

Celebration of Womanhood in Nectar in a Sieve

It's the fire in my eyes
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet,
I'am a woman
Phenomenally .

Women can be acclaimed as the super species created by God. They have proved that success is not dependent on any gender. Professional and personal life have been equally and perfectly balanced by women over the decades. The multi-tasking, multi-talented, infallible machine called 'woman' created long ago by Almighty has been serving mankind since times immemorial. The tenacity of women, their determined face with turbulent hearts, all over the world calls for the celebration of womanhood and their potential existence in the society as a whole.

As Eleanor Roosevelt says

“Women are like tea bags. We don't know our true strength until we are in hot water.”

Key words-

Womanhood, patriarchy, social customs, women writers, familial bonding, endurance, Tenacity of women.

Literature is the medium through which sentiments reach hearts and touch the chords. Studying literature is an enriching, eye-opening experience and help in construction of a valuable society. And when the pen is held by women writers, the influence is manifold. Many Indian women novelists have dominated the literary scene to explore female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is away from patriarchal society. Among the different colours and shades of the women novelists including

Nayantara Sehgal, Attia Hosain, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaye occupies a special position.

Kamala Markandaye is, undoubtedly, a distinguished novelist, social worker who heralded a new era of feminine existence in her novels. She always celebrates the mental, emotional and spiritual well being of women and asserts the fact that the world needs the perception to bow down before their strength. The diasporic writer is fully aware of the changing scenario of Indian society and social traditions. She has focused on the fact that womanhood needs to be celebrated for women's strength, their individuality and their own identification. The novels of Kamala Markandaye including *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice*, *Some Inner Fury*, *The Golden Honeycomb*, *A Silence of Desire* and others give voice to the voiceless, meek part of the globe which we call women. Women are the driving force and action-monger of Kamala Markandaye's novels. She has shown the importance of female existence in the complex fabric of the loom of Indian social structure; where the importance is given mostly to the age old patriarchal set up and the female are confronted with several obstacles.

Kamala Markandaye, through her heroines, clearly disapprove injustice, social inequalities, exploitation, declining social values, cruelty, colonial imperialism and much more. A woman's quest for combating the upheavals of social compulsions is prevalent in her female characters. Her heroines are in constant search for meaning and value of life. She portrays a realistic picture of contemporary women through her characters like Rukmani, Nalini, Ira, Mira, Roshan, Helen, Lalitha, Mohini, Usha, Valli.

The character of Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is portrayed as an awakened woman whose life is full of hopes and frustrations, pleasures and pains, rise and fall, disappointments and exhilarations. The plot of the novel revolves around the personality of Rukmani who is centrifugal force providing acceleration to the story; which is about her struggle for survival and the persistent battle against adverse circumstances.

Nectar in a Sieve begins with depiction of Rukmani as an old woman who imagines her deceased husband's presence in her sleep emphasizing her

strong familial bonds. She remembers her childhood when she was brought up in conservative, traditional Indian household where marriage was the ultimate goal of a woman's life and partnerships were determined by wealth and social status. Like her sisters, she also dreamt of a large wedding but was married at twelve to Nathan, a tenant farmer. Without reflecting any grudges, she adjusts to her married life and runs her household by getting absorbed in all her chores. She goes into town to buy vegetables and other provisions. She learns how to milk the goat and plant a garden. All this shows Rukmani's insight, thoughtfulness and her commitment towards her family. Her rice farmer husband, Nathan, too, remains patient and proves to be a loving person. Rukmani's marriage is not without crisis but equipped with a deeper understanding of human nature. She is a true partner to Nathan and when she learns of Nathan's infidelity with Kunti, she understands his deviation for she knows that Kunti has fire in her body; and despite this, Rukmani and Nathan's marital bonds are strengthened by her acceptance. Rukmani derives strength from him to go ahead in life. She says in the novel:

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which none 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.

Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel, captures the elements of happiness in the above extract and asserts the thought that true joy comes from essentials rather than from luxuries. She gives birth to her first child, a beautiful daughter Irrawaddy (Ira) . A woman herself, she protests the receiving of her born daughter and wails, “What woman wants a girl for her first born?” This depicts the social construct in which men occupy a superior position in the society to the extent that even a woman cannot welcome girl child as her first born. Rukmani, too, could not escape this mind set. Also, as a wife, she understands Nathan’s need of having a son. When she could not conceive for six years, she goes forward without the knowledge of her husband and underwent infertility treatment by a western doctor by the name of Kennington (Kenny) as a result of which she becomes mother to five sons- Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam in quick succession, She delights in her sons but their economic condition dwindles.

