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**RECONCEPTUALIZING NEW WOMAN IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NECTAR IN A SIEVE**


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**Abstract:** Kamala Markandaya is one of the brilliant names in the galaxy of Indian women writers. Her immense work has broadened the Indian English fiction world. Her works are very creative and has an essence of reality. Through her woman characters she portrays her worth, her beauty, potential and elegance. And this can be proved in her very first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* through the protagonist Rukmani and her daughter Irawaddy. Rukmani is credited for holding the flag of new woman. She is a woman not to be confined only to home and fulfill all the duties of a homemaker. She is the image of new woman who learns how to read and write and also teaches her children. Though faced with many misfortunes and struggles she never gives up but instead thrive to move forward in life. She represents a universal mother who is bound by love to her husband, children and home. Her character encourages women to be strong in their faith and has become a symbol of hope and goal to countless women who are living in isolation and frustration. Rukmani endures blow after blows the poverty, famine, death in the family, divorce of a barren daughter and so on but she stands as a strong woman who in spite of adverse circumstances refuses to succumb to the vagaries of life.

**Introduction:** Irawaddy on the other hand, is brought home by her husband because she is proven barren. When extreme poverty strikes, she thinks of saving her younger brother even at the cost of bearing the name of harlot. It is not an immoral act but an act of supreme self sacrifice like that of Tess in Hardy's *Tess of the D'urbervilles*. Both women portray a strong character that not only serves the purpose but also maintains their calm in the most critical situations and always tries to bring happiness to the family. Kamala Markandaya has shown the aspects of woman's life in *Nectar in a Sieve* with sensitivity and instinctive understanding.

Kamala Markandaya is known for her distinctive writings about women and her problems in the family and society. Born in 1924 Kamala Markandaya comes from an aristocratic orthodox Tamil Brahmin family of Mysore, South India. From 1940 to 1947 she worked as a journalist and also published short stories in Indian newspapers. In 1948 she married Bertrand Taylor, an English man and later migrated to England. She died on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2004. Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* rose to fame after its publication in 1954. The novel became Book-of-the-Month and best seller in United States. After the success of her first novel she went on adding new feathers to her cap. She was also awarded Asian Prize for her novel *Two Virgins* in 1974. She has to-date ten novels to her credit. *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury*, *A Silence of Desire*, *Possession*, *A Handful of Rice*, *The Coffer Dams*, *The Nowhere Man*, *Two Virgins*, *The Golden Honeycomb*, *Pleasure City* and *Bombay Tiger*. Her writing revolves around women's world. A fine feminine sensibility pervades her world of fiction.

*Nectar in a Sieve* is about a struggling woman who in spite of repeated blow of poverty and misery did not give up but thrived to move ahead in life. Rukmani possesses an amazing quality to deal with the harsh facts of life and she also accepts her fate in silence. The title itself *Nectar in a Sieve* suggests Rukmani's vain search for happiness but it 'does not in way suggest defeat of human spirit' (*Angom: 14*). According to Margaret P. Joseph,

"Rukmani's character is rather pathetic than tragic, for

she never realizes the tragedy of her situation and she never attempts to fight her lot and seek redressal of her grievances" (*Angom: 14*).

Rukmani like any other girl dreams of having a big bright future but Mother Nature was not on her side.

"My marriage will be such that everybody will remember when all else is a dream forgotten" (*Markandaya: 4*).

But unfortunately it did not turn out that way she imagined. For Rukmani, life took an unexpected turn when she stepped into womanhood.

"And by the time I came to womanhood even I had to acknowledge that his prestige was much diminished." Her father who was a village headman was reduced to nothing by the tax collector and the zamindari systems, so she had to marry a tenant farmer.

"For this reason they could not find me a rich husband, and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care for me, his wife, whom he took at the age of twelve".

Though married to a tenant farmer Nathan, for the first few years of her marriage she led a happy, contented and luxurious life and these can be seen when Rukmani says,

"I am happy because life is good and the children are good, and you are the best of all. What more could I say after that?" (*Markandaya: 59*).

"While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one 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? My heart sang and my feet were light.

Peace and quiet were ours. We owned our own ploughing bullocks; we kept a milch goat. From each harvest we saved and had gunny sacks full of the husked rice stored away in our small stone-lined granary. There was food in plenty for two people and we ate well. Rice for morning and evening meals; dhal; sometimes a coconut grated fine and cooked in milk and sugar; sometimes a wheat cake, fried in butter and melting in the mouth." (*Markandaya: 9*).

