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Women Characters in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract

In this paper, an honest effort has been made through the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* to analyse the Markandaya from the female point of view if they can be united to emerge as a new creative force for the humanity. novel of Kamala

Key words: economic, religious, psychological, hunger, socio

Owing to prodigious talent Kamala Markandaya's place in Indo-Anglian Literature is unique in many respects. She is an outstanding realist and one of the leading women novelists of Post-Independence Era. She has nine novels to her credit. Her sense of involvement in the social life of India, her keen observations and her feminine sensibility bring her international fame. Numerous articles have appeared which highlight the varied aspects of Kamala Markandaya's writings and yet, it cannot be said that she has really received the kind of attention that she really deserves. As such there is still some scope to explore the varied aspects of her complex works. Search for identity is one of the common themes in Indo-Anglian literature. Kamala Markandaya's search is narrowed down to two levels: one is the sophisticated level where the tradition clashes with progress and the other is sociological level which deals with poverty, exploitation and political struggles. She feels alienated from her society and suffers from cultural schizophrenia. It is assumed that Kamala Markandaya's literature is a literature of concern. Marrying an English-man and permanently settling down in London, still her concern is for millions of

poor people in her mother country. Many Indian English women novelists have analysed the socio-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their image and the role towards them and the society. In Post-independence era, Kamala Markandaya marches on fore front for women and gives them a new coinage from possession to person. Of the nine novels of Kamala Markandaya, in this article, I have focused only on *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) to give justice in this limited article.

In Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, we find Rukmani, Nathan, Irawaddy, Kennington, Kunthi, Ammu, Arjun, Birla, Biswas, Carter, Das, Das's wife, Durgan, Foreman, Hanuman, Janaki, Kali, Kannan, Kutu, Murugan, Old Granny, Old man, Overseer, Padmini, Perumal, Puli, Raja, Rukmani's eldest brother, Rukmani's eldest brother, Rukmani's mother, Rukmani's son-in-law, Sacrabani, Shanta, Sivaji, Selvam, Tannery official, Thambi, Thangam, Woman in the grocery store etc as male and female; major and minor characters, out of which thirteen women play role as per their turn overcoming the odds.

Women have significant place in Markandaya's novels. **Rukmani is the woman protagonist in the novel, an example of suffering wife and patient mother.** There is no exaggeration in calling her novel as feminine or womanly as it reflects more the world of women and their ways of life than the world of men. She treats woman not as a member of society only but as a liberated individual who is searching for possibilities of her own identity in the male dominated and patriarchal society. The novelist shows her sagacity in launching female characters as her protagonists. Her protagonists possess life-affirming qualities. By making them central characters of her novel, she has highlighted their roles in present-day world.

In the novel, Kamala Markandaya has distinctively exposed the intense appeal of the socio-economic colour. It is responsible for the tragedy in the life of Rukmani who with her pertinacious courage endures it in the monstrous form of Nature's antagonism and expeditious industrialization. Owing to the natural calamities that result in the failure of the harvest, the tenant farmers find them on the edge of starvation and bitterly taste utter poverty that forces them to sell everything. These words of Rukmani have come out from the core of her heart and express not only her injured feelings but also the feelings of the thousands of poor Indian peasants who have to part with their small possessions.

"This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us for it stood on land that belonged to another and the land itself by which we lived. It is cruel thing, I thought." (137)

Nature blitzes Rukmani and Nathan first in an enraged form of heavy rains resulting in flood and then in the worst form of drought. It destroys everything, leaving nothing to eat and leads to ruin and despair. The equation 'More rice to sell' changes to 'No rice to sell' and in the end, into 'No rice to eat'.

Kamala Markandaya's remarkable quality that sets her from other India- English novelists is her realistic approach to literature. She presents

veritable replica of hunger before her readers. Rukmani voices her feelings as:

"For hunger is a curious thing, at first it is with you all the time ... to avoid but you cannot, it is with you." (91)

Hunger directs Kunthi to the safest route of prostitution; blackmails Rukmani and Nathan. Because of hunger, poor Old Granny makes a wrong assurance to Ira that it will not hint the life of Kuti, her brother if she loses her chastity. It is, indeed an irony that in our society such self-sacrifice as is done by Ira to save the life of her brother is neglected and labelled as a sin. People without considering the real circumstances, feel no hesitation in calling such woman as immoral and a stigma on the fair countenance of the society.

