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Rukmani as an Epitome of Womanhood in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract:

The present paper focuses on the life and travails of a peasant woman, Rukmani. It shows the transformation of a carefree girl into an exploited and victimized woman trying to pull her family through the harsh and cruel life of a city. The paper shows the plight, status and attitude of women in India under the stress of changing social, economic, modern, spiritual and political forces. It shows the real existence of women struggling between tradition and modernity. Rukmani accepts suffering with strong innate strength which shows her true spirit of tolerance. As a woman of serenity, she accepts her adverse situation with balance and impressiveness which reveals her stoic acceptance of the inevitable. Industrialization has eroded the very basis of the natives who are forced to leave their possessions. The tannery is symbolic of the mechanical power finally destroying a traditional village. The peasants in rural India fall a pray to the cruel vagaries of Nature. Poverty, hunger and starvation can lead to disintegration of family followed by various sufferings. Even in that situation also, their inner strength is never broken. Rukmani faces so many odds like femine, death, adultery and prostitution due to poverty and fights against them constantly.

Keywords: Industrialization, marginalization, rootlessness, ailienation, fatalism, feminine sensibility.

Indian writing in English occupies a prominent place in World Literature. It illustrates the works of the ancient and the glorious cultural, social, political, religious, philosophical traditions and the enduring values of Indian society. It represents the artistic and imaginative perception of the changing phenomenon and the shifting values of contemporary Indian life and reality. Indian authors have influenced an entire generation with their writings. While

experimenting with new stylistic techniques and language nuances, the novelists depict not only the socio-political and cultural problems faced by Indians, but also the psychological problems such as alienation, rootlessness and search for identity in their works. Contemporary women writer like Kamala Markandaya is one of the most prominent Indian English novelists. Kamala Markandaya was a pseudonym used by Kamala Purnaiya Taylor, an Indian novelist and journalist. She was born in 1924 in Chimakurti, a small village in southern India. Through her novels, she has tried to alleviate the social imbalance and injustice in Indian society. Her novels have a social purpose and she depicts the life of a man and woman in relation to society and destiny. As a novelist, she was very much aware of the contemporary socio-economic realities of India and how they affect the lives of the people. Her novels show how much she was concerned about the society and the sufferings of mankind in India. In her novels, she highlights the post colonial and traditional Indian social hierarchy and the implications prevalent within both the systems. She shows the struggle of an individual in a changing society. Through her writings, she has also portrayed that the very existence of women is torturous and the condition is same everywhere. In most of her novels, she attempted to project the independent minded women. Her novels are popular in depicting boldly the cultural and traditional clashes of different societies. Besides feministic issues her novels also depicted the real society and the sufferings of the people of India. Her deep concern for the peasants is reflected in her novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Markandaya started writing when India has newly got freedom. Poverty, hunger and starvation were everywhere due to communal disturbances. Industrialization and urbanization were newly eroding the basis of rural life. Thus, Markandaya has used novel to communicate her vision of life. In her novels, she depicts racial conflicts, temperamental disparities, cultural divergences and sexual perversion. We can find the picture of rural India juxtaposed with the glamorous westernized life of England in her writings. The novels of Markandaya have a universal significance as they highlight the problems of world, countries, societies and individuals. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya has presented the life and travails of a peasant woman, Rukmani. Here, we see the transformation of a carefree girl into an exploited and victimized woman trying to pull her family through the harsh and cruel life of a big city. Markandaya has observed sufferings of rural women and she has depicted these sufferings in her novels. She is concerned with the plight, status and attitude of women in India under the stress of changing social, economical, modern, spiritual and political forces. She tries to awake the

consciousness of Indian woman against the traditional oriented society and communicate the real existence of woman. Being a post-independence novelist, Markandaya portrays the figure of 20th century women as they are progressing in all fields of life. She has tried to show the plight of woman with her greatness, soundness and boldness and tries to show the real existence of women, struggling between tradition and modernity. Here, we can see the theme of fatalism, rootlessness and human relationship are boldly presented through the life of the poor Indian farmers who believe in fate and accept every misery as their lot. The story is not the story of Nathan and Rukmani alone. They represent thousands of innocent poor farmers living amidst the reign of terror and uncertainties due to industrialization and unemployment. *Nectar in a Sieve* is the story of a peasant woman, Rukmani whose life is totally shattered by various factors of her life. Through this theme, Markandaya depicts the life of uncertainties lived by the tenant farmers. When their harvest fails due to natural calamities, the farmers face not only starvation, but also miserable poverty that forces them to sell their small possessions in order to pay the rent. Rukmani and Nathan are forcibly dispossessed of their land as a result of rapid industrialization.

