

The Feminine Mystique: Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses *Nectar in a Sieve* as an interpretation of life in the Post-colonial Indian context and as Feminist Literature. From the geocentric point of view, the novel under consideration is approached as Women's Writing – Writing by a woman, speaking both for and as a woman. Kamala Markandaya may be classified as a feminist writer on the basis of her unique perspective as an Indian woman. The heroine, Rukmini, as presented in the novel, is true to her tradition and culture. She represents a woman's struggle to find happiness in a changing India. The novel underscores the rampant hunger and indebtedness of the Indian peasant woman. Rukmini is not only a central character but also the 'central consciousness' through which the events come filtered to the readers. Kamala Markandaya's approach is both realistic and humanistic. She portrays Rukmini as scaling great moral heights at the end of her life-long struggle. Rukmini's tale could be any village woman's tale in India of the fifties. She is the mainstay and binding force in the family. A woman of great fortitude and capable of deep understanding, it is she, who bears through all the suffering to emerge triumphantly. Markandaya upholds the virtues of love and motherhood. The novel presents the veritable saga of struggle and of the triumphant womanhood in the central character, Rukmini. A woman is not an island, she belongs to the mainland, the heartland of the human race.

KEYWORDS

Kamala Markandaya; *Nectar in a Sieve*; Feminism

Kamala Markandaya is one of the most distinguished women novelists on the Indian scene. Her work is inspired by a crusading spirit for the welfare of humanity and the alleviation of human suffering. A driving purpose motivates her novel which has aesthetic value and is artistically constructed. The present study analyses the novel as an interpretation of life in the post-colonial Indian context and as Feminist Literature. It tells the world the obstacles women face and disadvantages they suffer in the orthodox Hindu world.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya pictures a woman's struggle to find happiness in a changing India. The novel underscores the rampant hunger and indebtedness of the Indian peasant woman Rukmini. She is not only a central character but also 'the central consciousness' as Henry James called through which the events come filtered to the readers.

Kamala Markandaya's approach is both realistic and humanistic. Her success in the novel results from her right choice in Rukmini as the central consciousness of the novel. Rukmini's tale could be any village woman's

tale in India of the fifties. She is the mainstay and binding force in the family. A woman of great fortitude and capable of deep understanding, it is she who bears through the suffering. Markandaya upholds the virtues of motherhood and love. She is no hard-core feminist but a writer who is realistic and humanistic.

Nectar in a Sieve is approached in terms of feminist criticism. The novel is written by a woman writer speaking both for and as a woman. A woman's experience includes a different perceptual and emotional life. The woman's main sphere is her immediate domestic and social circle. Women's writing can also be viewed in terms of women's psyche. The psyche is a product of female culture rooted in class, race, nationality and history. It is as Elaine Showalter states, "a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space." Literature is a social institution using as its medium language, the social creation. The novel is also approached from the sociological aspect. This approach helps in the analysis of the artist's influence on the society. The relation between the writer and the work of art is reciprocal. A sociological approach is a synthesis of multifaceted aspects like social conditions, economic, political and psychological conditions of a society.

Kamala Markandaya in *Nectar in a Sieve*, traces Rukmini, the narrator-heroine, through a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation. The heroine emerges a greater and stronger character than her husband, Nathan. Rukmini's life is full of hopes and frustrations, pleasures and pains, triumph and defeat, rise and fall. Before the advent of the tannery, the life of Rukmini with her family was simply peaceful with her simple joys and sorrows. She was proud of the love and care of

her husband. She needed nothing else, no wealth, no luxury and no material pleasure. Rukmini feels great pain in her heart when her tranquil and serene life is spoilt by the din and bustle, the filth and the dirt. The loss not only of natural beauty and also of human virtues and values is the natural outcome of the industry. The tannery is indeed the root cause of tragedy in the life of Rukmini and her family. She searches for self-realization in a chaotic world of conflicting cultures - 'one dead, the other powerless to be born.'

Harrowing poverty and terrible drought lead to the death of Rukmini's younger son Raja. Her daughter Ira revolts against the false norms of traditional society because she is unable to bear the starvation of her family any more. She is forced to take recourse to prostitution to save her younger brother. Under the impact of modernity and industrialism, she thinks the preservation of life more pious than the observation of so-called moral values which fail to feed her family.

