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## Celebrating Womanhood in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Kamala Markandaya was a pen name used by Kamala Purnaiya Taylor. She moved to England in 1948 and settled there after marrying an Englishman. However she still considered herself a true Indian. Her first published novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) was a bestseller and cited as an American Library Association Notable Book in 1955. Her other novels include, *Some Inner Fury*(1955), *A Silence of Desire*(1960), *Possession*(1963), *A Handful of Rice*(1966), *The Nowhere Man*(1972), *Two Virgins*(1973), *The Golden Honeycomb*(1977), and *Pleasure City* (1982). The works of Markandaya abound in the themes featuring a clash between traditional and modern, East and West, agriculture and Industrialization. Markandaya's feministic stance in her works is unique and distinctive. The female characters in *Nectar in a Sieve* are portrayed as independent minded confronting and enduring all odds meted out to them. Rukmani, the protagonist, comes across as a woman whose strength, courage, perseverance and resilience is a fitting reply to all those patriarchal institutions promoting the stereotypical images of women. The writer places her female characters in different circumstances and the same is to be analyzed in the Paper. Markandaya doesn't portray her female characters in *Nectar in a Sieve* as victims rather they are shown as an epitome of will and patience standing upright against all onslaughts. Rukmani throughout the novel, succeeds in asserting and affirming her independent identity that celebrates her womanhood. Markandaya deconstructs the gender ideologies that propagate the dominance of male over female. The Paper is an attempt at scrutinizing the different female characters of the novel through feministic perspective.

Women representation in literature has always been governed by ideologies based on hierarchical binary oppositions with male suppressing and repressing female. As a result women had to prevent themselves from misrepresentation which led to their silencing. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft marks the beginning for the plea of distinct female voice advocating the moral and social equality of women. Later Virginia Woolf's "A Room of one's own" seeks for an intellectual equality of women. Feminists across cultures concern themselves with the independence and autonomy of women. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern speak?" points to the female as subaltern who according to her is doubly marginalized and "deeply in shadow". The paper attempts to read *Nectar in a Sieve* from feminist perspective. Markandaya brings in the marginality, subalternity and forsakenness of a new born female child through Irawaddy's birth. Irawaddy is Rukmani's first child and her response to Ira's birth is, "I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?" (15) . Nathan too is unhappy at her birth, "he had wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a puling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory

behind ... ” (16). However, as the narrative proceeds, the writer deconstructs this myth of male/ female divide. After five years, the couple begets five sons in five consecutive years much to their contentment and satisfaction. Their expectations prove to be false as none of the sons helps his father in the agrarian chores. Ironically, it is Ira who takes a stand and saves her family from starvation by indulging in prostitution. Ira sacrifices her own self for the sake of her family while as Rukmani’s sons sacrifice their parents’ love for their own good. Ira’s love for her family is selfless while as her brothers are self-centered. The women characters in the novel including Rukmani, Ira and Kunthi stand above par male characters. They do whatever it takes to endure the odds meted out to them. They transcend all the boundaries emerging thus as survivors. Her women characters are a befitting reply to the patriarchal norms and paradigms. Nevertheless Rukmani is the only hope for the Nathan to rely upon. Rukmani’s only hope after Nathan is an urchin Puli, a leper who accompanies her in the city and to her village in the end. It is ironic that Puli acts as their son, Murugan, should have in the city. Puli is like her own sons in disguise. What the parents had expected from their sons is actually proven and done by Ira and Puli. Thus this line between female and male diminishes and it is the women / daughters who are the real warriors and survivors in the novel.

Markandaya places Rukmani in various trials and tribulations throughout the novel yet she comes up as a survivor till the end. In an “Introduction” to the novel, Indira Ganesan remarks, “our heroine doesn’t necessarily win over her suffering; she endures, a perhaps more apt response to a world that can never quite be counted on to maintain its constancy.” Markandaya delineates with the basic needs of human life – food, shelter and happiness. It is about a family wholly and solely dependent on land for its survival. She is an ordinary woman yet her endurance and her hopefulness at every hardship makes her extraordinary. On its face value, the novel depicts the misfortunes and hardships engulfing an agrarian family, on a deeper level, it implies the various conflicts and clashes; birth of female child and male child, the land and tannery, tradition and modernity, hope and fear, East and West and life and death.