Markandaya presents the trials and tribulations of the simple, naïve and traditional Rukmani who accepts sufferings with strong innate strength which shows her true spirit of tolerance. Rukmani is the youngest and educated daughter of a village headman had fallen on hard times. Rukmani is married at the age of twelve to Nathan, a tenant farmer because she is without beauty and without dowry. The man that her family found for her is below her status. But as a woman of serenity she accepts her adverse situation with balance and impressiveness which reveals her stoic acceptance of the inevitable. Nathan treats her with kindness and respect. Rukmani and Nathan are full of hope for the future. They both have mutual love, understanding, respect, acceptance and adjustment. Both Rukmani and Nathan lead a simple life with the fundamental necessities like food, cloth and shelter.

The quiet and peaceful life of Rukmani and Nathan are affected by the undesirable advent of a tannery which is a symbol of industrialization. When a tannery is built nearby, unpleasant changes come to village life. Markandaya emphasizes that mere mechanical progress cannot be achieved by suppressing human values. Industrialization has eroded the very basis of the natives who are forced to leave their possessions. The tannery is symbolic of the mechanical power

finally destroying a traditional village life. Rukmani's son's become a victim of the false values of the tannery.

Ira's husband returns Ira to her parent's home because she is unable to bear children. In the patriarchal society, barren women are considered to be inauspicious. They are not recognized and respected in the society. Men have the social sanction to reject barren wives. This presents a world where human relations are not based on love and emotions, but on selfish motives. But when Ira is fit to conceive after getting medical treatment from Dr. Kenny, her husband has married to another woman. Rukmani accepts this unavoidable situation with mental equanimity and reconciles herself to the ill fate of Ira. When they were young, Nathan fathered his neighbor, Kunthi's two sons. Kunthi uses this as leverage over them until Rukmani learns the truth and forgives Nathan. Rukmani accepts her husband's betrayal and moral weakness calmly. She suffers silently not because she does not have sufficient strength and courage to protest against her husband, but because of deep love for her husband, she accepts him with all his weaknesses and limitations. This genuine love for him enables her to forgive him and accept him wholeheartedly. This is how Markandaya has portrayed Indian woman who has beauty, strength, compassion, courage and at the same time devoted to her husband sincerely.

Markandaya reflects the real condition of peasant woman and farmers in the light of colonial India through the characters of Rukmani and Nathan. But this simple, courageous woman survives the calamities of nature and of industrialization and also personal sorrows. Even in that situation also their inner strength is never broken. Rukmani watches her children struggling to survive on little food they have and her infant baby dies of starvation. Her daughter was rejected by her husband for being not able to give him a child and she resorts to prostitution to help the family. Finally, Rukmani and her husband leave their village to find more depravity and hardship. Here, Markandaya's woman character Rukmani faces so many odds of life like famine, death, adultery and prostitution due to poverty and fights against them constantly. But it is her will power which provides her a life without hope. This shows the transformation of a carefree girl into an exploited woman who tries to support her family in harsh time.

Rukmani describes the life of the peasant, when she says:

“Hope and fear. Twin forces that hugged us first in one direction and then in another, and which one was stronger no one could say... fear, constant companion of the peasant Fear, fear of the dark future; fear of the blackness of the death” (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 110)

Kamala Markandaya shows how certain virtues like honesty, perseverance, simplicity, selflessness, faith in God, fortitude and courage enable the peasants in rural India to cope with the misfortunes and the natural calamities with calm resignation. Though Rukmani and Nathan are subject to adversities and vicious forces one after another they reveal the true spirit of endurance. They strongly believe the philosophy that like grass they should not break. For Rukmani miseries and sorrows are essential characteristics of life. According to her, one should accept both the good and bad with the same mental equilibrium. Her approach to life is quite optimistic. She says:

“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?” (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 113)

This philosophical outlook is the outcome of the inner strength of her character, her stoic endurance, her heroic struggle for survival, her mute sufferings and her acceptance of life with its varied experiences. To Rukmani nothing is beyond endurance and acceptance. She may bend due to excessive sufferings and tribulations in life, but she never breaks as Nathan has said.

Writers like Kamala Markandaya reflect the ‘New Woman’ who has realized that she is not helpless and not dependent on others anymore. She is an equal partner in a marriage as she is also a money earner and she is not merely confined to house work. Markandaya portray strong women characters that are prepared to meet the challenges of life. They have explored female subjectivity. As a post independence writer, Markandaya has transformed the traditional woman into a “new woman’ in her literary works. She has shown her readers the face of an evolved and empowered woman who seeks fulfillment through self-expression. Her women characters fulfil their sense of identity without compromising on their traditional individuality in a postcolonial space. The women in her novels are gifted with depth and the basic principles of thinking and are more deeply aware of the value system. These women survive out of hardship and discover their identity sometimes living inside the norms of society and sometimes by escaping it. Thus,

Markandaya portrays liberated women of modern India through the life of her women protagonists.

