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Rukmani as a Larger than Life Figure in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract

A strong woman knows she has strength enough for the journey, but a woman of strength knows it is in the journey where she will become strong. Women have significant place in Kamala Markandaya's novels. Her protagonists possess life-affirming qualities. By making them central characters of her novels, she has highlighted their roles in present-day world. Being a women novelist, Kamala Markandaya has brought mostly women characters into being. She breathes life in her women characters. Kamala shows her sagacity in launching female characters as her protagonists. The aim of writing this research paper is to highlight Rukmani's character the protagonist in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Rukmani is one who feels deeply and loves fiercely. Her tears flow as abundantly as her laughter. She is both practical and spiritual. A strong message which Rukmani gives in *Nectar in a Sieve* is that one must have faith in life. Faith is a great sustain power with which one, like Rukmani in the novel, can brave any hardship or misfortunes and even draw 'nectar in a sieve'.

Keywords: Inception, Independence, Calamities, Downtrodden, Misfortune

Introduction

The post-independence era makes the grand inception of the literary emancipation of women. And Kamala Markandaya is one of the greatest of these women-novelists. She won international fame and recognition with the publication of her very first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, 1954. Acc. to Dr. K.R.S. Iyenger *Women are natural storytellers, and Kamala Markandaya nothing if not a brilliant storyteller*. Her stories are gripping, all absorbing and

extremely readable. Readers fell spell-bound and time ceases for them as they are lost in the world of Kamala Markandaya who carries them into an enchanting world where they meet all sorts of men and women who make them realize of their sufferings and teach them how to live and let others live. In this novel Markandaya has given the true picture of a peasant woman Rukmani who uses her skill to improve the economic condition. A peasant woman works hard and pays her contribution to improve the condition as Rukmani does.

Nectar in a Sieve tells the story of Rukmani-affectionately known as Ruku in her family and village. The younger daughter of a village-headman, she marries Nathan, a landless tenant. It was Rukmani's fate that the family fortune was exhausted in the marriage of her elder sisters that she had to have a dowry less marriage. Rukmani has tremendous capacity for tolerance poverty, hunger, coupled with misfortunes do not make her perturbed. In the home of her husband, who is a poor tenant farmer, she, for the first time experiences poverty and starvation. But she does not give up.

In *Nectar in a sieve* Rukmani is the victim of child marriage, poverty, hunger, starvation, social injustice etc. But she faces all the problem, she also suffers immensely for her family but she does not leave her endeavors to live clinging tenaciously to the life force and that is the reason she fights against the heaviest odds and never accepts defeat. She accepts all and everything. She has not complained about it, rather like a disciplined daughter she has accepted her lot and cared for her husband and children. She is an epitome of the archetypal Indian wife who regards her husband as her God and her children as gifts from heaven. Throughout the novel, Rukmani faces a lot of adversity. She demonstrated her true character each time she overcome one of her problems. Misfortune cross her path again and again, poverty and starvation do not dehumanize her. Calamities of the flood bring major attack of starvation and sorrow.

Rukmani does not show extreme emotional outburst. But deep inside, she is highly disturbed and depressed, and suffers for her loved ones. She absorbs all misfortunes that come her way. She has extreme tenacity for life and she works her way out. Rukmani is the axis, the immovable affirmative force around, whom all the other characters in the novel revolve. She has no illusion in life, is disturbed by no desire or longing. Rukmani is ever ready, ever attentive, to stoop, to extend her eager heart to the person in need. Her silence is the silence of the deep sea. Under the calm, composed self is found the strong undercurrent of pain and suffering.

Indeed Rukmani is the mother figure in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Like in most Indian woman, her strength lies in her innate capacity for compassion and sacrifice. Rukmani is a victim of the tragic incidents in her life as- the death of Raja and Kutti, husband's adultery with Kunti, Ira's separation from her husband, and her prostitution, Murugans's migration to the city, two sons migrated to Ceylon. As a caring mother her tender heart could not bear Ira's infertility and she took her to the doctor for medical treatment. Rukmani's grief knows

no bounds when she finds her son Raja beaten to death, his limp, fragile body lies at her feet. The intensity of her sorrow and misery leaves her speechless. She ruminates, “For this I have given 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 bone and flesh without meaningless” (*Nectar in a Sieve* p.91).

