lines bears evidence of her tendency:

“It was my husband who woke me my husband, whom I will call here Nathan, for that was his name, although in all the years of our marriage. I never called him that, for it is not meet for a woman to address her husband except as husband. (P,4)

Her husband Nathan also loves her very much and cares for her. Although he is a poor peasant and lowers than her father’s status, she feels the warmth of his love and respects his feelings. She feels proud herself to get such loving husband and ignores the poverty due to overwhelming love of her husband. She Says:

This home my husband had built for me with his own hands in the time he was waiting for me ; brought me to it with a pride which I used to better living had

so very nearly crushed. In it we had lain together, and our children had been born. This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonged to another. And the land itself by which we lived. It is a cruel thing, I thought they do not know what they do to us. (P,135)

Rukmani belongs to the period of time when the literacy for a woman has no means but it was her father who taught her to read and write. People thought that he did it to make his children “to be one cut above the rest”. Her mother was also not in favour to literate a girl. She says “What use”, that a girl should be learned ! much good will it to do her when she has lusty sons and a good husband to look after. Look at me, am I any worse that I can not spell my name, so long as I know it ? It not my house clean and sweet, are not my children well fed and cared for? (P,11)

But her father did not pursue the matter Nor did he give up his teaching. He was aware of the future position. “Practise hard”, he would say, watching me busy with slate and pencil. ‘For who knows what dowry there will be for you when you are ready!.’ (P,11)

Rukmani continues the practice of writing and reading. She wishes to teach her children. The following lines express her wish:

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Rukmani continues the practice of writing and reading. She wishes to teach her children. The following lines express her wish:

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Harder than ever lest my fingers should lose their skill.”

Rukmani is portrayed as the fatalist. Nathan and Rukmani have complete intimacy with the soil and when the rains fail they are not ignorant of the consequences. Despite this have blind faith in God.

“We threw ourselves on the Earth and we prayed. I took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to my Goddess, and I wept at her feet, I thought she looked at me with compassion and I went away comforted, but no rain came.”(P,72)

Another example of her blind faith is for a small stone lingam, a symbol of fertility:

“I slunk away, frightened of I know not what: I placed even more faith in the charm my mother had given me, wearing it constantly between my breasts.”(P,20)

But she is not orthodox totally when her faith fails to achieve the desired result; she goes to Dr. Kenny for treatment. Cured of her barrenness, within a year she bears a son. When Ira is confronted with the same problem, without a second thought she takes her to Dr. Kenny for treatment.

Rukmani's thinking is one of fortitude. She believes that “a man's spirit”, is given to him to rise above his misfortunes.”(P,110-111) Man's wants are many and cannot always be fulfilled. “Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons of the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?”(P,114) It is such fortitude that sustains old granny who has lived alone making a meager living by selling vegetables. “It is not unbearable. One gestured to it.”(P,93) She says, Rukmani can not plan. “How can we? It is not within our means..... we are in god's hand's.”(P,131) She explains the need for stoicism. To those who live by the land there must always come a time of hardship, of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty. This is the truth of our existence.”(P,174) Rukmani too is of the same faith when her barren daughter Ira is forsaken by her husband. She consoles her saying, “we are all in God's hands and he is merciful.”(P,140)

Rukmani is courageous, self-controlled and level headed women. When she comes to know about Nathan clandestine relation with Kunthi, She is torn asunder by a bewildering variety of negative emotions that comes surging upon her one after the other. She feels cheated but she does not give vent to her anguish because

she also has feet of clay. She herself has practiced concealment and deceit ; of course for valid reason and has not been absolutely honest with Nathan about her relationship with Kenny, the doctor her love for Kenny is not less than adoration of God. Emotional and intuitive kinship exists between Rukmani and Kenny. But Nathan is Rukmani's most precious possession and she does not want to lose him at any cost: "I need you," I cried to myself," Nathan, my husband I can not take the risk, because there is risk since she is clever and I am not."(P,83)

Rukmani is a good daughter to her parents. The social and financial status of Rukmani's father gives her a sense of confidence and makes her hopeful of a bright future. She is youngest of the four daughters. Rukmani's mother worries about her dowry, as the earlier three marriages have squeezed them dry. Nevertheless, being a village headman's daughter, Rukmani is confident of her future happiness. In order to cheer her mother, she tells her:

"I shall have a grand wedding.... Such that everybody will remember when all else is a dream forgotten... For is not my father head of the village? I knew this pleased my mother, for she would at once laugh and lose her look of worry." (P,2)

At the tender age of twelve, Rukmani displays considerable understanding of her parents' limitations. She does not want to hurt their feelings.... She accepts their decision regarding her marriage ungrudgingly because she does not wish to any misery to her helpless parents. She remembers her wedding day when her mother in the "door way, no tears in her eyes but her face bloated with their weight" bids her farewell. (P,3)

Her marriage was beyond her expectations. However, she continues to be attached to her parents. She does not complain or show any resentment, for being married beneath her.

