

# Gender Role in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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### Abstract

Women are being presented in Kamala Markandaya's novels as the center of concern. She is a famous Indian novelist in the postcolonial era and she is very famous internationally for her masterpiece "*Nectar in a Sieve*" 1954 .

Markandaya treats women's issues and problems in her novels in a very deep way. A woman quest for identity and redefining herself finds reflection and constituted an important motif of the female characters.

What helps Markandaya in drain a realistic portrayal of a contemporary woman is that having a deep insight into women's issues. Markandaya explores and interprets the emotional responses of women and their problems with much understanding.

In her novels, female characters are the chief protagonists searching for meaning and value of life. Also She presents an existential struggle of a woman in some of her novels who refuses to submit her individual self and emerges undergoing much pain and suffering.

In her writing, Markandaya traces a woman's journey in order to know herself. This journey is from self-denial to self-assertion, from self-negation to self-affirmation, and from self-sacrifice to self-realization.

**Keywords:** gender, colonial, Nectar, identity, struggle, realization, affirmation.

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## Chapter One

In the town of Mysore in Southern India, Kamala Markandaya was born in 1924, to a Hindu-Brahmin family. She studied in Madras University and also worked as a journalist. She moved to England and there she married Bertrand Taylor. As a novelist she has eight novels in her credit. Uma Parmeshwaran, who has written about Markandaya's work, wrote: "Markandaya's strength as a novelist comes from her sensitive creation of individual characters and situation which are simultaneously representative of a larger collective; her prose style is mellifluous and controlled". . (www.epitomejournals.com.p, 3).

Markandaya's first published work was *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). It portrays the life of Rukmini who leads mental and physical tortures in her life, she is poor and has many hardships, but she shows remarkable forbearance. She introduces Rukmini as the "positive and dynamic image of heroism in the midst of inexperienced despair and hardships" (Naik 236).

She recalls the past life of her marriage to Nathan a landless farmer and how her hopes of grand marriage are shattered leaving her father joining her husband Nathan in a cart. Reaching her new home to sink down with grief and deep anguish and frustration. "I wanted to cry. This mud, nothing but mud and thatch was my home. My knees gave first the cramped one, then the other, and I sank down" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 4).

The husband's assurance and kindness touches her heart as he says that soon they will have a bigger house. Rukmani expresses her content saying that the house is all right and she is satisfied with him. She never complains at all but she grateful to her husband because he is so kind to her. She starts offering her love on knowing that her husband himself has built the hut with his own hands for her. This house becomes the creation of love and so she respects him for his nobility of heart. She feels joyful to realize the intensity of his love saying::

"A woman they say always remembers her wedding night. Well, maybe they do; but for me there are other nights I prefer to remember, sweeter, fuller, when I went to my husband matured in mind as well as body not as a pained and awkward child as I did on that first night." (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 2)

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Rukmini gives birth to a girl firstly naming her Iravadi. Then she does not have any children for seven years. Nathan desires a son to carry on his name. So she senses his pain and disappointment. Going to her family's house, and meeting Dr. Kenny who understands her troubles. through his treatment, she conceives again and becomes a mother of six sons which makes her very proud. She never tells her husband about Dr. Kenny. It seems that her concept of life is very simple:

“While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eyes and your husband sees beauty in you, which no one has been 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? My heart sang and my feet were light as I went about my work getting up at sunrise and going to sleep content. Peace and quiet were ours”. (*Nectar in a Sieve* 7)

Rukmani accepts her husband with no land and not like her father, she believes that one day they might have, “ True, my husband did not own the land he tilled, as my father had done; yet the possibility was there that he might one day do so”( *Nectar in a Sieve* 7).

In fact, Rukmani is a keen observer of nature believing that it represents power—constructive as well as destructive. Expresses her point of view she says:

“ Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid, but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat”. (*Nectar in a Sieve* 39)

Her happiness is dependent harvest and that in turn is dependent on timely and sufficient rains. She does not stand the shock given by nature. Also the industrialization in the form of tannery flattens her:

“But the change that now came into my life into all our village, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 29).

Rukmini does not like the change as it has noise, stinking smells and crowds. The village has “all noise and crowds everywhere and rude young hooligans idling in the streets and dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his money” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 50).

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The tannery, symbolizes industrialization and evils which deprives the children from playing in the playground and raises the bazaars prices highly. She recollects:

“ Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and clearing its cool silences with clamour”. (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 135)

Meanwhile, she does not consider the tannery as responsible for the misfortunes. Nathan is dispossessed of the land after working in it for thirty years hoping of owning it up. She describes the plight of the farmer:

“This home my husband had built for me with his own hands in the time he was waiting for; brought me to it with a pride which I used to better living, had so very nearly crushed. In it, we had lain together and our children had been born. 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 a cruel thing, I thought. They do not know what they do to us”. (*Nectar in a Sieve* 137)

When her daughter Ira returns as a barren woman, she is shocked. Her sorrow is extreme and crosses all the limits as she discovers her daughter who has been prostituting in order to buy milk for her ailing brother Kutí. She tries to stop her but in vain.

