

# Rukmani's Undaunted Struggle in the Novel: *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Indian writing in English has been accredited as an integral and a fundamental constituent of Commonwealth Literature, known for its great vibrancy and resilience. It occupies a prominent place in *World Literature Fiction* by Indian Women Novelists. Their novels are essentially concerned with the gender discrimination and other problems who are exposed to both physical and psychological abuse and ill-treatment in the male dominated Indian society.

*“Women are forgiving, kind and affectionate; women are God's highest creation, his own shadow, while men are God's common work. Women are lights and men their shadows.”<sup>1</sup>*

Outstanding among the post-independence women novelists is Kamala Markandaya. As a women novelist Markandaya represents “The creative release of the feminine sensibility” in India. Kamala Markandaya is not an aggressive, forceful and confrontational feminist. In her fictional universe women characters are more important than men characters. The spirit with which she delineates women characters in her novels clearly indicates the paramount importance she attaches to the role of women in society. While projecting the image of the changing traditional society in her novels she does not fail to bring to light the awakened feminine sensibility which is emerging rapidly in modern India. Commenting on Markandaya's treatment of women characters in her novels Jameela Begum observes:

*“In exploring the feminine consciousness of Indian women Markandaya has sought to fuse her own imaginative conception of traditional image with the bare, changing realities of existence. Her women characters are memorable in that they portray..... an in-depth study of human psyche caught in the net of social, traditional and spiritual values.”<sup>2</sup>*

As an artist with a thorough understanding of women's position in contemporary society Markandaya shows how social and economic factors affect women more than men. Shantha Krishnaswamy observes:

*“ Kamala Markandaya portrays the double pulls that the Indian Woman is subject to: Between tradition and modernity, between Indian and Western ways of living and values, between her dignities as a human being and her duty as a daughter, wife and mother, between marrying for love and unmarrying for the family, between her desire for autonomy and her need for nurturance.”<sup>3</sup>*

Markandaya's women characters are strongly rooted in traditions and they are to very great extent conformists. While discussing the treatment of women characters in the novels of Markandaya K. Meera Bai comments:

*“ Her novels are characterized by feminine sensibility. Markandaya's women are well drilled in the tenants of Indian ethos. They possess and admirable strength to face the calamities of life and are adapt at the wisdom of compromise and adjustment. ”<sup>4</sup>*

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is a remarkable novel which illustrates how Rukmani, a peasant woman of pre-independence rural India resolutely struggles for survival with undaunted courage, determination, fortitude and an indomitable spirit of endurance. Set in an anonymous village in south India the novel movingly depicts the events which centers around the life of Rukmani, the protagonist and narrator of the novel. Markandaya with her artistic imagination and feminine sensibility presents the trials and tribulations of the simple, naïve and traditional character Rukmani, Who accepts and endures sufferings with innate strength of character, vigor of mind and a true spirit of tolerance and resilience. The novel can also be considered a genuine chronicle of the hardships and misfortunes of a peasant family. Novel is written in the first person narrative and Rukmani, who is both an observer and participant, recollects her tale in a reminiscent mood. The novel portrays how the harsh vagaries of Nature, the cruel Zimidari system and the intrusion of modernization bring about misfortunes in the lives of peasants and especially in the family of Rukmani.

Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of a once powerful village headman, is given in marriage to Nathan a ternate farmer, who is poor in everything but in love and care because she is without beauty and without dowry. She happens to be a bride at the age of twelve, a mother at thirteen and has six children at twenty four and is evidently old at forty. Her initial reaction to her surroundings is one of despair and sadness.

*“Such a disgrace for me” she reacts. “How shall I ever live it down?”<sup>5</sup>*

The man that her family found for her is below her status. But as a woman who possesses serenity, a sense of balance and strength of character, Rukmani accepts her adversity with poise and grandeur and reveals her stoic acceptance of the inevitable. In her relationship with her husband she learns the values of mutual love, understanding, respect, acceptance and adjustment. Both, she and her husband, lead a simple and contented life with the fundamental necessities such as food, shelter and clothes. Rukmani finds a critical situation in her life when she begets her first child. As the first born child happens to be a girl, Rukmani sheds:

*“Tears of weakness and disappointment for what woman wants a girl for her first born.”<sup>6</sup>*

