

**KAMALA MARKANDAYA's 'NECTAR IN A SIEVE' – THE
VOICE OF THE VOICELESS**

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Indian English Literature is a genre deep rooted in the cultural scenario of the Indian soil. As a literary genre, it has contributed towards the formation and the reformation of the processed identity of the nation as a whole. Special mention should also be made about the contribution of Indian women writers in English towards the identity formation of India with regard to their poignant novels. In the realm of fiction, Indian women novelists have heralded a new era and have earned many laurels both at home and abroad. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively and are showing it even today without any hurdle. What they have accomplished in their fiction is the narration of the nation in all its colours and social contours. As Mitra has stated, "...relation between the nation and the novel is more acute in the case of women's writings" (185). Several talented women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Geetha Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English and are popularly known as the Goddess of Eros!. Now-a-days people enjoy reading the anglicized novels presented by these new age women writers. Thanks to their efforts, classification of feministic or male writings hardly makes any sense today unlike the past that undervalued and less prioritized women's writings.

KAMALA MARKANDAYA – AUTHOR OF THE BEST SELLERS

Being a social worker and journalist at the same time, Kamala Markandaya could watch and analyze the individuals residing in the society. In comparison to writings of the other women novelists, the novels of Kamala Markandaya fully reflect the awakened feminine sensibility in contemporary India. She was fully aware of the changing Indian traditional society in post-independent India. As a diasporic writer, her themes are often the east-west encounter and the consequent conflict between the cross cultural values. However, she rightly observes a definite cultural continuity amidst varied social, economic, and political changes in modern India. Incidentally, she also explores the impact of change on the human psychology more so on the women characters in her novels. Markandaya's objective is to help women in general to attain identity, dignity and recognition for their contribution to society. Yet, she is not a radical feminist and her novels are not an outright condemnation of a repressive male dominated society nor are these naturalistic accounts about the victimization of women. They just reflect the

ambivalence of change in women. Being a conservative feminist, her feminism is, of course, implied in her novels.

Nevertheless, the common thread in all her women characters is that they quest for autonomy for the self, coupled with nurturance for the family and fellow feeling for the larger community of men and women, a venture in which the women are confronted with several obstacles emerging mainly from the irregularities in the social system along with economical difficulties. As the women battle with these forces, they develop a mature vision of life. While the desire for autonomy and nurturance co-exist simultaneously leading to disillusionment at every stage, yet the women characters firmly refuse to lose either hope or courage. Through her novels which she terms as “the literature of concern” kamala Markandaya is, forever, in search for something positive. She has portrayed a gloomy scenario of Indian life due to changes in social, economic and political spheres yet she believes that togetherness and mutual understanding can create a meaningful existence for mankind. In each of her novels she has portrayed women characters who are prepared to meet the challenges of life in its own way with their indomitable bend like the grass attitude – a quality though seems to be submissive in nature but the right cognizance will be endurance and courage that never break. That’s why, the central theme of my paper is to analyse how Kamala Markandaya advocates this survival theory cum attitude which best fits this social havoc, to the women community in general to make a mark in their life by rising above all the errands, obviously life has for all - pertaining to her magnum opus ‘Nectar in a Sieve’.

NECTAR IN A SIEVE – IN LIGHT OF THE SUGGESTED TITLE

The text under consideration is, Kamala Markandaya’s ‘Nectar in a Sieve’ and the perusal of this novel tells us the transition that took place in rural India as endorsed by Industrialisation that led to the disintegration of cultural norms in which the central character, also narrator, Rukmani occupies our heart and brain because of her ability to endure and accept changes in life. She is the centrifugal force providing sap to the other aspects of the body of the novel and helping it to grow firmly. The whole story is about hers and her family's struggle for survival and their persistent battle against poverty and much misfortune.

The plot is simple yet it is realistic and has many connotations to make us contemplate in depth about the happenings. As the younger daughter of a village-headman, quite contrary to her expectations Rukmani is married to Nathan, a landless tenant farmer. Rukmani is shocked about the infidelity of her husband. In spite of this initial shock, she manages to conceal her disappointment and has not complained about it; rather like a disciplined daughter she has accepted her lot and cares for her husband and children. When she does not conceive after Ira’s birth, she finds that she has a physical trouble but doesn’t lose faith. She receives Doctors help in fixing her infertility and surmounts this difficulty. This act reveals her progressive and liberal approach to the problems of life instead of fussing about it.