Rukmani's happily ever after did not last long. It is said

the more children you bear the more hungry mouths to feed, so was in Nathan and Rukmani's case. They had seven children to feed and had so little to eat. First came the drought followed by famine and it changed the life of their family and fellow villagers.

"Change I had known before, and it had been gradual, my father had been headman once, a person of consequence in our village. I had lived to see him relinquish this importance, but the alteration was so slow that we hardly knew when it came. I had seen both my parents sink into old age and death, and here too there was no violence. But the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye." (Markandaya: 26).

When the family was juggling between the two misfortunes the biggest blow came when the tannery was introduced in the village. The tannery not only snatched the peace and quiet of their lives but also the land in which they lived and grew crops. Rukmani detested the introduction of tannery in the village.

"They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were that we have done these things." (Markandaya: 30).

"Already my children hold their noses when they go by, and all is shouting and disturbance and crowds everywhere you go. Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us." (Markandaya: 31). Rukmani was a kind and loyal wife who always stood by her husband and children and one can say that she has a heart of gold when she forgives her husband of having an extra marital affair with one of the village lady Kunthi. Nathan had born her not one but two sons. When she comes to know of the affair she was torn into pieces but she forgives him thus showing the character of a new woman.

"Disbelief first, disillusionment, anger reproach, pain. To find out after so many years, in such a cruel way. Kali's words: She has fire in her body, men burn before and after. My husband was of those men. He had known her not once but twice; he had gone back to give her a second son. It is as you say a long time ago, that she is evil and powerful I know myself. Let it rest." (Markandaya: 88-89).

The next tragedy comes when her son Raja is murdered. The policeman tells her that Raja was caught and beaten to death when he was stealing money. A mother's pain and agony can be seen when she says,

"For this I have given you birth, my son, that you should lie in the end at my feet with ashes in your face and coldness in your limbs and yourself departed without trace, leaving this huddle of bones and flesh without meaning." (Markandaya: 92).

Rukmani has a strong enduring spirit and bears all the hardships, problems, difficulties and misfortunes that life throws at her and this can be seen when she says, "We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak for it's not man's spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes?" (Markandaya: 115). She also adds, "We are taught to bear our sorrows in silence and all these so that the soul maybe cleansed". (Markandaya: 116).

The credit goes to Rukmani for holding the flag of new woman. Her character has been portrayed in such a way that it brings out the strong sensitive woman in her. She symbolizes a woman of strong spirit, mind and soul who does not give up and in fact is ready to face the challenges of life and come out triumph. On the other hand Irrawady, daughter of Nathan and Rukmani is brought back to her parental home by her husband because she is proven barren. Ira stays with her parents and undergoes medical treatment, and finally when she is cured of her barrenness and goes back to her husband another tragedy lies ahead for her as well. Ira's husband had already taken another wife so he did not welcome her back to his house. She did not rebel or say anything but continued to stay with her parents and help them in whatever way she could. The new woman inside her arises when she does what she had to do in spite of knowing the after effects that will befall on her and how the society will look at her. She did not care for other's opinion because the only thing that mattered to her was how to save her dying brother from hunger, and it meant even if she had to sell her body. When her father scolds her severely

"I will not have you parading at night," to which she replies him in an equally determining tone, "Tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long as there is need. I will not go hunger anymore." (Markandaya: 102).

When poverty reached its highest peak Irrawady makes a supreme self sacrifice like that of Tess in Hardy's *Tess of the D'urbervilles*. When she saw the condition of her youngest brother going from bad to worse because of hunger she decides to work as a prostitute bearing the name as the cheap harlot. From her earned money she bought milk, fruits and food for her brother Kuti. But even at the cost of selling her body and her tremendous effort unfortunately she could not save Kuti from dying and he loses his life.

Rukmani and her daughter remained firm though faced with failures and tragedies in life thus making them a strong new woman who were capable of making decisions of their own and endure all the tragedy and misfortunes calmly. They are not materialistic but give importance to human values and the capacity to compromise sustains them throughout. Therefore, in the words of K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, "Rukmani gets her strength from her love for her husband and children and her faith in human dignity. The suffering she faces leaves her stronger. She is not a weakling to accept defeat". She is the mother of sorrows with extraordinary resilience and pliability that helps her remains unbroken and intact (Angom: 17).

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