She knows that irrational conventions and anachronistic traditions decry and frown at female offspring. A successful woman in the eyes of the society is the one who begets as many sons as possible. As a typical village farmer Nathan also believes in the notion of superiority of a male child. Rukmani says:

*“Nathan at first paid scanned attention to her. He had wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pulling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind.”<sup>7</sup>*

Rukmani then seeks help from Dr. Kennington an English doctor, who enables her with his medical treatment to beget a son. As years pass on, she begets five more sons. Since, the family becomes larger, Rukmani and Nathan find it difficult to manage things economically. Soon, poverty and misfortune befall her one after another. The quiet and peaceful life of Rukamani's family is affected by undesirable advent of a tannery, a symbol of industrialization. Rukamani hates it from the beginning because she strongly believes that intrusion of industry and modern technology will certainly bring about sinister consequences in the lives of peasants. She pathetically recalls:

“They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maiden where our children played and had made the bazaar prices too high for us.”<sup>8</sup>

Rukmani had seen changes in her life but the change brought about by the tannery is quiet sudden. Rukmani denounces the change because after the establishment of the tannery the tranquil village has all noise and crowds everywhere. And rude young hooligans idling in the street and dirty bazaars and uncouth behavior and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his money. The changes had made people highly selfish and self-centered forgetting their earlier characteristics generosity, selflessness and concern for others. Though the tannery people lived in their midst, Rukmani never accepts them.

Another blow strikes Rukmani when Ira, her only daughter is brought back home by her husband for her temporary barrenness. She is rejected by her husband because she is unable to bear children. In the patriarchal society barren women are considered to be cursed and inauspicious. They are not recognized and respected. Men have the social sanctions to reject barren wives. Nathan understands the situation and says:

“I do not blame him. He is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient”<sup>9</sup>

But ironically when Ira is fit to conceive, especially after getting medical treatment from Dr. Kenny, Ira's husband has married another woman. Rukmani accepts this unavoidable poignant and distressing situation with mental equanimity and reconciles herself to the ill-fate of Ira. She consoles her daughter,

“you must not blame him. He has taken another woman?”<sup>10</sup>

Markandaya also depicts how the peasants in rural India fall a prey to poor vagaries of Nature. The novel vividly shows how Nature when unrestrained can bring havoc and destruction to the lives of peasants. The people in the village face severe loss of crops not only because of incessant rain but also because of frequent droughts. Reminiscing the unpredictable characteristic of Nature and its role Rukmani observes:

“Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you so long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat.”<sup>11</sup>

For the peasant who is also lease-holder problems do not end with floods and droughts. Nathan as a tenant farmer has to pay his dues to the landlord for using the land irrespective of weather prospects. He, therefore, pathetically says

“...There was no money left- every pie had gone to payland dues. Nothing left to sell.”<sup>12</sup>

The cruel and heartless nature of landlord is revealed when Nathan lamends : “ Now the landlord can wring from us his money and care not for the misery he evokes; for indeed it would be difficult for any man to se another staff and his wife and children as well; or to enjoy the prophets born of such prevail.

Rukmani and Nathan undergo a nightmarish and traumatic experience when the entire family finds itself in the grip of devastating hunger and agonizing fear. Rukmani understands that the hunger and fear have become a part and parcel of peasant’s life. The villagers cannot easily overcome these malignant factors as they are always the outcome of the unpredictable prospects of Nature and the evil system of landlordism in rural India. Due to fire poverty and fierce hunger Rukmani’s eldest sons become workers in the tannery despite their mother’s stiff opposition. No doubt the tannery creates in the minds of young people a craze for money. Tannery is the main cause of the forces that uproot the eldest sons of Rukmani: Arjun and Thambi from their native soil and force them to go to an alien place. After losing their jobs in the tannery they want to join the tea plantations in Ceylon to earn more money. As a traditional and loving mother Rukmani is against her family getting shattered. Realizing that her sons are too much engrossed in earning money and becoming affluent Rukmani becomes quiet miserable and sorrowful. What makes her more downhearted and unhappy is her realization that she would not be able to see them again in her life. Unable to find work in the tannery and at the same time finding it difficult to help his father in the fields Murugan, the third son of Rukmani, leaves the village in order to get a job in the city. The separation of the son makes her more depressed and disconsolate. yet she endures the ordeal without giving a hope in life. After alluring two of Rukmani’s sons who have become victims of false value the tannery happens to be the main cause for the death of Raja, the fourth son of Rukmani. She is terribly shocked and horrified when the dead body of her son is brought home by the ternary officials. They tell Rukmani that her son was caught in the act of stealing of calf –skin and when he tried to escape he accidentally died. Rukmani mental agony and pain find no limitations. The tannery is also responsible for the moral degradation of Ira the only daughter of her. She is compelled to become a prostitute in order to save her youngest brother, kuti, from hunger and starvation. When Rukmani and Nathan find out Ira’s immoral way of earning money they become thunderstruck.

