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Understanding Rukmani's Status in Kamala Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract:

Women's world in India is defined and regulated more by her gender than by any other actions that she performs and becomes a part of. Her social, cultural and economic status are all influenced by her gender. Gender beliefs and stereotypes overpower her intellectual capacities and relentless zeal of moving past the hurdles of life. Kamala Markandeya's Rukmani too is subjected to gender confirmations that her and her husband's economic conditions allow. The objective of this paper is to study and understand Rukmani's status through the various social, cultural and economic factors which govern and influence her life. Her gender i.e. 'Woman' plays a crucial role in defining the experiences that she has. The paper will use principles of Expectation States Theory to study the status construction of Rukmani, the protagonist in *Nectar in a Sieve* and see how the gender status beliefs are associated with her surroundings work to create certain performance expectations for her and regulate her status and position in society.

Keywords: Society, Culture, Gender, Status, Status Beliefs, Expectation States Theory.

Introduction

Society is important for people to live in and share something good or bad related to it. As an individual everyone is found on the way to make search for his/her meaning of existence and also holds the cause to find one direction in the light of prevalent situation. To live and survive all the individuals require an Other to one's Self. The existence of human beings can be observed as being dependent on the other members of their surroundings. People tend to find their self, subjectivity and identity against the backdrop of the situation

caused by others who happen to be the constituents of the society where one dwells and makes search for meaning. It is otherness of the other which helps one to judge one's self.

Stratification of society is an important aspect of the smooth functioning of the societies. Sociologists like Karl Marx, Floyd Hunter, Kingsley Davis, Wilbert Moore, Max Weber and others presented different views on stratification of society and suggested that any society is not a homogeneous whole but always divided in groups based on different factors and agents. All the divisions that have been created and maintained in the basic social structure are responsible for designating the roles and responsibilities to the individuals. The social roles and behaviours of the people living in groups determine their position and authority within the group.

Marx's idea of a society too was based on social stratification, but his ideas were predominantly class based and one dimensional. In his opinion every stratified society had only two classes which were involved in constant competition and a cycle of oppression and protest between them. The power and authority rested with the group which was economically dominating and the other one was evidently oppressed by them.

Max Weber following the idea of categorisation of the society breaks away from Marx's 'Economic Determinism' model of social stratification and tries to give a 'multidimensional' approach to it by including factors like Status and Power in his discussions of stratification of society. He considered these factors to be working independently of the class differences of hierarchy. Status groups, according to Weber, were more important when considering the distribution of power and authority amongst the groups of people.

In contrast to classes, status groups are normally communities. They are, however, often "of an amorphous kind. In contrast to the purely economically determined 'class situation' we wish to designate as 'status situation' every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honour. (Weber 186-187)

Status as an agent of social stratification he says is different from economic class division as it takes into consideration the social privileges that people enjoy despite the class that they belong to. Social privilege stems from the influence of Status Beliefs and Cultural Beliefs which are widely held and consensual ideologies and practices being followed from a long period of time. Status can be experienced in the normal routine activities of lives of

people. The roles that they play influence and develop their social behaviours and values which take a form of a 'specific way of life'. The unique traditions and patterns of a community influence the social interactions that people get involved in. Any interactions that people engage in in their lives determine their social standing amongst the groups that they are a part of. Cecilia Ridgeway in her book *Status: Why is it Everywhere? Why Does it Matter?* defines status as a “comparative social ranking of people, groups, or objects in terms of the social esteem, honour, and respect accorded to them” (1).

Status is a relative category. It can never be experienced alone or in isolation. Status of any person is defined only when it is studied in relation to the status of other members of the same or different groups. The National Committee on Status of Women formed in India in 1971-74, concluded that “The term ‘status’ denotes relative position of persons in a social system or sub-system which is distinguishable from that of others through its rights and obligations.” (3). The status that is thus bestowed on any individual indicates to them their position, role, and identities in specific situations at specific places.