## Chapter Two

To explain the gender role in any kind of writing, one should know what is meant by gender and gender bias. To separate gender in a way which prefers one sex over the other is gender bias. Markandaya is a feminist writer who concerns with the lives of Indian Women in her writings. Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays the imbalances of Indian women. Rukmani proves herself to be:

“an epitome of Indian wives because of her tolerance and submissive nature, exploited by male chauvinism but she enshrines as an ideal women in the Indian society” (JOSR.p13).

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To examine gender, one should define the term. It is defined as "classification of sex" and "preference or inclination that inhibits impartiality; prejudice" (Ibid . It is to prefer one sex over the other, there is a patriarchal set up where women are of little significance. According to the Laws of Manu,

" a woman is valuable only as far as she is the possible begetter of a male offspring. In her childhood, a woman should always be a subject to her father, in youth to her husband and after his death to her sons (Ibid.,). The women are kept in dependence by the male members of their families.

"The deplorable condition of women in the Indian society and the gender distinction manifested in female feticide, the liabilities attached to the girl child, declining sex ratio, high level of illiteracy among women as inferior and second class citizens, the various other forms of exploitation and gender violence are directly linked to the attitude to women".(Ibid.,)

Markandaya is concerned in her novels with the problems in the lives of Indian women who have psychological trauma in Indian society. Because she is a woman herself, dives into their mind through her feminine sensibility and deep insight to bring to light their problems, and their emotional imbalances. It is known that the women possess the power of endurance, love and foresight which contributes to the happiness of others, the moment they get married, they become the slaves of their husbands. They should also remain faithful and sincere in taking care of their husbands however bad and cruel their husbands are. The male has a voice whereas the female has no voice, a woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent home maker in the family.

Rukmani, the protagonist in *Nectar in a Sieve* is " the fulcrum and the sustainer of the family bond. The novelist has delineated the character of her heroine to the most miserable rural Portrayal of Womanhood". (Ibid., p14) .

Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of a village Headman, is married to a man below her status. She is satisfied with her marital life. She does not complain as she is a self-sacrificing women. Her satisfaction of husband is

"be all and end all" of life. She says that she need him . She is unaware of her rights. She never finds fault with him and she shares all misfortunes with Nathan till he dies. She accepts her fate designed by her husband. Rukmani proves herself to be a silent sufferer because of her passivity which stops her from asking anything for her sake as she realizes that what is the companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons on the earth, varying only in

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degree(Sunnel,p.6). What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change. Markandaya represents Rukmani as an epitome of Indian woman who knows herself to be tampered in the flames of responsibilities and circumstantial pressures,she never wants to destroy the marriage bond. Rukmani succeeds her marriage ties through her tolerant nature. She proves herself as the true image of tradition-bound women with the attributes such as submissiveness,

” through her endurance and confidence by coming out of a man's rib and not from his feet to be walked on or not from his head to superior over but just from his side to be equal”(Ibid.).

In general , the women in India have no identity of their own as they belong to their father before they are married and to their husband after they are married and in the old age they have to depend on their sons. However, they attempt to establish new identity with their changing gender roles. For example,

“ in a conservative family, a husband used to represent in public affairs. Now most of elite young women represent and manage the public and political affairs. These identities of women are separate from their husbands. The working-women particularly are to compromise and adjust themselves as wife, mother, as an employee performing their household traditional responsibilities.(www.epitomejournals,p.2).

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” .(*Nectar in a Sieve*.185).

## Chapter Three

For Markandaya the portrayal of the relationships between the two genders always had a fascination . Her characters are strong and courageous as they have sturdy will power to face the life with great audacity. The heroines of Markandaya 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”. (RJELAL p.524). In all her novels, Markandaya has revealed her protagonists who believe that they are never inferior to their male counterparts.

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Gender empathy is found in *Nectar In a Sieve*, women are depicted in various shades. 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 was 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. 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. Nathan shows his innate goodness and his co-operative mind-set towards his wife Rukmani. He 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 fruit of the peasant's labour goes either to the landlord or is destroyed by the ravages of nature.” (Jain.p .79-80) .

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 devotion.

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.

“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.p.85).

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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, Deepti 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.P.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.

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 could catch so beautifully and sadly the point of view of an Indian village

likes Rukmani.” (Parameswaran. P. 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.

## Conclusion

Obviously, as everyone knows, time is a great healer, and with the passing of time, Rukamini deals the life with calm of mind, all passions spent. Her calm acceptance of the reality of the situation and resignation manifest typical image of an Indian woman. Meena Shirwadkar identifies her with Maurya in J.M. Synge's play, *Riders to the Sea*. All tragic incidents make her “a Mother of Sorrows”. She comes back to her village after her husband's death with a faith in an adopted son and reconciles to life, which is in store for her.

Thus, the novel is a story of struggle of Rukamini who gives a message in the chaotic situation that must have faith in life. She fights with many conditions but does not surrender herself to them. It gives a way to look at life as if one believes in life; it will have the sustaining power. Markandaya has an ability to peep into the psyche of the character and to depict the suffering, and humiliation of female characters. Rukamini stands as an



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undefeated one. She keeps her image as a mother, wife and more than the struggler for living life.

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