Land is the sole and only means of sustenance for the family. This dependence on land is interfered by Nature in the form of rains, drought and then famine. As regards Nature, Rukmani says,

Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat.(39)

Rukmani’s patience is tested one after the other calamity of nature; it is the heavy rains first destroying their crops but sparing their hut, then it is followed by drought leaving them to starve. As it is, the problems never take leave of Rukmani and the major threat to land is the establishment of tannery by the British. Markandaya starts her fourth chapter with, “ Change I had known before, and it had been gradual.” That is secondary as to whether this change is

positive or negative. Rukmani is the only villager who is disappointed by this, “they had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maiden where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us.” Unable to earn livelihood from the land, her elder two sons start working in tannery. With this earning, they begin again “to live well”. They are later fired from the tannery and both the sons decide to move to Ceylon. Raju another son starts working in the tannery but he loses his life for having caught in stealing. In this clash between the land and tannery, it is the tannery that overpowers the land, making the villagers dependable on it. Sivaji takes away the land from Nathan so as to have tannery built there. Markandaya brings forth the colonial experience: first a piece of land is taken, the hike in the prices, employing people there and hence depriving them of their indigenous strength to till and maintain the land, “they may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter . . .” (28) An agricultural village now becomes an industrial town with its people getting used to the noise and smell of the tannery.

Apart from her family, Rukmani befriends a British doctor- Kenny who helps Rukmani in easing her mother’s death and to conceive boys with Nathan. There are various instances in the novel wherein a conversation between Rukmani and Kenny makes Markandaya depict the East West encounter. Kenny’s attitude towards poverty in India is in contrast to Rukmani’s. Kenny admonishes, “You must cry out if you want help. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence.” Rukmani retorts by negating it so as to prevent being treated as pitiable creatures “for is not a man’s spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes?” Kenny’s remark suggests all things can change while as Rukmani believes in the cleansing of soul as the suffering is borne in silence. Rukmani’s awareness of this cultural divide between East and West is evident in her conversation with Kenny about his wife. Upon knowing that his wife wont be living with him, Rukmani says “a woman’s place is with her husband.” Kenny being a Westerner regards her thinking as “limited” to which she further ends as, “our ways are not your ways.” It is in fact Rukmani that understands that he has no home in her country something that Kenny had not acknowledged. Kenny’s part of the conversation has logical overtones quite opposed to Rukmani’s spiritual generalization- “We are in God’s hands”. This is what keeps her enduring every suffering with patience believing in the betterment of things in the future. Hopefulness is a recurrent motif in the whole narrative of the novel.

The second part of the novel is set miles away from their village in the city. Rukmani and Nathan take refuge in a temple where all their money and belongings are stolen. It marks a shift in their life from land to stone quarry. The only positive thing about the city is they get to know Puli. “Better to starve where we were bred than live here,” Nathan says passionately. Markandaya by placing her characters in the city that thrives on materialism brings in the contrast the tradition and modernity. The indifferent and cruel attitude of the city people makes them wander throughout culminating finally in the death of Nathan.

The ultimate theme of the novel is put across by Murugan’s wife by saying “one must live”. Despite the hardships, sufferings, miseries, and sorrows one ought to live. Rukmani throughout

her life unknowingly follows the same. One must live despite insurmountable odds, one must hope for betterment, one must endure the suffering and one must survive after all. This forms the crux of the novel upon which Rukmani's life is thrust upon. Moreover it is Puli who makes an observation "it's a hard world" and hence one needs to tackle it with patience and endurance. On old Granny's death Rukmani makes a heartfelt remark,

Once a human being is dead there are people enough to provide the last decencies; perhaps it is so because only then can there be no question of further or recurring assistance being sought. Death after all is final. (121)

Kamala Markandaya points to the universal and eternal definition of life; hope sustains life. It is this hope that leads to Nathan's peaceful death. As Nathan states during his death, "what has to be, has to be." It is the first instance in the novel where Rukmani actually grieves but then this is also accepted by her for the hope of returning her village along with Puli is a sigh of relief.

As R. S. Pathak points in case of Rukmani that "the nature and value of the sense of identity has been defined (by the author)... mainly in terms of Indian values and norms." She is a chaste and obedient wife, caring and compassionate mother and an ideal Indian woman. Right from working on land till the stone quarry she epitomizes herself as an embodiment of forbearance and resilience. Kamala Markandaya projects Rukmani as the one who celebrates her womanhood; balancing her emotionality with her indomitable spirit. Rukmani completely fits in to what Neena Arora's observes, "In classical literature, a woman is always shown in relationship to man...Traditionally, a "good woman" is always synonymous with good wife and good wife must be chaste, faithful and virtuous like Sita or Savitri." Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays its positive women characters as ideal sufferers and nurturers. Meena Shirdwakar comments, "[T]he cause of her suffering springs mainly from poverty and natural calamity. The women are from the rural sections of society. They are the daughters of the soil and have inherited age-old traditions which they do not question. Their courage lies in meek or at times cheerful ways of facing poverty or calamity". Shantha Krishnaswamy identifies an increasingly feminist consciousness in the novels of Kamala Markandaya in the form of a recurrent female 'quest for autonomy'. It is Rukmani's faith and belief in her own Self that makes her a unique woman protagonist. Thrity Umrigar in her "Afterword" to the novel regards Rukmani as a true "everywoman". The novel is thus a saga of a triumphant womanhood in India.

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