Gender is one of the primary categorisation system that works on the prevalent ideals, conventionality and historical consciousness of the past. Gender identity, Socio-cultural and economic factors influence the status positions ascribed to people. Experiences like marriage, home, education, religious norms, prevalent traditions, cultural practices all influence the status construction of the individuals in society, but these experiences are often times different for different genders because of the widely held conceptions of gender hierarchies practiced unquestionably for a long period of time.

Gender and status exist with each other in a dynamic relationship. Cultural practices and traditions associated with the status beliefs and gender subtleties create premises for differences and inequality. Status beliefs which are related to gender hierarchies are commonly conceptualised on the basis of the socio-cultural institutions and practices followed in the society. Gender status beliefs thus work to normalise the superior status accorded to males over the females. according to ridgeway, “because gender is associated with status in cultural beliefs, it becomes a principle for organizing social relations in terms of not only difference but also of hierarchy and inequality.” (Ridgeway & Bourg 217)

Many sociologists and social scientists have studied the status-based stratification of society. Joseph Berger with his colleagues in 1977 formulated the Expectation States Theory to study the influence of gender stereotypes and beliefs on the widely prevalent status beliefs.

And how these status beliefs form and influence the expected performance capacities and capabilities of different genders in same gender and mix gender tasks and actions.

The Expectation States Theory focuses on “the ways in which people create and maintain status hierarchies and how these hierarchies regulate inequalities in influence” (Reid, Palomares, Anderson, & Bondad-Brown, 2009). It gives a detailed account of the circumstances and processes that work to create and maintain the gender status beliefs which eventually result in the widely consensual status and power differences existent between men and women. Status hierarchies stem from the widely prevalent status beliefs which attribute greater competence to one group over the other. These beliefs take shape from the repeated interactions among the members of the society where some of them experience an advantage over the others because of similar experiences in the past. Ridgeway considers them to be “widely held cultural beliefs that link greater social significance and general competences, as well as positive and negative skills with one category of social distinction compared to another.” (Ridgeway, “Gender, Status, and Leadership” 638).

The focus of the expectation states theory is mainly defining how “status beliefs affect people’s behaviour and evaluations of one another in situations in which people are working together on a collective goal or task” (Berger et al., 1977; Webster & Foschi, 1988; Ridgeway & Bourg 223). The theory also emphasizes the cultural beliefs about status which regulate the behaviours and evaluation of their own personal traits by independent individuals.

Generally, the existent status beliefs accord greater competence and status to men over women. Status beliefs are usually consensual in nature, they hold great power in determining the behaviour of men and women in mixed gender societies and tasks. The theory argues that “status beliefs are a major determinant of gender inequality precisely because men and women interact so frequently under the conditions in which status beliefs shape people’s behaviour and evaluations.” (Ridgeway & Bourg 223)

Mr. Yogesh Atal in his keynote address at the conference on “Status of Women in Rural Societies” said that, “In sociology, a person is supposed to have several statuses and with each status are associated a set of roles vis-à-vis counter statuses” (Chaube and Saini 19). A woman’s life and her status is defined more by her gender and the roles that she performs in the society. Gender plays a crucial role in making her identity. Body that a woman lives in becomes the most common hurdle in her life and determinant of general views on what she can and cannot do. Roles and behaviors typically specific to a gender

have been propagated and institutionalized as unwavering and rigid. Gender roles hence create specific performance expectations from men and women in general mixed gender tasks and situations. Expectation states Theory argues that,

the implicit performance expectations that people form for themselves compared to others create and sustain a behavioural status hierarchy. Those for whom higher performance expectations are held tend to participate more, receive more attention, be more positively evaluated, and be more influential than others. (Ridgeway & Bourgeois 224)

Literature is instrumental in the reflection of socio-cultural values through language. Lived experiences of people repeated in form of stories and anecdotes create a large body of occurrences which are grouped together as being a narrative which is reflective of a certain type of society with all its forms of human involvements. Interactions between people being the basic requirement for coexisting in one social structure makes the people related to each other. Literature as a work of art too seeks to interact with the people and make them experience the different facets of life which are lived around the world. Literature as a reflection of society also works to highlight the virtues and vices of the social lives of people. All interactions between the characters of the narrative reveal certain relationships between them and indirectly hint at the understanding and development of status position and identity of the singular characters.

