

Plight of the Peasant Woman, Rukmani in Kamala Markandaya's Novel 'NECTAR IN A SIEVE'

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Abstract: *Kamala Markandaya is a well-known and gifted woman novelist who has a realistic approach to rural life and plight of peasantry class. She has depicted all the hardships and miseries faced by Rukmani, the peasant woman character in the novel 'Nectar in a Sieve'. However, she does not take sides with any of her protagonists. But she feels the pain of inhumanity and believes in the betterment of human life. Being the rooted in the Indian soil and ethos, she has a subtle social purpose to awaken the peasantry class through the character of Rukmani who represents all peasant women of Indian society residing in rural areas. Thus, the present research paper highlights the deeply rooted facts about peasant women through the portrayal of Rukmani's character in the Novel 'Nectar in a Sieve'.*

Keywords: Rural Life, Peasant Woman, Protagonist, Humanity, Sufferings, Ethos.

Introduction: Rukmani is an archetype woman character that proves the plight of a peasant woman in rural India with a meaningful role in the changing scenario of India society. It is also a well-known fact that the novelist is the first Indian writer who probes into women's psyche and she portrays the peasant woman, Rukmani who struggles against those forces which are beyond her control. Nevertheless, Rukmani does not rebel. In the novel '*Nectar in a Sieve*' the Novelist has made every effort to show the real situation faced by peasant women and their family. The novelist believes that togetherness and mutual understanding can create a meaningful existence for mankind. That is why; Rukmani has been portrayed as a strong woman character,

which is always proposed to meet the challenge of life. Moreover, Rukmani's character traces a journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization.

If we analyze the novel, '*Nectar in a Sieve*', Kamala Markandaya has truly presented the life and travails of a peasant woman, Rukmani in a meaningful way. Rukmani faces so many odds of life like famine, death, adversity and prostitution in the condition of bone chilling and heart touching poverty. In spite of many lacks and suffering, Rukmani continues her fight against these evils. That is why; she has been able to win the sympathy of the readers by her astonishing will-power that endures a life without any good hope like '*Nectar in a Sieve*'. Her plight resembles that of '*A Handful of Rice*'. The novel '*Nectar in a Sieve*' witnesses the transformation and radical changes of a carefree girl into an exploited and victimized peasant woman, Rukmani. Therefore, '*Nectar in a Sieve*' is a heart touching novel and presents a real and vivid picture of peasantry class in rural India.

'*Nectar in a Sieve*' deals with the character of Rukmani and her family. Some of the critics call it a family saga including Rukmani, her husband Nathan, a poor tenant farmer and seven children. Here Parminder Kaur and Sheetal Bajaj remarks that '*Nectar in a Sieve*' is a family saga with the sufferings of peasantry class in India. It is a story of a peasant couple riddled with economic crisis, social evils and natural calamities. Actually, Rukmani being the peasant woman suffers due to the hostility of nature and industrialization. She is compelled to lead a life of uncertainty, hunger and degradation. She has to starve and face many miserable happenings. Ultimately, she has to lose their land and is caught in the paws of draught.

Here it is noteworthy that Kamala Markandaya projects the peasant woman characters basically traditional woman with all social barriers. She believes in social institutions like marriage and family and she portrays Rukmani in her custody role of '*Sati Savitri*' archetypal image. In the novel '*Nectar in a Sieve*',

Kamla Markandaya presents the vivid picture of a peasant woman, Rukmani who never lose faith in life or love for her husband, Nathan and seven children, Ira, Arjun, Thambi, Murgan, Raja, Selvam and Kutti. Despite all her sufferings, Rukmani continues her fight against the relentless nature, changing time and dire poverty. That is why; A.V. Krishna Rao remarks: “ *The real truth of the novel is spiritual stamina of Rukmani against such formidable enemies to her culture: the draconian landlord, and the soulless industry.*” She knows it very well that work without hope draws nectar in a sieve and hope without an object cannot live. Therefore, this mother of rural India (Rukmani) lives in her children, Selvam and Ira, who belong to a different age but they are of the same self.

Rukmani is the youngest daughter of a village headman who due to changing circumstances, is forced to marry with Nathan, a tenant farmer who is poor in everything except in love. Being the protagonist of the novel ‘*Nectar in a Sieve*’, she plays a dramatic

role of a peasant woman based on traditional life of an Indian village in transition. After marriage, Rukmani has to leave her father’s house with her poor husband, Nathan in a bullock cart. That is why; Rukmani could never forget her past life. All the memories of her past life are still fresh in her mind. Therefore; she remarks: “*Then the cart began to move lurching as the bullock got awkwardly into rhythm I was sick. Such a disgrace for me, how shall I ever live it down? I remember thinking, I shall never forget I have not forgotten, but the memory is not sour*”.