She implicitly believes that a woman’s place in life is always by her husband and ever supports Nathan in all his toil and moil. She is an epitome of the archetypal Indian wife who regards her husband as her God and her children as gifts from heaven. Poverty and starvation crossed the threshold of the couple from the beginning of their married life that appears to be a never ending process. In their struggle, they display the characteristic Indian attitude that they are simply agents in the great design of fate. They accept their fate without qualms and feel

contended in life in spite of a series of misfortunes visiting them. The traits of tenacity, honesty and simplicity, and having an unshakable faith in God as articulated by them, represent the traditional Indian attitude to life.

The establishment of a tannery in the village ushers in a new era in the life of the village community. Industrialisation is welcome for the upliftment of the poor; however it is not without evils. The tannery pollutes the serene and vernal atmosphere of the village with its stink. It corrodes the value system of village life. The age old economic and social authority in the village begins to disintegrate and crumble under the onslaught of industrialisation. People like Nathan and Rukmani who have worked in the fields throughout their lives, have never thought changes in the form of a tannery would ever come to their village. They feel disoriented and disconcerted. In that very same year of brutal drought, the family is hungry; their youngest son dies of starvation. It is almost as painful to watch the death of her son as it is to watch Rukmani's apparently passive acceptance of her situation. She is barely even roused to anger by this turn of events; rather, she accepts the situation as part of her way of living: "This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know," she writes, "that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve... still, while there was land there was hope" (p.132).

The industrialisation of her village changes these dynamics and eventually robs Rukmani of the comfort of her land. Rukmani appears to object to the double-edged nature of this industry, quite on the contrary, lured by its wages, her sons go to work in the tannery. Eventually, after too many bad seasons, she and her husband can no longer pay their dues, the landowner sells the land to the tannery, thus confirming Rukmani's fears that "the tannery would eventually be our undoing for it had spread like weeds... strangling whatever life grew in its way" (p.18). In the heat of her disappointment, she couldn't sustain this rage whereas Nathan is a passive sufferer who advises his wife: "Foolish woman... Bend like the grass that you do not break" (p.28). As a humble wife, Rukmani followed his words, suppressed her anger in favour of tolerance and then onwards adopts the same attitude throughout her life. The same fortitude to remain unshakable whatever the worst situation may be in life makes her accept calmly the treachery which Nathan, her soul-mate, gives her by his secret affairs with Kunthi. She also takes this same approach to the social world, acknowledging its injustice, but never being roused out of her tolerance. This is the aspect of Rukmani's character that most critics focus on when they call her a "typical Indian woman... an upholder of Indian tradition" (Abidi 94).

On the other hand, her intellectual affair with the worldly white doctor Kenny reveals a different dimension of her character and represents one of the important steps she makes in asserting control over the conditions of her own life. In fact, Rukmani develops into a stronger, more assertive character through her interactions with Kenny. Her boldness in this relationship is an indication that she is not a victim of modernity but is rather in negotiation with it. Theirs is not a romantic relationship, but is instead can be called as an intellectual affair. Rukmani seems to enjoy conversations with Kenny that she never engages in with her husband, who can neither read nor write and who shows little interest in the world beyond their village. She and Kenny are both adversaries and collaborators. They share secrets that Nathan does not know and would not understand the facts that he helped her and her daughter to overcome their infertility. By seeking out his help and concealing it from her husband, Rukmani seems to be limiting patriarchal control over her life by taking charge of the medical services she needs to create the family she needs and in this way Markandaya allows Rukmani to be a product of her times. At the same

time, Rukmani is aware that changing with times is not necessarily the best response and would not be the path she wanted to choose. Hence, Rukmani is neither the traditional woman nor the 'new' emancipated woman.

