

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

GENDER EMPATHY IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

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ABSTRACT

The present research article is an attempt to examine and discuss the torments and desires, the pains and the pleasures of women in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The portrayal of the relationships between the two genders always had a fascination for Markandaya. Her characters are strong and courageous as they have sturdy will power and face all the odds of life with great audacity. The protagonists of Markandaya are not idealists but they surpass the general weakness of the mortals. They know how to bend like a grass and how to face the reality of life and they always exhibit the courage to overcome disappointment and despair and they choose to fight against the odds of life through a heroic indulgence in conflict and struggle. For them, consistent fights form the integral part of life. However her women pass through the transitional phase which is neither too conventional nor too avant-garde. In all her novels, Markandaya has revealed her protagonists who believe that they are never inferior to their male counterparts. Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* are taken for discussion with regard to the artist's handling of the nuances of gender sensitivity. The research clearly portray the picture of a suffering woman throughout her life. It studies the strong statement against male-chauvinism, female frustration and reluctance and the woman's search for female identity as artistically presented in the novel.

Key Words: Discrimination, Humiliation, Voiceless, Oppressed, Marginalised, Poverty, Injustice, suppression.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian social system, with just a few exceptions, is dominated by patriarchy, which advocates male governance and female subordination. The better share has always been in the control of men and women have to be contented with the minor role and have to be restricted to the background. In this system, a woman is projected to mould herself in the pattern of the family into which she is married and ultimately fuses her identity with that of her husband.

As Sudir Kumar Arora predicts:

Inevitably, she becomes the shadow of her husband and follows him throughout her life. She is expected to support in all his ups and downs, adding her strength to him. Chastity and fidelity are her most precious ornaments. Her family is her place of worship and the carrel, in which she remains confined, is the kitchen where she performs her daily duties. In bedroom, she worships her husband calling him her 'Pati-Parmeshwar'. (Arora 35)

For years this has been the practice in this male chauvinistic Indian family, where transgression is measured a sin. Women writers started to contest these communal suppressions in excess of the years with massive determination.

Markandaya derives the title *Nectar in a Sieve* from Coleridge, whose lines form an epigraph to the novel: "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve and hope without an object cannot live." (qtd.. in Bhatnagar 50) Rajesh Shukla's observation illuminates further :

Kamala Markandaya has used the couplet by Coleridge because these lines vividly state the theme of the novel. When work is done without any hope it becomes as useless as nectar in a sieve. If there is no objective in life, life becomes useless. (Shukla 220)

Gender empathy in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar In a Sieve*

Kamala Markandaya has depicted women in various shades. In her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya has presented the life and travails of Rukmani the peasant woman. In this novel, the journey starts from Rukmani who clutch the flag for women taking the initiative by coming out of her limited boundaries.

Husband and wife relationship is the most intimate and complex of all relationships. In the Indian social tradition of marriage, there continue a conflict between tradition and modernity. Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* depicts the traditional approach of the Indian women towards marriage. The protagonist Rukmani seems to conform to the established image of women personified in the mythical figures of Sita and Savitri who silently bear all hardships and remain devoted to their husbands. Born of the village head man and married to a tenant farmer below her family status, her good soul speaks of her husband as one " who was poor in everything but in love and care for me." (NS 4) She feels proud of him as he is efficient in farming, in maintaining the household single handed and he is also a loving husband.

Rukmani resists against all the predicaments life has to offer. "It is a thing that might happen to

anybody", he said. "Do not fret. Come, dry your eyes and sit up here beside me." (NS 5) This statement of Nathan shows his innate goodness and his co-operative mind-set towards his wife Rukmani. Nathan consoles her that every girl has to leave her house and he asks her not to worry and pacifies her by inviting her to sit beside him. This shows the kind of reverence that Nathan has for women and how he is psychologically prepared to treat his wife as a companion.