Markandaya is outstanding among the post independent women novelists. She is endowed with an artistic genius and creative talent. It is not only her subject matter, but also her fluid and polished style of writing makes her prominent. She is not an aggressive, forceful and confrontational feminist. In her fiction, women characters are more important than men. The way she portrays women characters in her novel shows the importance she attaches to women in society. While projecting the changing traditional society in her novels, she brings to light the awakened feminine sensibility which is emerging rapidly in modern India. As an artist she has a thorough understanding of women's position in contemporary society. She shows how social and economic factors affect women more than men. Markandaya's women characters are strongly rooted in traditions and to a great extent they are conformists. Though they are staunch believers of established customs, modes and cultural practices they never give up their individuality. Here, her female character Rukmani, a peasant woman of pre-independence rural India resolutely struggles for survival with undaunted courage, determination, fortitude and an indomitable spirit of endurance.

Here, in the novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya portrays the travails of Rukmani who faces crisis in life with exceptional courage and extraordinary confidence. As a typical Indian woman, she is a loving wife to Nathan, an admirable mother to her children and a helping woman to her neighbours. With an uncommon spiritual and mental strength, she absorbs all miseries and misfortunes that come her way. As an embodiment of optimism and hope she resolutely fights against the social and the economic forces which crush her and her family brutally. Though she grieves like an ordinary human being whenever she is subject to the cruel vagaries of cosmic forces and the man-made evil systems, she comes over the hurdles with great resilience and acceptance. She symbolizes the strong Indian rural psyche which sometimes comes under great pressures, but does not break. Though she seems to be passive she never gives up her spirit of individuality and will power. The innate strength and deep-rooted single mindedness enable her to carry on in this remorseless world. On the whole, Rukmani stands like a rock among women characters in Indian English fiction.

Markandaya's feministic stance in her novels is unique and distinctive. She has portrayed the women characters in the novel as independent minded, facing all odds forced upon them. Rukmani's strength, courage, perseverance and resilience are a befitting reply to all those patriarchal institutions promoting stereotypical images of women. She places her women characters in different circumstances. Markandaya does not portray her female characters in the novel as victims rather they are shown as an epitome of will and patience standing against all onslaughts. Throughout the novel, Rukmani 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. In literature, women representation has always been governed by ideologies based on hierarchical binary oppositions with male suppressing and repressing female. Different feminists have spoken for independence and autonomy of women. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft marks the beginning of the female voice advocating moral and social equality of women. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* seeks for an intellectual equality of women. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* points to the female as subaltern who according to her is doubly marginalized. Markandaya deconstructs the myth of male/female division. Marknadaya places Rukmani in many trials and tribulations throughout the novel yet she comes up as a survivor till the end. Rukmani is an ordinary woman, still her endurance and her hopefulness at every hardship makes her extraordinary. Rukmani's patience is tested one after the other throughout the novel. She is a chaste and obedient wife, caring and compassionate mother and an ideal Indian woman. But till the end she epitomizes herself as an embodiment of forbearance and resilience. Rukmani is a woman who celebrates her womanhood with her indomitable spirit. Markandaya portrays her women characters as ideal sufferers and nurturers. Rukmani's faith and belief in her own self makes her a unique woman.

In the male dominated society, women are of little significance. According to the laws of Manu, a woman is valuable only if she is the begetter of a male offspring. Women are kept in dependence by the male members of their families. We can find the deplorable condition of women in the Indian society. There are cases of female feticide, declining sex ratio, illiteracy among women as inferior and second-class citizens and also various forms of gender violence. Markandaya is mainly concerned with the psychological crisis in the lives of Indian women who

are subjected to physical and psychological trauma in Indian society. She goes deep into the inner mind of the repressed women by their feminine sensibility and psychological insight of her women characters.

Men and women are complementary to each other. Neither is superior to the other. Women have the power of endurance, love and foresight which contributes to the happiness of others. Earlier they were portrayed as dependent and weaker sex to men. Here, the protagonist, Rukmani is a silent sufferer and finds no quest for autonomy in her character. She is a woman who knows how to handle her responsibilities and the pressure of the circumstance. Thus, Markandaya has very clearly portrayed the distressful condition of the marginalized section of the society.

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