Kamala Markandeya in her writing portrayed the stringent commentaries on the social life of the times. Her works present the atrocities of Indian life as lived by the people at the very ground levels. Her debut novel *Nectar in a Sieve* published in 1954 is one the most remarkable representations of peasant life in India at those times. In a diary entry as revealed by her daughter Kim Oliver in her discussion at the JLF London in session titled “Nectar in a Sieve: Rediscovering Kamala Markandeya”, says that the writing of the novel came as a product of the experiences that she had when she was visiting villages continuously for a period of 6-7 years for her assignments as a journalist. The book however is famous for its presentation of a woman who is courageous and relentless in her spirit to live life in spite of the hardships that it held for her.

Women in Indian villages usually come about as the more hardworking lot, who shoulder the responsibility to do it all. They manage the home and also work alongside their husbands in the fields. Gender based status beliefs work in their lives to push them down,

even when they work equally hard as the men. Dr. Ramesh Chaube and Dr. Kalpana Saini, in the Preface of *Status of Women in Rural Societies* (2002) discuss a similar idea:

The women in rural communities play a more active role as a bread earner of the family, performs hard manual labor, even acts as a more responsible partner and not functioning as a passive human incubator, not confining herself to hearth and kitchen alone, not parading herself as a beautiful drawing room showpiece like many of her counterparts, in advanced societies. (10)

Rukmani, the protagonist in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is portrayed as an ideal woman. A better part of her life is spent in taking care of the home and the land. The mud hut of one room which her husband Nathan had built for her was the site of all her festivities, rejoicing, motherhood, hunger, starvation, longing and hope. The survival of the couple was dependent on the paddy crop which they grew on the rented land. The nature however was not always generous with them and they had to suffer the periods of draughts or failed crops with a hope for a better future. The children grow distant of the land as the industrial wave grasps them into its folds. Opportunities with a more stable income and guarantee of food to survive obviously appealed more to them. As the children move away and hardships continue for Rukmani and Nathan, they are forced to leave the land and the only home that they have known to find a hopefully better life in town with Murugan, their third son. Destiny however fails them again as their only hope of a comfortable survival is shattered when they actually meet Murugan's deserted wife. The temple provided them shelter but also robbed them of their money and scanty belongings that they carried with them. Hope again finds an object as they plan to return to their village and start working as wage labourers in a stone quarry. Working hard at a job that they are unfamiliar with Nathan and Rukmani save up to return, and Rukmani did return, not alone of course but without Nathan. The town takes him away, yet nevertheless blesses her with Puli. The memory of the lived experiences surprises Rukmani and makes her wonder at her own journey filled with hope and fear.

Rukmani's status position is evidently hinted at throughout the narrative of the work. Being a woman for the very thing dictates most of the initiatives that she undertakes in her lifetime. She dreams of having "a grand wedding", "such that everybody will remember" (Markandeya 4). Indeed, she is married off at a very young age of 12 years but without any dowry and to a "tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care" (4). She was disheartened and felt disgrace for she was arranged with a "poor match" (4). The mud hut of

which she was the mistress did not appeal to her at first but gradually became her home. She longed for a happy home, eventually one which she started taking pride in. Most of her expectations of being a married woman are ecstatically discussed as,

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? (9)

Women often put themselves below their husbands. Husbands who are ignorant of a wife's crude mistakes were seen to be of a superior status. They dealt with patience the insolence of their "ornament" (10) wife. At one point in the narrative, Rukmani and Kenny's conversation expresses her limited yet strong opinion about a 'woman's place'.

