



Unvoiced Palpitations: Discernment of Protest and Resistance

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Abstract

*Discernment against womenfolk has been a matter of debate. Caught in an intricate web of the patriarchal world, women face immense hurdles on their way toward the realization of their ambition. An attempt has been made to see how a woman is tutored for a subsidiary role and how her persona is acclimatized into a subordinate role right from her childhood. Living in different circumstances, women suffer a lot at the hands of patriarchy and become victims of authoritarianism, oppression, and suppression which diminish their existence into oblivion. Not only the society but also the kinsfolk consider them inferior in comparison to their male counterparts. The denigrating plight of numerous women to abject poverty, dispossession, and sexual battering corresponds with the impact of industrialization leading to the wreckage and worsening of women's lives on the grounds of sex and class. This paper examines the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* written by Kamala Markandaya which deals chiefly with the woman's intrinsic and extrinsic role, exposing the myriad acts of discrimination meted out to women and also capturing the stirrings of feminine displeasure against such role constructs.*

Keywords: *Patriarchy, Tradition, Identity, Marginalised, Feminine psyche, Role constructs, Resilience.*

Patriarchy like a conformist monster, dictates, degrades, and almost rescinds a woman as an individual. It accentuates all forms of subjugation and has efficaciously muzzled the anguish of women. A woman though conscious of her rights, yields to the prevalent customs established for her by the male xenophobic society as women, usually, are viewed as frailer sex to the menfolk. In the Indian scenario, the distinctiveness of women is usually connected to and defined by the societal and cultural norms of a familial structure. The identity of women is therefore defined within the parameters of their social relationship with men. The characteristic quality of an Indian spouse is such that she cheerfully handles life with all its whims. Though men might be unprincipled, Indian women are expected to remain loyal while taking care of their husbands and families. In the social milieu, only male members have the right to express their sentiments. In a patriarchal society, a woman is supposed to play myriad roles –that of an idyllic wife, a patient mother, and an exceptional



homemaker. Often we see the image of an archetypal woman whose permanent goal is to make others happy and satisfied. Women authors write novels to break the stereotypical established manacles. (Hale, 583). The same could be said about the author of *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya who is respected and cherished by many for her forthright voice among the Indian people to depict the unvoiced problems of women.

The women characters in Markandaya's novels reflect an odyssey from submission to defiance while progressing through different phases of her life. The women are undeniably at crossroads as they are caught in the manifold snare of human relationships, and become a pendulum that moves incessantly but never finds its destination. Torn amidst tradition and modernism, she experiences psychosomatic turmoil. Markandaya delves deep into the inner mind of the repressed woman named Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel and the youngest of the four daughters of a village headman. She marries at twelve a tenant peasant, Nathan, whom she has never met before and who is far below her status. Marriage makes her leave her family and move to a different environment. Rukmani represents the regular Indian woman who sacrifices her time and energy for the happiness of the family and strives for the gratification of her husband who is the be-all and end-all of her life. She believes in her fate and is portrayed as ignorant of her rights. Till her husband dies she acquiescently accepts her destiny and takes a great effort to protect her husband's honour despite his infidelity. During a conversation, she tells 'A woman's place is with her husband.' (Markandaya 111) When she comes to know of Nathan's extra-marital affair with Kunthi, she expresses 'Disbelief first; disillusionment; anger, reproach pain to find out.....' (Markandaya 88) and remarks that women are tutored to accept tribulations silently. She continues to be submissive as she remarks, 'Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons or the earth...What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?' (Markandaya 115)

The novel throws light on Rukmani's point of view, and the prevalent bias instructed in individuals when she becomes the mother of a daughter Irrawaddy. She along with her husband felt unhappy and disappointed at the birth of a girl child. Though Kali comforted her stating that she could have many children later on in life, 'Rukmani mused that it was 'so easy to be comforting'... 'As Kali had three sons already, she could afford to sympathize.' She wants to give birth to a male child as her husband



desired a son who would 'continue his line and walk beside him on the land' rather than a daughter who would take dowry and leave 'her memory behind.' (Markandaya 17). Though Nathan wants a son to carry on his name, Rukmani does not conceive for the full seven years. At her mother's house, she meets Dr. Kenny and confides her troubles to him. It is under his treatment that she conceives again and soon becomes the proud mother of six sons—Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam, and Kuti. The training of societal norms begins early, as is substantiated when the first male child is born. Rukmani remarks that the disappointment was turned to joy when she gave birth to a male child as her husband was overjoyed and her wizened father travelled to have a glimpse of his grandson. Instruction and training of girl children to be good, docile members of society begins very early in life. In *Sorties* Cixous defines the pre-destined position of woman 'as a non-existent being' in the family, the microcosm of the society: 'You can even fail to notice that there's no place at all for women in the operation. (Cixous 283) A woman as a girl receives her instruction for her future life from the point of male tradition. As a result, her perspective is coloured by the influence of the father or male tradition.