When, Rukmani enters the house of her husband, Nathan, she feels the signs of poverty there. Meanwhile, her husband says: “*It is a thing that might happen to anybody. Do not fret. Come dry your eyes and sit up here beside me*”. But Rukmani sinks down as much with grief as with deep anguish and frustration. She remarks: “*I wanted to cry. This mind, nothing but mud and thatch was my home. My knees gave first the cramped one, then the other, and I sank down*””. Nevertheless, she is

assured by her husband that it will change and they will have a better and bigger house. That is why; Rukmani is deeply touched by her husband's kindness. Now she assures Nathan that the house is all right and she is happy with him. She has no complaint about it when she comes to know that Nathan has built this house with his own hand, she is impressed and admires her husband's creation of love. She remarks: *"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"*.

On that day, Rukmani remained true and dutiful wife to her husband. She devoted all her happiness for her husband and family traditions. Being a sagacious and prudent housewife, she manages her family and society. She has a number of friends in her neighborhood. But she is very close to Janki and Kali, though she does not like Kunthi so much. Nevertheless, when Kunthi gives birth to

her first child, she serves her to the best of her ability, though it puts so much of strain on her. To increase her family income, Rukmani grows vegetable and sells them to her neighbors. She collects cow dung and uses dry dung as a fuel.

Rukmani's approach to life is very realistic and she does not require seeing much happiness in her family life. She ponders on bare necessities consisting largely of food, clothes and shelters. She is also keen observer of nature. She believes that nature has a cosmic power of construction as well as destruction. Rukmani knows the fact that all happiness of her family depends on good harvest and adequate rains. Only nature can play a vital and positive role to make them happy. If heavy rains are draught occur, then nobody can return their happiness. She also knows it very well that Industrialization has flattened their life. She admits the fact that the tannery symbolizes industrialization and it is associated with all evils. It has made the village life noisy and crowded. It has also deprived her children to play. Moreover, the setting up of the tannery

in the village, the crows, kites and other scavenging birds are always eager for the filth and garbage of the two, have taken place of paddy birds and flamingoes.

But on the contrary, she does not wholly hold the tannery responsible for her misfortunes. Her husband is dispossessed of the land on which he worked for thirty years under the illusions of owing up. In her poignant words she remarks: *“This home my husband had built for me with his own hands in 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 my which we live. It is a cruel thing, I thought, they do not know what they do to us”*.

Furthermore, Rukmani is shocked when her son-in-law returns her daughter Ira saying that she is a barren woman and can never give birth to a child for his family. Therefore, her sorrow crosses all

the limits when she discovers Ira who has been prostituting to buy milk for her ailing brother Kutty. She tries to stop Ira doing so. Moreover, she is astonished and shocked when she comes to find out that her husband as a relationship with Kunthi. However, at the first event, she is voiceless; but she raises voice against it and remarks: *“it is as you say a long time ago. That she is evil and powerful I know myself, let it rest”*. Meanwhile, her son Raja dies and she reacts as: *“For this I have given you birth, my son that you should let at my feet with ashes in your face and coldness in your limbs and yourself departed without trace, leaving this hurdle of bones and flesh without meaning.”*

However, Rukmani is herself spiritually and mentally strong and says: *“These things were you. Now there is no connection whatever, the sorrow within me is not for this body which has suffered and suffering has let slip the spirit, by for you my son”*. She also feels great grief on the death of her last son Kuti, but her grief is more controlled eventually. She also muses over the

death of her old granny in a philosophical manner and remarks: “*Death after all is final*”. In the same manner, when her husband Nathan dies, she says poignantly: “ *I licked my wet lips. There was a taste on them of salt and of fresh sweetness of the rain water. I did not know I had been crying*”.

Conclusion: Nevertheless, we can't ignore the fact that time is a great healer and bad time passes away. Rukmani knew it very well and she calmly accepted the harsh realities of life and situation of her family. She spent all her life for the betterment of the family and she faced all calamities and miseries with all manifestations of typical image of peasant woman in rural India. Despite, all ruins of her crops, she accepted it as God's will and even on the occasion of the death of her family members she remained strong. Likewise, the destination of her daughter Ira made her a sorrow stub who failed to crush her spirit are to sake her faith in the basic human values. She only returned to her village on the death of her life partner, Nathan with a new hope and faith to

reconcile her life. Thus Rukmani fought a heroic battle against all unfavorable circumstances. Most of the scholars assume the fact that Rukmani truly represents the peasant woman of Rural India. That is why; Rukmani's character in the fiction of Kamala Markandaya has been admired and appreciated by most of the Novelists and scholars.

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