'Cannot?' I said. 'She must. A woman's place is with her husband.'

He sighed impatiently. 'You simplify everything, being without understanding. Your views are so limited it is impossible to explain to you.'

'Limited yes,' I agree. 'Yet not wholly without understanding. Our ways are not your ways.' (111)

Rukmani's understanding of woman's rightful position in the society is 'with the husband'. Woman who is without a husband or unfaithful to him is looked down upon by the people. Her pride of being a faithful wife, prohibits her from disclosing to her husband her treatment for bearing a child for he might misunderstand. In the later part of the novel, she even gives away rice saved away for 7 days to Kunthi as she threatens her about disclosing it to Nathan. Rukmani's fear of her husband thinking her unfaithful was her most dreaded dream. She had never imagined herself without the dignified status of a good wife.

I need you, I cried to myself, Nathan, my husband. I cannot take the risk, because there is a risk since she is clever and I am not. In your anger or your jealousy, or even because you are not yourself after these long-strained months, you may believe what she says and what she means. Because I have deceived you and cannot deny all she proclaims, you may believe the more. (85-86)

The prevalent traditions and cultural beliefs about the duties of a wife and mother influence Rukmani's life and her status position to a great extent. Rukmani was a virtuous

wife as she kept her home with utmost attention and managed it with whatever Nathan and she could manage. Women used to take a lot of pride in their well-kept household and the upbringing of their children. Their status depended not the education or knowledge that they had about the outside world but primarily on how well they managed and upkept the traditional status of being the homemaker.

‘What use’, my mother said, ‘That a girl should be learned! Much good will it do her when she has lusty sons and a husband to look after. Look at me, am I any worse that I cannot spell my name, so long as I know it? Is not my house clean and sweet, are not my children well fed and cared for?’ (13)

The convention has it that the women of Indian society have to be helpful and cooperative to their husbands. Rukmani has found her space in the novel representing the continuity of that tradition. She is helpful to Nathan as it becomes and suits an Indian woman. Since her marriage she took all the responsibility to look after the home and manage everything like the rations and expenses. She also helped her husband in the fields in whatever time she could find off from home. Her domain still remained the domestic affairs which were practically expected performance of her. Although Rukmani was equally capable and hardworking as Nathan at the tasks of the field, yet her gender status modestly put her in an inferior position in comparison to Nathan.

Motherhood in Rukmani's life came with a responsibility. Rukmani's aspirations in life were all defined and made up in accordance to the traditional gender norms and beliefs that were consensually accepted by the members of the society. She had to be a good mother to her children. Especially for Ira, her only daughter. There was the responsibility of finding her a good match. Marriage was the business of women, so the status of the woman who was to be selected as the matchmaker in such a task was much higher than that of other women. Old granny, even by the matter of age and also experience was carefully chosen to be the matchmaker by Rukmani. Rukmani's status as a mother however, only became prominent when she bore a son 7 years after the birth of her daughter. Until then, she fared of no well amongst the other woman of the village. Being a mother of a son, was the status that was craved by every woman.

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.

‘Your mother would have been glad,’ he said. ‘She was always praying for you.’

‘She knew,’ I told him. ‘She said I would have many sons.’ (22-23)

Rukmani’s real status as the *Annapurna* of the family came about when the crops failed for subsequent years. The responsibility of fairly cooking and feeding the family fell on Rukmani. The lands were not yielding much and there was even less grain left in the granary. The food and management related decisions were now solely taken by Rukmani. This also reflects the pride that a woman takes in feeding her family well. Rukmani counted and distributed the portions of grain for each day, and such a skill of hers was the reason the family continued to survive in spite of the hunger and hardships.