The serious and momentous crises in her married life surfaces when Rukmani learns about Nathan’s illicit relationship with Kunthi, a notorious woman in the village. She become heartbroken and inconsolable when she comes to know that her husband whom she has loved deeply has betrayed her for the trivial and insignificant woman who had been blackmailing her about the innocent and blameless relationship with Dr. Kennington. With so much pain and sorrow inner heart she says:

“Disbelief first; disillusionment; anger; reproach, pain. To find out, after so many years, in such a cruel way.... At last I made an effort and roused myself. “it is as yousay a long time ago”, I said wearily. that she is evil and powerful I know myself. Let it rest”<sup>13</sup>

Rukmani accepts her husband’s betrayed and moral weakness with calm resignation. She suffers silently it doesn’t mean that she lacks sufficient strength and courage to protest against her husband. She accepts her husband with all his weaknesses and limitations because she loves him deeply and profoundly. Her genuine love for him enables her to forgive him and accept him with whole heartedly. Uma Parameswaran observes:

*“Without the least break or imbalance of body, mind, or spirit, she lives on now supporting her husband and her younger children.”<sup>14</sup>*

Rukmani’s sufferings become intensive and grim when her last son, Kuti dies due to hunger and starvation. Kuti’s struggle for life is pathetic and unbearable. It becomes a horrible and a harrowing experience for Rukmani to see her own son becoming quite frail and dying gradually. She painfully recalls;

*“yet, although I grieved it was not for my son, for in my heart I could not have wished it otherwise. The strife had lasted too long and had been too painful for me to call him back to continue it”<sup>15</sup>*

Rukmani becomes a pathetic woman when the land is taken away from them. While expressing her anguish for her miserable condition she recounts:

*“This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, ...It is a cruel thing..I thought they do not know about what they do to us...”<sup>16</sup>*

After eviction from the land Nathan and Rukmani migrate to a city for their livelihood. Unable to find out their son, Murugan, who is supposed to be working their both Nathan and Rukmani take up the work of breaking stones in a Quarry. Nathan who cannot cope with new surrounding and the alien work dies. The untimely death of her husband happens to be an appalling and horrible blow to Rukmani. She then returns to her village with her adopted son Puli who is an orphan. The novel ends on a positive note. Selvam, the fifth son of Rukmani, who has been assisting Dr. Kennigton to construct a hospital in the village, assures his mother “do not worry.... We shall manage”. Commenting on the universal appeal of the novel K. Venkata Reddy observes:

*“In its particular theme of tragic plight of Rukmani and her family, there is universality of love, loyalty and suffering that will appeal to readers all over the world. .... Rukmani’s village is indeed symbolic of the entire rural India..”<sup>17</sup>*

Kamala Markandaya shows how certain virtues life honesty, perseverance, simplicity, selflessness, faith in God, fortitude and courage enable the peasants in rural India to cope with the misfortunes and the natural calamities with calm resignation. Rukmani’s approach to life is quite optimistic. This grand and dignified philosophical outlook is the outcome of the inner strength of her character, her stoic endurance, her heroic struggle for survival, her mute suffering and her acceptance of life with its varied experiences. Thus, the novel portrays the travails of Rukmani who faces crises in life with exceptional courage and extraordinary confidence. With an uncommon spiritual and mental strength she absorbs all miseries and misfortunes that come her way. On the whole Rukmani is a memorable character who stands like a rock among women characters in Indian English fiction.

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