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Potentiality and Temerity of Rural Indian Women as Reflected in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

Dr. Sulekha Jadaun

Asst. Professor

Kishori Raman Post Graduate College, Mathura U.P.

Abstract:

Women in rural India have been oppressed for ages. They have been tortured in the name of religion and rituals. Sometimes it appears that all the religious customs have been designed to imprison them. But even after facing all odds, rural Indian women have contributed immeasurably to the development of rural society. Taking the example of Rukmani from 'Nectar in a Sieve', we have attempted to explore the courage and capacity of rural Indian woman, in the present paper.

Keywords: rural, scriptures, independence, celebration, contribution etc.

Indian scriptures pronounce that perpetual bondage is the nemesis of a woman. Manusmrti postulates that-

“Girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of their son as widows. In no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself independently.”¹

Not only do these scriptures state this but they claim that these are the words of God. Male chauvinists of this country consider it mandatory to obey these orders of Almighty although they never follow a single word of the same Manusmrti when it says-

“Where women are worshipped, there live the gods.”²

All the great religious literature of ancient India was composed in Sanskrit language which had been the tongue of highly educated scholars. Teachings of scriptures were interpreted to the uneducated common men by these scholars in different ways. Confused and gullible common men grasped these teachings in their own ways and being uneducated, they transferred them from one generation to another orally with each generation making its own contribution of ambiguous derivations. Although we boast proudly of possessing ancient female scholars like Gargi, Apala, Ghosa, Lopamudra but the stark reality is that Indian women have always been deprived of education. Again we worship piously goddesses like Durga, Kali Or Chamunda considering them a source of strength but the bitter truth is that power has always been denied to Indian women. Women have been (if they are not they are made to be) God fearing. They accept their bondage happily in the name of God. So the uneducated and God fearing women were convinced by some crafty educated men that it was the will of God that women should be subordinate to men. Then there was child marriage, purdah system, dowry system, sati system and many other strategies to suppress and torture women. For example we can take this statement of 'Yajur Veda' –

“A wife, obedient to her husband, renowned, light-footed, eloquent in speech, sympathetic to the patients, attains to happiness when she lives peacefully with her husband and nicely cooks the food.”³

But in spite of all these shackles, Indian women have proved themselves in every field of life. They have given excellent performance in all the domains that were earlier considered to be suitable only for men. But the rural woman of India is still miles away from the road of independence. She works day and night at home and in the fields. She takes care of family members as well as domestic animals. She maintains Purdah and tolerates all the hardships of life. Still she is made to be ashamed of her life and embarrassed at giving birth to a female child. ‘ShatpathBrahmana says—

“A discarded wife is one who has no son... For a wife that is without a son, is possessed with ‘Nirriti’ (destruction, Calamity).”⁴

A perfect picture of rural Indian woman has been painted by Kamala Markandaya in her novel ‘Nectar in a sieve’. Rukmani, the heroine of the novel, is the fourth daughter of her parents who were prosperous during her childhood but become poor by the time Rukmani is married. So Rukmani is married to a poor farmer Nathan who is merely a tenant of somebody else’s land. The reason behind her not being able to getting married to a prosperous man is dowry. Dowry system forces many girls to marry below their merits but most of them accept it as their destiny. They give full respect to their husband. They worship the husband like a God and never call him by the name. Rukmani says-

“.....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.” (pg. 6)⁵

When a woman is pregnant, the family wishes that there should be a boy in the womb. The mother herself prays to God for a male baby because it will enhance her importance in the family. The woman who gives birth to a girl, feels dejected because she is looked down upon by her in-laws and husband. The same happens with Rukmani. Her first child is a girl who is not wanted by Nathan—

“Nathan at first paid scant attention to her; 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.” (pg. 17)

The minds of people have been moulded in such a way that the birth of a boy is the subject matter of their prayer to God. Rukmani feels unfulfilled without a son. Other women of the village who are mothers of boys, make her realize that she is incomplete. When Rukmani does not have any son even after six years of the birth of her daughter, everybody becomes anxious. Rukmani’s mother gives her a small stone lingam, symbol of fertility. But it doesn’t work. Then Rukmani consults an English doctor Kennington. The treatment of this doctor helps her in conceiving again and this time the child is male. Now let us see the reaction of the family members—

“My husband was overjoyed at the arrival of a son; not less so, my father. He came, an old man, all those miles by cart from our village to hold his grandson.” (pg. 22)

Now there is joy and celebration all around. The whole village is invited for feast. Rukmani and Nathan comprise a poor family where there are scarcities but the birth of the boy enables them to forget all the poverty and misery. This celebration is the specimen of average Indian family's approach towards their offspring. All the people, whether rich or poor, feel elated at the birth of a son and dejected at the birth of a daughter. All this happens despite the fact that women contribute to the affairs of the family equally with the men or sometimes more than men. In rural families husband and wife both work in fields. The wife works at home also besides working in the fields equally. The same is true to urban families also where women manage the house besides working in the offices.