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, but finally I decided against it, for Kuti was already ailing, and we needed to preserve our strength for the harvest. (82)

Lack of economic resources however further subdued Rukmani’s status. Being poor was one of the reasons for the sufferings that she had to endure. Poverty took a toll on the couple when the crops failed for subsequent years and they had to sell off their little belongings to pay the zamindar. A woman who already is dealing with her socio-cultural status which is low because of social privilege, she cannot afford to endure low status because of economic deprivation. Rukmani cheered whatever possessions she had and wanted to hold on to them because for her those were the way to understand herself, construct her identity and status.

For where shall a man turn who has no money? Where can he go? Wide, wide world, but as narrow as the coins in your hand. Like a tethered goat, so far and no farther. Only money can make the rope stretch, only money. (171)

As a woman in the rural setting Rukmani’s status proves to be higher than most other women of the village. She took pride in her skills and home keeping. Keeping a low profile and staying away from vices like prostitution, she struggled to maintain her status of a virtuous woman. She desperately clutched on to “the memory of the past”, (32) and resisted the future. Her reality rested on the opinion that “Women need men” (111) nearly as a ‘way of life’.

Traditions were the only possession for the women who had nothing else to hold on to. Rukmani's object of hope were the traditional customs and practices that she knew and held on to even in the time of dire adversities. She shrugged the attitude of the other women who "reconciled and threw the past away with both hands" and changed their ways "to grasp the present" (31). She did not want move out of the ideal world that these cultural beliefs and systems had created for her. She found peace and solace in them. Even though she got used to the "noise and the smell of the tannery," (64) she could not do away with her constricted and traditional social and cultural beliefs.

As a mother-in-law, Rukmani wanted to be able to maintain a superior status as compared to her daughter-in law. Even though she had only a few cooking vessels she felt that she had taken with her on the journey towards town she had her pride. Eventually when she and Nathan were looted at the temple, Rukmani was overcome by misery.

But I could not smile, and the ease with which he accepted the misfortune irritated me. Now I shall be wholly indebted to my daughter-in-law, I thought. I go to her without even a cooking vessel, like a beggar off the streets; and straightaway I determined to spend one or two of the coins I felt digging into my flesh at the nearest bazaar, for I would not go to her destitute. (153)

Rukmani discharged all her duties and responsibilities of being a dutiful wife even during the time when she met so many hardships. The weather was so rough when she did not have any dwelling place to live in and she was also seen bearing the tough time when the condition was as such that she could not help two times meal smoothly. Nathan was helped through and through in such a time of need. In the town, living in the temple compound Rukmani started working as a letter artist to support herself and Nathan before they started working as wage labour in a quarry to save up for coming back to their village. Nathan's death was a bad experience for her and she was utterly broken and grieved for her husband who was with her at every point in her life was now no more.

'If I grieve,' I said, 'it is not for you, but for myself, beloved, for how shall I endure to live without you, who are my love and my life?'

'You are not alone,' he said. 'I live in my children,' and was silent, and then I heard him murmur my name and bent down.

'Have we not been happy together?'

‘Always my dearest, always.’ (191)

Conclusion

Woman’s status position in rural societies is dictated by the gender status beliefs that unconsciously but suitably give superior status to men over women in any structured society. Existence in a female body changes the perception of the people towards the performance expectations in particular tasks. Women traditionally have been entrusted with the domestic areas of work according to the stratification principles. Social roles given to women take the form of widely accepted cultural beliefs which give rise to status beliefs.

Rukmani’s life too is dominated by the domestic duties of a wife, mother, nurturer and a protector of the traditions. Her social and cultural roles of being a dutiful and loving wife, being a mother of five sons, feeding her family fairly well even in the times of hardships, raising her children to be good human beings, keeping her home with utmost attention and care, following all the religious practices and customs with all heart and conviction provide her a respectable and high status in the society. Rukmani’s status still is comparatively lower than that of Nathan, her husband because of the social expectations that he has in accordance with his gender.

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