Rukmini is the silent sufferer who according to Meera Shirvadker, is the daughter of the soil 'who has inherited age-old traditions which they do not question. Their courage lies in meek or at times cheerful ways of facing poverty or calamity.' (49). Unstung by the bug of industrialism, Rukmini displays her faith in human dignity by assimilating the destitute leper boy, Puli into the nectar of her love and warmth, a natural feminine virtue, and gets him cured of his disease. By infusing meaning into his life she finds a new meaning in her own life.

In the so-called modern society, humanity and human values are dead and people prey on each other like vultures. The erosion of human values continues and greater is the need for protection of the eternal human values from decay. Rukmini faces the adversities of natural disaster when a monsoon destroys much of their home and

floods the rice paddies on which their livelihood depends. She watches as her children either suffer cruel fate or leave the village to make their own lives. She and Nathan lose their land and in the end, she becomes a widow.

Rukmini is not a woman who allows adversity to destroy her. She has enough in her life that fulfils her, children she loves friends and a happy marriage, to find the will to continue seeking improvement. While she is sometimes struck with despair, she never wallows in self-pity. She receives shock after shock. Her husband Nathan's infidelity, her daughter's sacrificial going on the streets, to the save the family from starvation, poverty, inertia, famishment, and disease - all these tortures her till the end of her life. Even her husband leaves her on his eternal journey. As Shantha Krishnaswamy observes, she is "... faced with great odds like famine, death, infidelity and prostitution amidst a backdrop of bone-chilling poverty, she wages a constant battle." (162) At the end of the novel, she is at peace with herself and her life. She is hopeful and cherishes her memories because she clings to the happiness in her past rather than to the heartache.

Rukmini's struggle epitomizes woman's undefeatable spirit. She brings us the message that while a woman may grow old fighting against all odds, and be wholly down on her luck, she can still dare to persist and thus win a victory by the very manner of her losing. Her victory is a moral victory of having lasted without permanent impairment of her belief in the worth of what she has been doing. Rukmini is the triumphant woman who is capable of snatching spiritual victory from circumstances of disaster and material defeat. Rukmini thus scales great moral and spiritual heights.

The novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, is crafted in a simple manner. Kamala Markandaya chooses a simple mode of narration. The

narrator-heroine, Rukmini, uses the traditional omniscient narrative voice. She is both a witness to the cycle of changes and the narrative voice. The reader is aware of the creative process even as the narrative is taken backwards and forwards, each crisis, each detail is sharply etched for the voice belongs to a character itself. Here again, there is a blend of the author and character. There is greater psychological depth in the delineation of characters in the novel. The narrative tautness is maintained with the reporting of the actions of characters by the narrator's 'creative' voice. The narrator and the author blend so that textuality is highlighted. The text in part becomes metafiction for the novelist draws obvious attention to her craft. Another important feature is the fusion of the author and the protagonist.

Kamala Markandaya presents in her writing the unique female perspective, too long as the male vision relegated it to the background and virtually blotted it out of existence. Helene Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in the women's writing, encodes female experience, the Feminist Vision. In the novel, the female vision is predominated. The authenticity of female experience is underscored in Rukmini, the peasant woman, the mother, true to her womanly, wifely, maternal instincts. The writer and especially her central character is part of the Indian social and national heritage being dedicated to freedom in family life, in society and in social life. The author's closeness to the central character makes *Nectar in a Sieve* 'a veritable saga of triumphant womanhood.'

Most women in fiction and in real life have to grapple with conflict situations. The Indian woman is caught in the flux of tradition and modernity - the burden of the past and the aspirations of the future. The study shows that the Indian woman - passive or aggressive, traditional or modern - serves to reflect the author's quest for psychological insight and

awareness. She evokes a continuous discussion of social values, she is the focal point of contact between the writer's consciousness and the alien world, the writer's experience of reality and hope for salvation. The Indian woman is resilient and emboldens her writer and reader alike to endure and prevail. The figure of the Indian woman represented by Rukmini, with her inner strength and integrity, paving her own resolute way through an exploitative, discriminatory world serves as an inspiring light of hope and endeavour. Kamala Markandaya has a message for the new generation. A woman is not an island, she is the mainland, the heartland of the human race.

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