Rukmani represents the adjusting nature of Indian women. She is born and brought up in a well to do family but is married to a poor farmer Nathan. She adapts to her new surroundings without complaining. She works hard at home as well as in fields. She accepts her fate calmly and soon gets used to it. She tries to remain happy even in the testing times of utter poverty. She develops a habit of saving not only money but also food grains. Let us see how she manages her kitchen with the small savings of rice in the utter need of the family—

“At last no option but to draw upon my secret hoard: a small stock of rice, ten ollocks in all, shielded from every temptation to sell or barter, kept even when the need to hold our land had squeezed us dry of everything else. Now I brought it out and measured it again, ten ollocks exactly. Then I divided it into several equal portions, each of the portions as little as would suffice for one day and counted the portions, of which there were twenty-four, so that for nearly a month, we would not starve. For a long time I hesitated, wondering whether we could do with less, thus making thirty divisions.” (pg. 81)

Despite working so hard in fields, Rukmani's family is on the verge of starvation. At such a time, Rukmani comes up with a new idea. She prepares a small garden at her home where she grows some vegetables. She goes to sell those vegetables from door to door through the whole village. Thus she saves her family from dying of hunger. Rural Indian women are very religious minded and God fearing. The rarity of divorce cases and suicide cases in rural India is because of the religiousness of Indians, especially women. Although today we see that farmers are committing suicide in India but that was not the trend some years ago. In this novel, there are many situations where Rukmani and her family face disasters but they do not lose faith in God and maintain patience—

“That year the rains failed. A week went by, two. We stared at the cruel sky, calm, blue, indifferent to our need. 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.” (pg. 74)

This religiousness is not the weakness of Indian women but it is her strength which bestows her with a capacity to tolerate all the odds of life. Her staunch faith gives her hope for better days. This trust, this belief, this hope provide her power to maintain herself in adverse circumstances. Another marking feature of Indian women that we see in 'Nectar in a Sieve' is forgiveness. Rural Indian women are particularly full of forgiveness. Rukmani loves her husband Nathan faithfully throughout her life but Nathan betrays her. He has a love affair with Kunthi. He is the father of her sons. This revelation of Nathan's treachery falls like a lightening on the faithful heart of Rukmani. But like most of other Indian women she forgives Nathan. While Indian husbands are very revengeful in such cases and go to the extent of murdering their wives, Indian wives generally forgive their husbands because husband is their God and anything done by God is acceptable. Although the mind-set of urban women, who are educated and earning, is changing rapidly, yet rural Indian woman is still the same. One may say that she forgives her husband because she has nowhere to go. Still we will have to accept that it is her power of tolerance. Rukmani had saved some rice for future but Nathan gives it to Kunti. Let us see the reaction of Rukmani at the revelation of Nathan's betrayal—

'She has a strange power, this woman', I said, half to myself.

'Not strange', Nathan said, 'I am the father of her sons. She would have told you and I was weak.'

Disbelief first; disillusionment; anger, reproach, pain. To find out, after so many years, in such a cruel way. Kali's words, 'She has fire in her body, men burn before and after.' My husband was of those men...

At last I made an effort and roused myself.

'It is as you say a long time ago', I said wearily. 'That she is evil and powerful I know myself. Let it rest.' (pg.88-89)

This power of forgiving and forgetting needs a very strong will-power which is the marking feature of Indian women only. Rukmani shows her physical, mental and emotional strength at every step of life. During hard times, she gives moral support to her husband. She becomes the source of his strength. She boosts up Nathan's heart and her own by thinking positively in the following manner—

"Privately I thought, well, and what if we gave in to our troubles at every step! We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak, for is not a man's spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes? As for our wants, they are many and unfulfilled, for who is so rich or compassionate as to supply them? What is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons or the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?... We are taught to bear our sorrows in silence and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed." (pg. 115-116)

We see another facet of Rukmani's personality when she goes to city with Nathan. There she breaks stones for earning bread. When it doesn't work, she starts writing letters for earning

money. People make fun of her when she sits on road saying that she can write letters. Seeing that she is rustic wearing torn clothes, nobody believes that she can read and write. See how people make fun of her—

“Youths sauntered by insolent of eye and manner, speaking loudly and with exaggerated clearness to each other that I might hear. ‘Says she can read! The village folk are certainly getting above themselves!’

‘She is a writer as well! What do you suppose she writes with?’

‘Probably uses her.....!’Whispers, laughs.

‘Oh, come away! She is past all that.....’

‘She must be mad to imagine.....’

Grimly I took no notice and went on with my cries. (pg.172)

But her perseverance bears fruit and ultimately some people trust her. She writes letters and earns money. In this way she proves that a rural Indian woman can not only work hard physically but also mentally. It is the misfortune of this nation that rural girls are not given an opportunity to get education. The story of national development would have been positively different if rural Indian women were given equal opportunity for education and work. The scenario can change still if we give rural Indian women their due even now.

Works Cited:

1- MANUSMRTI, CH. 9, VERSE 3.

2- Ibid. 3,56.

3-YAJUR VEDA CHAPTER 33, VERSE 59.

4- SHATPATH BRAHMANA 5.3.1.13

5- This page number and all the subsequent page numbers for Kamala Markandaya’s text refer to Kamala Markandaya, ‘Nectar in a Sieve’ (2009 ed.) Penguin Books, India.