Under the calm composed self is found the strong undercurrent of pain and suffering. She absorbs all pain, she is the womb immune to all shocks. Her grief-stricken visage has dignity and nobility. When Kuti suffers, she suffers, with him, and for him and in her desperation she almost wishes him dead. Kuti’s struggle for life is pathetic. Her sorrow has not been diminished, but acceptance and absorption have made her endurance stronger and stronger.

Rukmani’s courage, determination, resourcefulness, and her patient acceptance of her lot, we all displayed during the days of misfortune which soon followed. Cruel fate dealt severe blows at her innocent head but she bore the buffets of misfortune with determination and patient acceptance of her lot. Never did she flinch or falter or forget her duty to her husband and her children. A child of tradition and wedded to the soil she hated the tannery and the city which together claimed her sons one after another. With the coming of the tannery, the prices began to rise and her hardships increased. None of these incidents can change her soul’s inclination toward lamination.

Rukmani is a child of transition between the separated autonomous village lives of an old and the new village dependent upon urban civilization. A bride at twelve, mother at thirteen, mother of six children at twenty four and old at forty, Kamala Markandaya very carefully focuses our attention on the sympathetic realization that tropical flowers in their natural state blossom early, wither soon and yet retain a clinging endurance. To her misfortunes and sorrows are essential ingredients of life. Demanding help is an alien thought to her for she is well aware of negations. Her heroic struggle and her mute acceptance and silent suffering give depth and integrity to her character and land her with an elevated, philosophical outlook. She says that there is grandeur in endurance.

Our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments
and we are taught to bear our sorrow in silence, and all this so
that the soul may be cleansed. (*Nectar in a Sieve* p.114)

In the face of all calamities, Rukmani unfolds her lap to take in everything and everybody around her. Her intense involvement with life and the depth in her character have helped her to create a philosophy of life. She believes that in tolerance, endurance and mute suffering one can be purged of all guilt and can emerge a purified being. This mystic and philosophical truth comes to her not through learning, but from a profound insight, depth of character and richness of experience. In the evening of her life leaving her eventful past behind, she sets out with Nathan on her voyage. She undergoes extreme mental conflict, she

bends but never breaks. The final blow that Rukmani receives from the cruel hand of fate is by means of Nathan's death. To her misfortunes never come single; they come in battalion. Rukmani swallows her grief. Her frustration is transmitted by her renewed hope in the village life and she decides to return to her native village. Her will is strong and assertive.

Finally she absorbs the destitute Puli into her warmth and brings him to her village, gets him cured of his disease and infuses meaning into his life. In him she finds consolation and comfort for her deep wounds of sorrow and suffering. From Puli she learns a lot, who is confronting undaunted the hard facts of existence. This brings about an expansion of consciousness, it releases her ego. She grows in stature. Rukmani proves that within the traditional role she can accommodate her other roles as a human being. She proves that through expansion and communion a deeper self-knowledge can be attained. Significantly, at the end, Rukmani's return from the town to her village along with her adopted son Puli, symbolizes her ultimate triumph.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that Rukmani may be one of the poor and the down-trodden, but her life story is a saga of epic-grandeur and magnificence. As A. V. Krishna Rao has pointed out, *The real truth of the novel is the spiritual stamina of Rukmani*. She is destroyed by malevolent fate, but she remains heroic and upright up to the end. Rukmani the key figure in this novel, does not accept defeat in the face of odds. Even till the end of the novel, she has been trying to discover *nectar in a sieve*, hopeful and undaunted. During the days of adversity, never, not even once, did her spirit droop, never she loose her balance, poise and patient forbearance. We find her as a larger than life figure in this novel. Being a woman novelist, Kamala Markandaya expresses all aspects of a female, the inner voice, sentimentality of a woman, depression, frustration, feeling of dominate over some one, the hope of achieving aim, the happiness and sorrow, the patriotic feeling, the maternal instinct in the character of Rukmani. That's why Rukmani is one of the immortals of literature, and her life-story, once read, can never be forgotten.

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