Nectar in a Sieve elucidates the despicable quandary of an infertile woman. Rukmani is shocked when her son-in-law returns Ira saying that she is a barren woman. In the novel, the female characters progress beyond parochial norms by becoming the owner of their being, as is manifested in the case of Irrawaddy. The novel depicts the progression of Irrawaddy who initially gets subjugated to a patriarchal society, by getting married at the tender age of fourteen, and then after being declared barren, subsequently she is deserted by her husband and finally moves towards prostitution. Markandaya presents Irrawaddy, as the victim of class and gender hegemony who enters into prostitution to survive and to earn her livelihood. Irrawaddy's journey is marked by the polarised ideas of the courteous, compliant, and emotional femininity on the one side, and the poised, rebellious, and liberated person on the other. Hence, despite resistance from her father Ira takes to prostitution as she cannot tolerate seeing Kuti starving. There is a resonance of determination when she states that she will not stay hungry anymore. Rukmani's sorrow crosses all the limits when she discovers that Irrawaddy is prostituting herself to buy milk for her ailing brother.

Knowledge is power and a nation cannot progress unless education is provided to all without gender bias. Rukmani is vociferous when she confronts misconceptions and exigent traditional views. Many



in Rukmani's village remarked on the ineffectuality of educating children, especially a girl child. Her mother opined '...what use...that a girl should be learned? Look at me, am I any worse that I cannot spell my name, so long as I know it? Is not my house clean and sweet, are not my children well-fed and cared for?' (Markandaya 13)

Rukmani, though a victim of sex and class, is educated but feels perturbed since it hampers her husband's honour who she felt would be uneasy that his 'wife was more learned'. (Markandaya 14). When Rukmani goes to the city with Nathan she doesn't earn much by breaking stones. Her education helps her to write letters for illiterate folk. This income helps them to sustain themselves in the city. We find many youngsters mocking her and commenting that the villagers were 'getting above themselves.' (Markandaya 172)

The commencement of industrial development –in the form of the tannery infringes on age-old agricultural practices and illustrates the origin of the exploitation of women and the environment. A terrible famine destroys the crops and thus the novel describes Rukmani's life of mental and physical torture, financial scarcity, and hardship. On the flip side, she shows remarkable restraint and displays a dynamic image of fearlessness amid numerous hardships. Rukmani's hard peasant life showcases her as an embodiment of an Indian woman who churns herself in the quagmire of responsibilities and incidental pressures and exemplifies the truth of Coleridge's line, '*work without hope draws nectar in a sieve.*' Even when her heart is ragged, she never thinks of protesting against the situation.

Hunger becomes a definite threat to dignity. Planning and managing food in difficult circumstances, especially during the famine was the prerogative of Rukmani. The competence of Rukmani even during the testing times of utter poverty is obvious when 'She accepts her fate calmly and soon gets used to it. Fear is the constant companion of the peasant. Hunger ever at hand ...fear of the dark future;(*Nectar in a Sieve* 81). Anxiety about hunger 'torments' the peasants who are exposed to the oddities of nature. The farmers felt cheated as they neither had the crops nor any other means of sustenance. Their hopeless plight could be compared to the 'magnificent tons of dried-up hay.' The vagaries of nature and commercialization made the poor farmers penniless and this led Ira to choose prostitution over squalor and hunger. The loss of regular income made Rukmani's sons seek new business ventures.



Rukmani's tirade is against the land proprietorship laws and the inception of industrialization in the form of the establishment of the tannery. She feels both are equally responsible for depriving, weakening, and dislocating the peasants like them. Rukmani's family is displaced as Sivaji the owner sells the land without sparing a thought for the poor farmers. In the name of development, the agrarian farmers felt deprived of their rights.

Rukmani displays stoic calmness even while being displaced. When her husband is evicted after working for thirty years she speaks nostalgically, about the pathetic plight of an uprooted farmer. 'This home my husband had built for me with his own hands...in it, we had lain together and our children had been born.It is a cruel thing, I thought. ' (Markandaya 137)

As civilization changes, the social order transforms, and Indian women too, are ready to break the prescribed patriarchal codes. They refuse to be docile, and marginalized, and strive to occupy a rightful place as human beings in a civilized society. Kamala Markandaya has endeavoured to capture the quintessence of the feminine consciousness through her works and has provided glimpses of the 'New Woman' who breaks through revered archetypes.

Empowerment is only possible when it is coupled with an awareness of the present situation. The protagonists Rukmani and later Ira try to break the age-old shackles of patriarchy and lead a life on their terms. Rukmani as the New Woman is emancipated and has the grit to live her life on her terms. She learns to trust her feminine self. This awareness is the assertion of her individuality, her willingness to confront reality and not to run away from it. Thus the emancipated women are non-conformists who are discontented with the rhetoric of equality between men and women.



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