The main cause for Rukmani's ordeal is the beginning of industrialization in her village in the form of a tannery. The English chiefs buy the village field for a high price and so there is price hike for every village product and even vegetables. The village hawkers and sellers trade their goods to the English men. Therefore, hunger and starvation increase as, "the fruit of the peasant's labour goes either to the landlord or is destroyed by the ravages of nature." (Jain 79-80)

Markandaya uses the Savithri metaphor in this novel to elevate the protagonist. Parvati Mishra reinforces this idea::

Savithri metaphor has been ironically used in R..K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*, where Savithri tries to sever the mythical image by leaving her home when she can no more tolerate her husband Ramani's extramarital relations. She tries to commit suicide but is rescued by Mari whose wife Ponni advises her to assert her position in the family by handling domestic conflicts with iron hand. Eventually Savitri returns home signifying the importance of the dark room for an Indian wife who cannot enjoy a life of liberation. (Mishra 42)

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani mutely undergo Nathan's extramarital adventures in the interest of a peaceful nuptial life. For her, Nathan's infidelity with Kunti in his youth is unbearable, yet she hardly ever betrays her feelings of jealousy and distress. On the other hand, her faith and reliance on her husband remain unabated for she is the symbol of

unquestionable and unswerving devotion. As K.S. Narayana Rao remarks:

Markandaya's novels deal with contemporary Indian society, which is a traditional society in state of flux and change, and reveal a spectrum of moral attitudes on the part of the characters that people the fictional world, which include the traditionally moral, the amoral and the immoral attitudes. Although her woman characters are never relegated to the background and are, in fact, better drawn than their male counterparts, it is usually the men who get away with their delinquent sexual conduct. (Rao 69-70)

Rukmani supports her husband emotionally as well as physically. She assists him in the fields, cooks, cleans and cares for the children. While giving them roots, she does not believe in clipping their wings or does not stifle the objective of her offspring. Rukmani bids her sons goodbye with a heavy heart knowing full well that she will almost certainly never see them again.

Rukmani is not alone in her role as a self-sacrificing wife and mother and at best she is a usual representative of many such unlucky victims of the traditional, conventional and male-chauvinistic Indian society. Meena Shirwadkar's analysis Rukmani's self-sacrificing stance:

Woman as wife was mostly the *Pativrata*. The Sita- Savitri image was firmly implanted on the wife's mind. She was exhorted by the older women to seek fulfillment in her duty to her husband or if that was possible, to seek fulfillment in spiritualizing or sublimating her feelings. A portrayal of such woman is unique to Indo- Anglican fiction. (Shriwadkar147)

She becomes shockproof as one shock comes after another. Death visits her house and carries her son Raja to the anonymous world. The loss is matchless, yet she was strong enough to rise above the grief. One could find her spiritual and mental strength through her words: "These things were you, now there is no connection whatever; the sorrow within me is not for this body which has suffered and in suffering has let slip the spirit, by for you, my son." (NS 92)

Nathan notified her that their last child Kuti, conceived in glee has been taken away by unkind Death and she grieves for him. When match up to to Nathan, her mourning is more controlled, though no less emotional this time: "Yet, although I grieved, it was not for my son: for in my heart I could not have wished it otherwise. The strife had lasted too long and had been too painful for me to call him back to continue it." (NS 105) Similarly, when Nathan dies, she says poignantly: "I licked my wet lips. There was a taste on them of salt and of the fresh sweetness of the rainwater. I did not know I had been crying." (NS 189)

As Parminder Kaur and Sheetal Bajaj ruminates:

Time is a great healer, and with the passage of time, she (Rukmani) reviews her life with a calm mind with all passions spent. Her acceptance of the inevitable reality of the circumstances and apathetic resignation to the inherent determination manifests the typical image of an Indian woman. (Kaur and Bajaj 5)

Rukmani's sufferings form a queue and they multiply with the advancement of time. It started with the failures of harvest, the deaths of her sons Raja and Kuti, the departure of her other sons for the city and for Ceylon, the desertion of Ira by her husband, the withdrawal of Selvam from agriculture, the deprivation of land – all these tragic incidents make her "a Mother of Sorrows" (qtd. in Agarwal 154) but fail to crush her spirits or to shake her faith in the basic human values. Having faced the biggest blow of her husband's death, she comes back to her village with a renewed faith in an adopted son Puli and reconciles to life, which is in store for her. Arundhanti Chatterjee describes the character of Rukmani accurately:

She is the eternal mother bound by love and affection to her hearth and home. Biologically, she is the receiver giving birth to human beings. Emotionally, Philosophically and Spiritually too she is the absorber who imbibes everything that comes her way - joy, happiness, hardship, poverty, loss, pain, suffering - Nectar as well as poison. Her

journey from home to her husband's house is her journey to motherhood. (Chatterjee 85) Rukmani, therefore, has achieved the significance of universal motherhood. Everything that crosses her path is sieved through her kind, simple, tolerant, understanding, sympathetic and loving self.

