



The Image of Woman in *Nectar in a Sieve*



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Research Paper :

One of the major causes of the persecution of women in Indian Society lies in the fact that our society is predominantly patriarchal in which the right to property and the right to make important decisions rests with the eldest male members of the family. In short, the will of males prevail over the females. This system gave rise to the demand of dowry by the bridegroom's parents at the time of marriage. The constant nagging and interview of prospective brides before marriage force girls to pass through mental trauma. She is constantly made aware by her parents and close relatives that she is now a liability. Again unfulfilment of the expectations of the boy's parents for dowry in many cases leads to bride beating and bride burning.

The identity of woman in India is one that is usually connected to and defined by the societal and cultural norms of a practicable familial structure. This identity is defined within the parameters of their social relationship to men. Most Indian women are traditional, conservative, and therefore, are reluctant to cross the threshold of their family and culture and have specific roles to perform at different times. They are to always welcome their guests and entertain them, care for their family members performing all the household responsibilities and if there is any pain, they are to hide it. This symbolizes true Indian tradition and culture. Thus the Indian women become a metaphor for purity, chastity and sanctity of the ancient spirit that is India. The national construct of the Indian woman includes the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, devotion, and religiosity and so on.

Consequently, anything that threatens to dilute this model of Indian womanhood constitutes a betrayal of all that it stands for religion, God, the spirit of India, culture, tradition and family. It is believed that Indian women in general have no identity of their own. They belong to their father before they are married and to their husband after they are married and in the old age they have to depend on their sons. However, urban and metropolis educated Indian women, immigrants and expatriates claim their rights within their family and beyond it. They attempt to establish new identity with their changing gender roles. For example, in a conservative family, a husband used to represent in public affairs. Now most of elite young women represent and manage the public and political affairs. These identities of women are separate from their husbands. Further, the working-women particularly are to compromise and adjust themselves as wife, mother, as an employee performing their household traditional responsibilities.

Women novelists in Indian fiction in English occupy prestigious position. Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De, R.P. Jhabvala, and Arundhati Roy are some prominent names in this field. Kamala Markandaya belonged to this group who made

their mark not just through subject matter, but also through their fluid, polished literary style.

Kamala Markandaya was born in the town of Mysore in Southern India in 1924 to a Hindu-Brahmin family. She studied in Madras University and also worked as a journalist. She moved to England and there she married Bertrand Taylor. As a novelist she has eight novels in her credit. Markandaya's novels deal with a wide range of Indian topics. Uma Parmeshwaran, who has written about Markandaya's work, wrote: "Markandaya's strength as a novelist comes from her sensitive creation of individual characters and situation which are simultaneously representative of a larger collective; her prose style is mellifluous and controlled."

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) was Markandaya's first published work portrays the life of the protagonist of the novel *Rukmini and her Family*. In the novel, Rukmini leads the life of mental and physical tortures, financial scarcity and hardship, but she shows remarkable forbearance. Markandaya presents Rukmini as the positive and dynamic image of heroism in the midst of inexperienced hardships and despair. "Rukmini's hard peasant life illustrates the truth of Coleridge's line, 'work without hope draws Nectar in a Sieve' (Naik 236).

Rukmini recalls her past life when she married at the age of 12 with Nathan a landless farmer and how her hopes of grand wedding are shattered. As soon as the marriage ceremony is over; she leaves her father's home with her husband Nathan in a bullock-cart. On reaching her new home, she sinks down as much with grief as with deep anguish and frustration. "I wanted to cry. This mud, nothing but mud and thatch was my home. My knees gave first the cramped one, then the other, and I sank down" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 4).

Nathan's assurance and his kindness touch to Rukamini's heart when he says that very soon they will have a better and bigger house. She also expresses her content him that the house is all right and she is happy with him. She does not complain at all and is rather grateful to her husband for being so kind to her. She starts showering her love when she comes -to know that Nathan has

built the hut with his own hands for her. The mud house is the creation of love and so she admires her husband for his nobility of heart. She feels highly euphoric and proud realizing the intensity of her husband's love. She says:

“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.”

(Nectar in a Sieve, 2)

The wedding night for Rukamini has no sweet memories but later that she comes to love him as a true and dutiful wife. She is faithfully devoted to her husband and according to Indian traditions, does not call his name but addresses him only as husband.

Understanding the situations, she acts as a prudent housewife and manages her house well. She is amiable and gentle and soon she has a number of friends among the womenfolk of the village. She is particularly close to Janki and Kali, though she does not like Kunthi so much. However, 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 the family income, she sows wine vegetables in the small patch of ground at the back of the cottage. She sells first to Old Granny and then to Biswas, the banya, as he pays a much higher price. She collects cow dung early in the morning from the fields around, and thus saves the cost of purchasing fuel. She is prudent and farsighted and even in days of prosperity saves something for the rainy day.

Rukmini gives birth to her first female child and names her Iravadi. But after that she does not conceive for full seven years. Her husband wants a son to carry on his name. He waits patiently but she feels his pain and disappointment. At her mother's house, she meets Dr. Kenny and confides her troubles to him. It is by virtue of his treatment that she conceives again and soon becomes the proud mother of six sons—Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam and Kuti. She never tells her husband about the treatment that she has taken from Dr. Kenny. Her concept of life is very simple and

elemental; it does not require being much happy. She ponders on bare necessities consisting largely of food, clothes, and shelter.