Rukmani is not only a good daughter but she is a good careful mother also. Her ability to read and write is of no avail. Nevertheless, she practices writing purposely so that she may teach her children. Rukmani is affectionate mother who inspires trust and confidence in the heart of her children. She is aware for the

future needs of her children. She saves for Ira's marriage "had I not saved from the day of her birth so that she should marry well? Now I brought out the stores I had put by month after month-Rice and dhal and ghee, jars of Oil, betel leaf, areca nuts, chewing tobacco and copra." (P,37)

Nathan is surprised when he sees her saving. In amazement he says. "I didn't know you had so much."(P,37)

Rukmani is affectionate mother. Separation from children is unbearable for her. Her sons Arjun and Thambi can not remain idle in the face of economic hardships. They leave for Ceylon to work as labourers in a tea-plantation. Nathan, as a man bears the pangs of separation silently, but for Rukmani this is unbearable. She makes desperate efforts to dissuade her sons from going away:

"If you go away you will never come back". I cried.

"The journey costs hundreds of rupees; you will never have so much.

The tears came hot and bitter, flowing and flowing.....

The spoke soothingly of how much they would earn, and how one day they would return-as one dies to a child. They left at first day light...each before he went kissed Nathan's feet then mine, and we laid our hands on them in blessing. I know we would never see them again. (P,68)

But Rukmani is not possessive in her love for her children. Despite adverse circumstances and great suffering she remained kind to their children. She does not force her choice of profession on Selvam, her only son left now. His love for reading and writing makes him lose all interest in the land. As an assistant to Kenny, he wants to join a hospital. He hesitates to reveal this to his mother. But Rukmani does not want to come in the way of her son's plans or happiness:

"I have told my father, "he said hesitantly. "He is very willing."

I smiled at him, "So am I, I wish you well." He relaxed, "I am glad. I thought you might be- were-displeased."

“Not displeased. Perhaps disappointed since all our sons have forsaken the land. But it is the way for you.” (P,112)

The deep understanding between Rukmani and her son Selvam is of that order where verbal communication is hardly needed. Much remain unsaid about the relationship between Kenny and Rukmani, but he shows great maturity in understanding its true nature. When he decides to work with Kenny, her mother is filled with foreboding, but she does not discourage him:

“It is the best way”, he repeated after me. “It will be a great venture. We have many plans and much hope.”

We both relapsed into silence. I watched him covertly, wondering but than I thought resolutely. “I will not take the fire from his resolve or sow suspicion between them,” and so I held my peace. But his steady eyes were on me calm and level.

“I am not unaware,” he said quietly. “But is it not sufficient that you have the strength and I have the trust?”

“It is indeed”, I said with relief. “I wanted only that you should know.”

We smiled at each other in perfect understanding. (P,112)

Markandaya shows Rukmani buffeted by the vagaries of fortunes. But she copes as the wife of a poor peasant, she accepts her fall from fortune with grace and dignity and reveals stoic acceptance of the inevitable. In her relationship with Nathan she learns the value of love, mutual respect and understanding. She shows a sense of accommodation in her reaction to her discovery of infidelity on her husband’s part. She is shocked to learn of her daughter’s wayward ways. It leaves her traumatized but she remains a mother who protects and nurtures her young. The intrusion of the new industrialization in the secure world of the village she strongly resents and in the long run suffers the most. But she shows an appreciation of the inevitability of change.

Young Rukmani's reactions to the world around her are motivated by a recognition that life is for living and when going gets tough human mind must draw its strength from an unambiguous acceptance of the inescapable and that admit the desire to escape is anathema. Not to break-up or destroy, but to persist and rebuild is what life is about. Not self-pity but self-esteem is what human existence must derive its sustenance from Rukmani is endowed with an awareness of the possibilities of life. She considers the act of living for her life is important. Rukmani reveals finer perception and a higher even idealistic level of existence. Rukmani transforms the challenge of life not into the face of two snarling dogs but into a pursuit of finer values that make life worth living.

As we go through the novel we noticed that Kamala Markandaya's heroine responds to the drama of life entirely. She treats life as one, as whole in which man-woman relationship is only one aspect.

Thus we find that Rukmani, the central character of the novel "*Nectar In a Sieve*" is able to be heroine of the novel. She has distinguished characteristics. The story starts from her advanced showing rise and fall of her life and gets end with her last line saying "It was a gentle passing, I said, "I will tell you later." (P,189) she is a courageous woman who suffers the hardships of life bravely. She losses not only her sons but also her husband who she loved very much. But her philosophy of life is to live facing the sufferings of life and try to make her best efforts for living. She is a good wife and supports her husband in every situation. Although she herself belongs to a higher class, she never creates any trouble for her poor husband who is much below to her father's status. She loves her husband and respects her felling also. She knows her weak point too that she "was without beauty and without dowry". She forgives Nathan for his clandestine relationship with Kunti because she seeks her loose point about her relation with Dr. Kenny. She is a responsible mother and a good house-wife. She helps her husband in his work also.

Therefore, Rukmani's response to the changing hues of life that constantly emerges as forever renewing challenges is one of greater maturity and in which reason and intellect play a vital role.

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