Rukmani as a woman of robust commonsense always anticipates things and also sees them happen virtually. For instance during the onset of tannery, she has an innate fear that it will be the cause for their future sufferings and it becomes an absolute truth when the same tannery and its employers prove to be the cause for Ira's changed way of life, also not enough they killed one of her sons, Raja, accusing him of robbery. The same instinct alarmed her when her sons Arjun and Thambi prepare to leave to be employed in the plantations of Ceylon. She feels that she is going to lose them forever. She tries to dissuade them going, by telling them that happiness in life does not depend on just money. But being grown-ups, she is also aware that they are out of her control and as an individual they would want to make their own decisions in life.

By the end of the novel, Rukmani has almost lost everything. Perhaps the greatest surrounding change that happens in the story is, after being evicted from their land, she and Nathan head to the city in hopes of leading the rest of their lives with one of their sons who left the home years ago. Their efforts to find their son end in vain, instead in this long and difficult journey, all their belongings and money are stolen along the way. Poverty and hunger drives them to work as coolie there, even in her sufferings Rukmani doesn't lose her kindness and sympathy for fellow people. She takes pity on Puli, a leprous boy, shares her food with him and adopts him as their son.

The list of adversaries reaches the climax when Nathan dies. After Nathan's death, Rukmani feels shattered and helpless: "Nathan no longer beside me... Ashes and dust scattered to the winds" (p.189). She has to face the worst of all tragedies in her life when her husband dies. But this is only for a short period as she soon revives her indomitable spirit: "I picked up the fragments of my life and put them together..." (p.189). Rukmani decides to go back to her homeland as she chooses not to live in the jarring cityscape. Significantly, at the end, Rukmani's return from the town to her village along with her adopted son Puli, symbolizes her ultimate triumph with her bend like the grass attitude which gave her the courage to endure all difficult phases in her life. Thus, we find in Rukmani, a noble woman who rises in our esteem because we find that her sufferings caused by cruel fate do not have the power to change her inherent noble qualities.

Rukmani's acceptance of life and nature in spite of the miseries in her life is an act of affirmation of faith. Her life has become a conundrum of conflicts, both social and economic. She becomes the symbol of the divide between the country and the city, the agrarian and the industrial, and the tradition and the modernity. She encounters numerous hardships from her son being killed to her daughter turning into a strumpet yet she never gave up her fights against these troubles and manages to survive. After each trial, she grows mentally stronger and keeps pushing for the end. She has an awakened sensibility which is at the very core of the novel. That's why, she outshines other women characters in the novel like Kunthi, Irawadhy, and Ammu, though they live in the same situation and the surroundings, stand in contrast to Rukmani.

CONCLUSION

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Thus Kamala Markandaya, in this novel of all times, traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation. Rukmani has traits of both leadership and submissiveness. She is the leader in the house where even her husband is subordinate to her and has less to say in her domestic affairs and decisions. She is dedicated to her husband, at the same time she is a symbol of women's emancipation and refuses to be suppressed by men. At times, she is portrayed as the supreme one but is equally powerless who lacks the drive to oppose as she knows well that things are uncontrollable under relentless nature. Her ambition is a modest and not modern one - to live in simple harmony with nature (tradition). Her motto of life seems to be 'it is better to feed the soul than to feed the body at the soul's expense'. She is even compared to our 'Mother Earth' by one of the famous critics, Balaram Gupta, in his book Indian English Literature. Here I quote his exact lines,

“Rukmani, the mother figure, symbolizes the mother earth, is the source, the origin, the well-spring, the life-giver, the supporter, the sustainer, the nourisher and even more, the last resort, the consoler, the healer. It is the positive sustaining force of life... Her integrity is never on the brink of collapse. (Gupta, 92).

Rukmani will certainly remain in the minds of the readers as a woman who could stand all kinds of suffering and who 'successfully' continued her journey of life never willing to stumble like blades of grass which bends for the force of wind but is never uprooted. Rukmani is like that humble grass who is flexible for any kind of changes and sufferings but the ultimate survivor with unbeatable courage and sustenance, and through such immortal character Markandaya seems to propagate the same attitude that can be better followed by the whole women community to make their livelihood in this relatively unadventurous social milieu and thus the title of the paper is justified.

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