Rukmani, the mother figure, symbolizes the mother earth. The Earth is the life - giver, the supporter, the sustainer, the nourisher and even more, the last resort, the consoler, the healer as it is the positive, sustaining force of life. The mother Earth is omnipresent with outstretched arms to welcome each and every one. While commenting on the noble quality of the stoic endurance of Rukmani, Deepthi Pandey observes:

Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is the Mother Earth. Her integrity is never on the brink of collapse. On the face of all calamities, she unfolds her lap to take in everything and everybody around her. She is the eternal mother figure. (Pandey 29)

The importance of traditional Indian women in the institutions of the family rose immensely only when they produce a male child who is considered as an heir to the family. Meena Shirwadkar's pointed observation in this regard throws more light:

The silently suffering wife becomes a venerable figure when she becomes the mother of a son. As a protective, holy, sacrificing figure, she pervades Indian culture. Patriots symbolize her as mother India... The mother is culture and in the novels is a creative, protective and centrifugal force in the family. (Shirwadkar 146)

Dr. Kenny has earned great respects from Rukmani. He turns to be a good adviser to her for Kenny is essentially a humanist and is above the narrow consideration of caste, creed and colour whereas Kunthi is immoral, iniquitous, crooked and callous. She threatens Rukmani to divulge to Nathan her secret affairs with Dr. Kenny. Thereafter she intimidates Nathan by threatening to disclose his immoral relations with her own self. It is strange that when Nathan and Rukmani are starving and Kuti is on the

verge of death, Kunthi does not hesitate to pamper in the disgusting game of blackmailing them. In fact, she is a stain on womanhood and the entire human society. Woman being an adversary to another woman could be seen through the character of Kunthi.

Another appealing character is the old granny, who has a unique place in the family of Rukmani. Though she is not legally connected to the family, she occupies a major position in the family. She comes to Rukmani's rescue in all her desolations and participates in their pleasures as a family member. When Rukmani is bothered about the future of Ira, old granny consoles her thus: "why fear? Am I not alone and do I not manage?" (NS 64) Old granny gives the only rupee left with her to Ira's child and she dies of hunger and her death was a cruel blow to Rukmani. "Only granny's death bore especially hard on me; for apart from the fact that we had been friends since my marriage I could accept the rupee which might have fed her for several days." (NS 125)

Biswas, another persona is a cunning money lender who is pitiless and money-minded. He is wicked and plays the role elected by fate for the exploitation of the poor and the deprived. Biswas makes a clever move as he interrupt Rukmani one day in the street and buys her vegetables at a much higher rate than she can ever expect to get from the old granny. Naturally, Rukmani is tempted and so has dealings only with him. He then becomes the indirect cause of the sufferings of the old woman who dies of hunger. Devoid of all essential humane traits, he needs the fundamental sense of social meticulousness. When passing through her hard times, Rukmani and Nathan approach him for some rice, and Biswas does not hesitate to exploit them. He charge an exorbitant price of two rupees for two pounds of rice. Thus in *Nectar in a Sieve*, persons like Kunthi and Biswas present the weak links of Gender egalitarianism just opposed to munificent and helpful people like old granny and Dr. Kenny who represent the love and faith on the Earth.

Conclusion

Markandaya has offered *Nectar in a Sieve* as an autobiographical presentation of Rukmani. Uma Parameswaran points out, "It is extremely unlikely

that any non - Indian writer could catch so beautifully and sadly the point of view of an Indian village likes Rukmani." (Parameswaran 120) Many critics have a similar opinion for they have graded *Nectar in a Sieve* as one of the finest novels in Indian writing in English that have been written with an autobiographical insight.

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