In the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani, Old Granny and Dr. Kenny are the ideals and pleasant shades of socio-psychological colour whereas Kunthi and Biswas are the patterns of nauseous shades. Rukmani is the ideal character that plunges in the links of human relationship with others. Where social affairs are grounded on self-interest, affection and outlooks play no role. Ira's husband deserts her as she is spotlessly clean.

"Mother-in-law, I intend no discourtesy, but this no ordinary visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought back to you. She is a barren woman." (54)

Rukmani departs to meet Ira's husband when Ira is cured of her sterility. But, she is shocked to discover that she has married with another woman. Rukmani's husband Nathan is not thoroughly devoid of moral sense as he has consciousness to confess his guilt before her. He confesses frankly his relations with Kunthi. When Nathan dies, she feels alone and desolate in the wide world. Rukmani and Nathan never blame when Arjun and Thambi are turned out of their jobs. Dr. Kenny who dedicates his life for the cause of humanity is the messiah to Rukmani and the family. Kunthi who commits countless sins does not hesitate to blackmail Rukmani by threatening her to disclose to Nathan her contact with Kenny. She does not spare Nathan and blackmails him too, by threatening to

disclose his illicit relations with her own self. Old Granny takes care of Rukmani during this crisis as intimate colleague. Rukmani feels nervous when she thinks of the future of Ira. Her sacrifice can be seen when she gives the only rupee left with her to Ira's child. She dies of starvation and her death leaves a deep imprint on the heart of Rukmani. Some people exploit the poor and needy by honeyed tongue and take undue advantage of their pitiable plight. Biswas, the bunia belongs to this category. He tempts Rukmani by purchasing her vegetables at a much higher rate than she expects, thus causing injury to the old woman who dies of starvation.

In the novel, Kamala Markandaya has superbly painted the socio-religious colour that includes different shades- fatalism, superstition, material verses spiritual values etc. The Indian people who are coloured in socio-religious feelings are stoic and hence resume to their fate without weeping and lamenting. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani and Nathan face untold sufferings but like a stoic, they bear them. Rukmani who longs for a son actually bears a daughter. But she consoles herself thinking that Gods are very busy and cannot attend to everyone. Being religious, she presents her daughter Ira, a lingam that is a symbol of fertility. Due to Dr. Kenny's treatment, Ira becomes free from the course of sterility and is now fit to be a mother. Nathan goes to Ira's husband to convey this good news. But to his shock and surprise, he finds that Ira's husband has married another lady. Nathan and Rukmani again stick to the will of God. Rukmani tells Nathan:

"No fault of yours, or the girl's or her husband's. It is fate. I do not like to think of the future." (66)

Kamala Markandaya succeeds in lending different shades of the socio-religious colour to her novel. She believes that stoicism provides the Indian people a sort of mental strength and protects them from the danger of tension and conflict.

While outlining diverse shadows, the novelist displays no support either to the east or to the west. She is quite intelligent as she looks at the West through the eyes of the East and she looks at

the East through the eyes of the West. Nathan and Rukmani in the novel are the representatives of the East while the speedy industrialization and Dr. Kenny symbolize the West. Dr. Kenny has affection with the Indian people but senses sickened with their stupidities, dearth and quiet humbleness. He displays no curiosity in the Indian thinking of starve yourself for the refinement of emotion. But he ensures his best to mend the lives of the Indian people as he gathers huge money from England for the creation of a hospital in Rukmani's village. Inactive and obedient are the correct adjectives for the persons of the East while energetic and aware of their privileges are for the society of the West. Relatively, she conveys the solid points of the eastern values. Marriage, in the western culture is simply a contract, but in the eastern culture, it is not a contract but a sacred relation.

Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* deals with full range of feminine experiences. Her women dominate the scene and are superior to male characters. What Ruskin said about Shakespeare that 'he has not heroes but heroines' is quite true in case of Kamala Markandaya who has portrayed almost every form of woman. Her skill of painting the portraits of women with different colours is laudable. With the alchemy of her heart, she has transmuted them into bright stars and her male characters into planets that have no light of their own but receive it from the stars that shine brightly with their own light.

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