The novel unfolds gradually, stage by stage, the miseries that overtake Rukmani's village with the introduction of a tannery that is being built in the vicinity of it. Priorities are wrongly fixed, wrong choices made and the village is invaded by the city wallahs. Beguiling the land lords, they annex the cultivable land and start building a tannery on it. As a result, the tenanted labourers are rendered jobless. Their lands taken away, they have to find work elsewhere. Victims of cash nexus, they don't adjust well with the change around them. Rukmani's whole family is affected by this change. Her two older sons go to work in the tannery but they are soon dismissed for their leadership in labor strike. She is taking all possible steps to keep her family running. Her apparent dumbness and passivity are transmuted into an acceptance of life because of which she escapes imbalances of mind, body and spirit.

Rukmani marries Ira at fourteen in keeping with the social custom. Due to destruction of all their crop, she sacrifices all her savings to buy food for the family without expecting any help from outside. A woman of fortitude and capable of deep understanding, it is she who bears through famine and flood and scarcity and is the mainstay and binding force in the family. Ira's husband returns Ira to her parents' home because she is barren, This blow is also borne by Rukmani as her fate and she says, "I don't blame him. He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient." Meanwhile, Rukmani furthers her own family by giving birth to Kuti, her youngest son. Again, drought befalls and Rukmani sells most of their possessions to keep her household going, Rukmani has to face a series of mishappenings. Her third son starts working as a servant in the city. Her fourth son is killed stealing a calfskin from the tannery. Kuti suffers the most from hunger due to their poor economic condition. Ira prostitutes herself to feed him. Despite her efforts, he dies. Here, the heroine, Rukmani voices a note of dissent. The tannery corrupting the atmosphere of the village with its smells and clamour, and corroding the values of the people, was the main target of her attack. She concedes that it was bettering village life by bringing in more money but there were counter-balancing evils. Greater commercialization, an alien population, labour unrest and the death of a son are some of its consequences. When her husband advises her to accept its presence, she says "Never, Never."

Ira's division to prostitution can be attributed to social evils and cruel customs. If the tannery could have employed Ira, nullifying the gender bias of the society, she would not have to resort to evil means of earning a livelihood, but Rukmani put up a brave front in this case and stood like a pillar with her daughter. When Ira has a son, she accepts his albinism and guards him from the world's inquisitive gaze.

Meanwhile, Rukmani's son, Selvam, joins doctor Kenny for apprenticeship but miseries do not seem to leave Rukmani. The family again experiences a great loss when land agent tells them that their land has been sold to the desired tannery. Rukmani again faces the challenge with high spirits and decides to move to city to her son. Difficulties chase them again. They can not find Murugan and the thieves steal their bundles and all their money. We find conflict between tradition and modernity here. Rukmani feels helpless and laments at a point where she says, "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 for and no father. Only money can make the rope stretch, only money." The city's unjust structure robs them of liberty and choice, their birthrights as humans.

Hope arrives in the form of a leprous street urchin named Puli who steers them out of their miseries. The positive attitude of Rukmani that was the outcome of her inner strength helped her stand on her feet again and withstand this social oppression. She works as a letter reader, her husband works at a stone quarry. They continue their journey of life till the death of Rukmani's husband due to ill health. Her endurance increases with increasing losses. It comes to the forefront that Rukmani's strength does not lie in her muscular power but in her inherent capacity for compassion, sacrifice, nurturance and acceptance of the inevitable. Finally, she returns to her village, to her loved ones with Puli as her adopted son exemplifying her dauntless attitude and resolute fervor.

Conclusively, Nectar in a Sieve is a study of Rukmani's courage and patience to face life's blasts. She is a traditional woman who is conscious of her duties to her husband and the family with her strong spirit, she refuses the role of "pitiable creature even though she is poor, In Hindu belief, suffering is a form of purification and Rukmani is willing to bear her suffering and rise above misfortunes. She had an inherent strength to

face the calamities of life and was adept at the wisdom of compromise and adjustment. The novel clearly implies that you are ruined when you don't accept life as it comes. Throughout Rukmani's story, she has celebrated life and its abundant fertility. Truly, the novel celebrates her spirit of womanhood.

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