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eyes and your husband sees beauty in you, which no one has been 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 as I went about my work getting up at sunrise and going to sleep content. Peace and quiet were ours. (Nectar in a Sieve 7)

She accepts that her husband had no land as her father had but she believes one day there will be, “ True, my husband did not own the land he tilled, as my father had done; yet the possibility was there that he might one day do so”(Nectar in a Sieve 7).

She is a keen observer of nature. She believes that Nature represents some cosmic power—constructive and destructive. She expresses her point of view:

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. (Nectar in a Sieve 39)

The happiness of Rukmani and her family is dependent on good harvest and that in turn is dependent on timely and adequate rains. Nature plays the game of ‘hide and seek’ and ultimately snatches all joys from her life—destroying the crop—— sometimes in the form of heavy rains—sometimes in the form drought.

She does not get over the shock given by Nature. Meanwhile, industrialization in the form of tannery flattens her. She is quite aware of this change. “But the change that now came into my life into all our village, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye” (Nectar in a Sieve 29). She is dead against the change because of its noise, stinking smells and crowds. In place of quiet, the village has “all noise and crowds everywhere

and rude young hooligans idling in the streets and dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour and no man thinks of another but schemes only for his money" (Nectar in a Sieve 50). The tannery, symbolizing industrialization and its associated evils, invades the village with clatter and din, depriving it of its children's playground and raising the bazaars prices high. With the setting up of tannery, she feels that the crows, kites and other scavenging birds that are eager for the filth and garbage of the town, have taken the place of paddy, bird and flamingos. She pathetically recollects:

Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and clearing its cool silences with clamour. (Nectar in a Sieve, 135)

But, 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 owning up. Her poignant words, which are spoken nostalgically, describe the pathetic plight of an uprooted farmer.

This home my husband had built for me with his own hands in the 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 by which we lived. It is a cruel thing, I thought. They do not know what they do to us. (Nectar in a Sieve 137)

She is shocked when her son-in-law returns Ira saying that she is a barren woman. She knows that people think a barren woman to be a counterfeit coin, which is returned to the owner or discarded, as useless. Her sorrow crosses all the limits when she discovers Ira who has been prostituting to buy milk for her ailing brother Kuti. She tries to stop her daughter but of no use as she has made up her mind that she will neither go hungry herself nor allow her brother to do so. Her helplessness is seen in these lines.

Well we let her go. We had tried everything in our power; there was nothing more we could do. She was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination...we forbade, she insisted, we lost. So we got used to her comings and goings as we had got used to so much else. (Nectar in a Sieve 103-104)

According to Arora a woman can bear a shock but her husband's infidelity, is too much for her. She faces the gravest crisis in her married life when she learns about her husband's relationship with Kunthi. She is stunned as she thinks of Kunthi who continues blackmailing her for Platonic relationship with Kenny. First she is speechless, later full of speech. "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: "fit is as you say a long time ago," I said wearily, "That she is evil and powerful I know myself, let it rest." (Nectar in a Sieve 90)

She becomes shockproof as one shock comes after another. Death sees her house and carries her son Raja to the unknown world. She reacts to the death of her son Raja thus: For this I have given you birth, my son that you should lie 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. (Nectar in a Sieve 93-94).

She shows herself spiritually and mentally strong when she says:

...These things were you? Now there is no connection whatever, the sorrow within me is not for this body which has suffered and in suffering has let slip the spirit - by for you, my son. (Nectar in a Sieve 93-94)

Nathan tells her that their last child Kuti, conceived in glee have been taken away by cruel Death. She grieves for him and feels too well what Nathan feels. Her grief is more controlled, though no less poignant this time:

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. (Nectar in a Sieve 105)

She muses over the death of Old Granny in a philosophical manner:

Death after all is final.... So it had been with my sons so it was now with Old Granny, one day it might be the same for me, for all of us. A man might drift to his death before his time unnoticed...." (Nectar in a Sieve 125)

Similarly, when Nathan dies, she says poignantly: "I licked my wet lips. There was a taste on them of salt and of the fresh sweetness of the rainwater. I did not know I had been crying" (Nectar in a Sieve 185).

Time is a great healer, and with the passing of time, she reviews her life with "calm of mind, all passions spent." Her calm acceptance of the reality of the situation and stoic resignation to the Immanent Will manifest typical image of an Indian woman. Meena Shirwadkar identifies her with Maurya in J.M. Synge's play, *Riders to the Sea*. Failures of harvest, the deaths of Raja and Kuti, the departure of her sons for city and for Ceylon, the desertion of Ira by her husband, the withdrawal of Selvam from agriculture, the deprivation of land—all these tragic incidents make her "a Mother of Sorrows" But fail to crush her spirits or to shake her faith in the basic human values. Having faced the biggest blow of her husband's death, she comes back to her village with a renewed faith in an adopted son Puli and reconciles to life, which is in store for her.

Thus, the novel is a story of struggle of Rukamini who gives a message in the chaotic situation that must have faith in life. She fights with many conditions but does not surrender herself to them. It gives a way to look at life as if we belief in life; it will have the sustaining power. Markandaya has a quality to peep into the psyche of the character and to depict the suffering, aloofness and humiliation of female characters. Rukamini stands as an undefeated one. She keeps her image as a mother, wife and more than the struggler for living life.

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